Back to Basics: The Dogme 95 Movement

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Back To Basics: The Dogme 95 Movement

At first look, Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg’s launch of the “back to basics” Dogme film movement seems out of place in the context of advances in video technology in the 1990s. However, it was the desire for a purer storytelling method that drove the two filmmakers to establish the “Vow of Chastity” in the first place: by crafting a set of rules that severely limited Hollywood gimmicks, they inspired filmmakers worldwide in a mode of rebellious independence reminiscent of Italian Neorealism and Nouvelle Vague. The Vow forbade conventional shooting practices such as importing props, lighting sets, using tripods, and adding non-diegetic sound. Vinterberg’s *The Celebration* (1998), the first official Dogme release, exemplifies the understated stylistic effects crucial to Dogme’s purity with its family drama, roaming cinematography, and home-video aesthetic. This first Dogme film went on to win the Special Jury Prize at Cannes, earning the movement recognition as a legitimate new wave in filmmaking (Badley 81).

*The Celebration*’s subject matter is far darker than its title suggests. In keeping with Dogme’s rejection of genre filmmaking, the plot avoids the violence, action, and epic sweep of many mainstream movies. Instead, *The Celebration* presents an uncomfortably intimate portrayal of a twisted family tragedy. By adhering to Dogme’s restrictions, Vinterberg relied on the intensity of the story and the power of the performances to impress the audience rather than exercising the shock and awe common in contemporary large-scale production. The large cast rarely leaves the primary setting of the mansion, yet Christian’s unflinching toasts are as
riveting as any modern thriller. When he calmly discloses his father’s sexual abuse to the entire family, there is no music, flashback, or action to heighten the drama. Silent reaction shots are more than sufficient to captivate the audience. Thompson and Bordwell summarize, “All of the Dogme directors stressed that filmmakers had to start reflecting on why they made certain choices; by working under a self-imposed simplicity they could relearn how to tell stories on film” (703).

Staying true to the Vow’s hand-held rule, *The Celebration*’s visual style is marked by rapid pans, zooms, and cuts that are designed to follow the action organically as it happens (Badley 85). The character interaction plays out in a way that combines elements of documentary and theater (Badley 84). Much of the film takes place within the dining hall where all the characters join together in key moments of revelation. When the disturbed guests exit the hall after Christian’s second toast, the shots dart back and forth on main characters and extras alike, letting their facial expressions and body language carry much of the scene’s tension.

By wielding the camera so freely, the cinematographer could capture reactions and details in the moment. At times the actors themselves were allowed to control the compact digital camera (Thompson and Bordwell 703). In any given scene, an actor might not know if the camera was recording him or her, and could even forget the camera’s presence. Because the actors lived out each scene in such a raw manner, Vinterberg was able to capture strong emotional performances in *The Celebration*.

When trying to describe *The Celebration*, it’s almost impossible not to compare it to home video, the concept of which was increasingly prevalent in the 1990s due to the
emergence of consumer grade camcorders. In fact, the camera employed by Vinterberg was the very same that parents often used to capture video of their children. Combined with the setting of the family party, this everyday aesthetic enhances the realism in *The Celebration* by lending each scene a chilling credibility: it is as if the story really did occur somewhere in time and space. Every time Christian taps his glass and all eyes turn toward him, the film achieves an unnervingly authentic feel.

While the past movements of Italian Neorealism and Nouvelle Vague had also sought to spotlight simplicity and realism as important film elements, Dogme brought these ideas into a new context that highlighted “truth-seeking” in a time when audiences enjoyed being fooled by visual effects (Badley 84).

*The Celebration* was intentionally radical in its departure from the streamlined, formulaic productions of Hollywood. Its home video aesthetic spited immaculate genre filmmaking by proving tropes were not necessary to engage an audience. Vinterberg and other Dogme directors maintained that “film’s increasingly complex technology and bureaucracy hampered genuine creation. One could, however, fight Hollywood’s globalization by going back to the basics” (Thompson and Bordwell 703). Dogme, with its unlikely terms and stipulations, encouraged directors around the world to refocus on genuine story over production value and accomplished exactly what it set out to do.
Works Cited

