Dogma 95 has been hailed as the European renewal of independent and innovative film-making, in the tradition of Italian neo-realism and the French nouvelle vague. Critics praised the directors’ low budgets and team work, and film fans appreciated the bold look at contemporary life. Lars von Trier – the movement’s founder and guiding spirit – however, also pursued another agenda. His approach to filmmaking takes cinema well beyond the traditional confines of film aesthetics and radically transposes the practice of film making and film itself right into what has become the paramount genre of new media: games and gaming. Dogma 95, this book argues, is not an exceptional phase in Von Trier’s career – as it was for his co-founders – but the most explicit formulation of a cinematic games aesthetics that has guided the conception and production of all of his films.

Even the launching of Dogma 95 and the infamous Dogma Manifesto were conceived as a game, and ever since Von Trier has redefined the practice of film making as a rule bound activity, bringing forms and structures of games to bear on his films, and drawing some surprising lessons from economic and evolutionary game theory.

This groundbreaking study argues that Von Trier’s films can be better understood from the perspective of games studies and game theory than from the point of view of traditional film theory and film aesthetics.

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2 The Name of this Game is Dogma 95

Filmmaking as a game

Because Dogma 95 presented its rules in the puritan and moralistic form of a Vow of Chastity, and the Brethren originally gave Dogma certificates to filmmakers who had followed the rules (and who had properly owned up to the occasional transgression), the rules were wielded by many critics and journalists as a checklist with which to determine how ‘Dogmatic’ a Dogma film really was. This eventually led to an absolutism in which the rules were held to be the only measure of the ‘true’ Dogma film.

In the spirit of modernist manifestos, which, not coincidently, had always displayed a predilection for proclaiming ten declarations, the ten rules laid down by the Vow of Chastity were seen as the filmmaker’s Ten Commandments. In light of the same tradition, Dogma 95 could be classified as clearly belonging to one side of a dualism that had traditionally divided art and cinema into two opposing realms: a conventional, rule-bound one and a creative, experimental one. However, the aim of the Manifesto was to show that not only Dogma 95, but all approaches to filmmaking imposed constraints on the filmmaker (‘if it doesn’t look like Star Wars, then we can’t make a film’). If Dogma 95 has any doctrine to proclaim, it would be that every film practice is based on a number of arbitrary and interchangeable rules and that none is better than any other.

That the Vow of Chastity does not represent an absolute standard is made clear by the fact that its authors have only made one Dogma film each, and that they themselves substituted the Dogma rules for others before Dogma 95 itself became an inflexible canon. When asked whether his next film projects would be Dogma films, Vinterberg answered: ‘Definitely not. I mean, that’s the whole point’ (in Kelly 2000: 113). His first film after Festen, It’s All about Love (Dk/Sw/N 2003), which was described in the press as ‘a fascinating and disturbing blend of science fiction, thriller and love story set in the near future’, was the opposite of a Dogma film. The same can be said of von Trier’s Dancer in the Dark (Dk/BRD/NI/USA/UK/Fr/Sw/Fin/Iceland/Nor 2000), which broke pretty much every one of the Vows (see chapter 5). The closing scenes of Søren Kragh-Jacobsen’s Dogma #3 film, Mifunes Sidste Sang (Dk/Sw 1999), even poke fun
at the Vows (see chapter 3). It was Kristian Levring alone who followed his Dogma #4 film *The King is Alive* (USA/Dk/Sw 2000) with *The Intended* (UK/Dk 2002), a film which was subsequently given a lukewarm reception as ‘a Dogma 95-inspired drama’, and ‘of some interest for students of Dogma 95’.¹ For different reasons, Dogma 95 was at best a purifying experience for the Brethren, perhaps even a therapeutic one for von Trier (see Stevenson 2002), but by no means an unbending law to which they wished to subject the entirety of their future careers. That would, indeed, have been against the spirit of the movement, whose goal was to rediscover the practice of filmmaking as a game.

**Film and formalism: The parametric film**

The idea that film rules are arbitrary was not, of course, invented by Dogma 95 or by Lars von Trier. The films of Jean-Luc Godard repeatedly exposed the conventions which regulated and naturalised film, and he was neither the first nor the last to deconstruct the language of film. David Bordwell (1985) and Kristin Thompson (1988) even distinguished a special ‘parametric’ film form in which stylistic devices are independent of narrative functions and motivations, and which exist primarily to call attention to themselves (Bordwell 1985: 280; Thompson: 248-249).² In parametric films, the filmmaker selects a limited number of stylistic devices from the repertoire of a filmic mode of narration (classical, art cinema, historical-materialistic, etc. – see Bordwell 1965), and distributes these devices systematically in the film according to an independent logic. In *Pickpocket* (Fr 1959), for instance, Robert Bresson uses medium shots and medium close-ups, eyeline matches and shot/reverse shot combinations, but no establishing long shots, match-on-action cuts, or analytic découpage. In this way, the devices employed are extracted from their conventional, codified context and ‘moved forward as pure parameters’ (Bordwell 1985: 293).

From a formal perspective, then, parametric filmmakers would seem to be employing the same strategy as that proposed by the Dogma 95 Manifesto: To put themselves under certain constraints by making a limited selection from the range of available stylistic devices, and to employ these chosen stylistic devices according to a logic which is independent of the story or the need to give dramatic weight to certain events. Because the selection and occurrence of a parameter is not motivated by story, probability or genre rules, Bordwell and Thompson speak here of ‘parametric play’ (Thompson 1988: 248). Parametric patterns need to be consistently sustained if they are to be perceived; however, if this succeeds, they can ‘shift our habitual perceptions of filmic conventions through defamiliarisation’ (Thompson 1988: 251). The most important result of
this shift is that the familiar, self-evident styles of conventional films are revealed as the product of stylistic choices. The Dogma 95 rules, too, intend to bring about a shift in the conventional image of the quality or acceptability of a film.

With a little goodwill, Lars von Trier’s pre-Dogma films such as Element of Crime and Europa could qualify as parametric films. With no clear narrative motivation, all the scenes take place in the evening or at night, in artificially lit locations. Both films seem to have been shot in black and white, until sparse elements of colour denaturalise the monotone to which the viewer has become accustomed. Element of Crime uses only sepia-like yellow artificial lighting, and consists almost entirely of long takes. In Epidemic (Lars von Trier, Dk, 1988), this time a genuinely black-and-white film, the camera is aimed in turn at von Trier and his co-scriptwriter Niels Vørsel, but there is no cameraman and the camera does not move in order to follow the actors or to alter the framing. In Europa, actions that take place at the same time but in different places are linked together by long and complex camera movements. Transitions between scenes are frequently effected by allowing elements of the new scene to appear in the background of the current scene, and actions within scenes are commented on, or contrasted with, background projections or seamless double exposures. In Europa, the editing is performed almost exclusively ‘in frame’, which places the mental and modifiable character of the film’s time and space in the foreground (see chapter 4).³

While these films were shot in accordance with rules that were arranged beforehand and which limited the range of acceptable stylistic devices available to the filmmaker, Element of Crime, Epidemic and Europa can be seen as parametric films⁴ but they are not Dogma films. On the contrary, drawing up the Dogma 95 Manifesto and making Idioterne was von Trier’s attempt to liberate himself from the technical and stylistic perfectionism that had marked his earlier films. With Epidemic, von Trier had wanted to make a film with ‘no technique’, but it was only with The Kingdom that he was first really able to throw the ballast of conventional film technique overboard (see Stevenson 2002: 104). For all the superficial similarities between parametric films and the playfulness of the Dogma 95 approach to filmmaking, the differences between them are too large to group them within the same paradigm.

Nevertheless, the comparison to parametric films, which are often seen as the perfect example of modernism in film (see Bordwell 1985: 310), is a useful one. It throws light onto the forcefulness with which Dogma 95 rejects modernism, and onto the nature of its objections to the ‘new waves’; but it also helps us to understand why the genuinely innovative dimensions of the Dogma 95 approach to filmmaking are all but systematically overlooked.
4 Virtual Explorations: Journeys to the End of the Night

C’est le privilège européen d’avoir eu à affronter, en plein XXe siècle, quelque chose comme le Mal, c’est-à-dire le contrechamp interdit, là où les Américains n’ont jamais été avarés de représentations réalistiques du Diable.

Mais pour ‘se’ faire, L’Europe devra oublier cela.

Serge Daney (1993: 108)

Rules and Manifestos

The extremely popular Danish television series The Kingdom, Idioterne and the Dogma 95 Manifesto are generally regarded as representing a break in von Trier’s work. The last two have even been described as a ‘calculated career shift’ and as wilful ‘careericide’ (see Stevenson 2003: 69). If the rules of the Vow of Chastity had been intended to free filmmakers from ‘the oppressive apparatus of “major motion picture” filmmaking with its big money, big crews, big pressures and big temptations’ (Stevenson 2002: 104), then they might have been written for von Trier. With Dogma 95 and Idioterne, von Trier did indeed seem to be forcing a break with the working methods he had followed in all of his pre-Dogma films.

During the launching of the Dogma 95 Manifesto in Paris, von Trier was still involved in the production of Breaking the Waves, the preparations of which dated from 1991. Despite a number of similarities with Idioterne, such as the use of hand-held cameras and semi-improvised acting, in all other respects the production of Breaking the Waves employed working methods completely at odds with those laid down in the Dogma 95 Manifesto:

It was a major production with all the planning and personnel that implies. It was not set in the ‘here and now’ (taking place in the 1970s) and it employed a mass of special effects and post-production lab processes. The Apparatus was back in all its clanking, grinding glory (Stevenson 2003: 65).

Against this background it is tempting to see the ‘cold turkey’ that the Dogma 95 Manifesto prescribed to filmmakers as a medicine that von Trier had prescribed first and foremost for himself (ibid.: 53). As he admitted in an interview:
Those of the Dogme rules that I myself have been responsible for are to a high degree designed with pedagogical motives in mind – a pedagogy directed against myself (in Schepelern 2003: 67).

This pedagogy was directed not least towards his obsession with technique and style, and his compulsive need to exert total control over the production process which, as he describes in his Third Manifesto (on the occasion of the film **Europa**), turned the process of making a film into ‘a hell’ (in Stevenson 2003: 283; see Schepelern 2003: 64). To his great frustration, pre-Dogma productions such as **The Element of Crime** and **Europa** attracted attention in particular because of their unmistakable technical and stylistic virtuosity. These two films, which he held to be nothing less than masterpieces, won only the **Grand Prix Technique** at the 1984 and 1991 Cannes International Film Festivals (and the **Prix du Jury** for **Europa** – shared, moreover, with Maroun Bagdadi’s **Hors la Vie** (B/Fr/It 1991)) – but not the coveted **Palm d’Or**.1 For **Breaking the Waves** he was awarded the **Grand Prix** in 1996, finally collecting first prize in 2000 with **Dancer in the Dark**. **Epidemic**, **Idioterne** and **Dogville** were awarded no prizes at Cannes.

His need for control over the production process and his technical and stylistic perfectionism had already made von Trier a master of the storyboard technique (see chapter 2) during **The Element of Crime** and **Europa**. Every shot of **The Element of Crime** had been planned, drawn and rehearsed and every location had been reconnoitred beforehand: ‘We knew precisely every single camera position before we began’ (von Trier in Stevenson 2003: 53). Like the other master of the storyboard approach, Alfred Hitchcock, he had contempt for actors (‘treat them like cattle’). In his pre-Dogma period he could confidently assert:

> For me, it’s an indication of professionalism that actors follow the director’s instructions. It’s his vision… Danish actors would demand to ‘understand’ their roles. But what is there to understand if the director knows precisely what he must have? (in Stevenson 2002: 35).

Even after having undergone his Dogma 95 ‘treatment’ von Trier would continue to have a difficult relationship with his actors. Both Björk and Nicole Kidman declared (after **Dancer in the Dark** and **Dogville**, respectively) that they would never work with him again. The actors often felt truly free to improvise only when von Trier handed the acting direction over to someone else, as he did for **The Kingdom**.

Whatever the case, the rules laid down in the Vow of Chastity are certainly at odds with von Trier’s own pre-Dogma film practices. Preconceived, pre-visualised, and pre-rehearsed camera movements contravene the demand that ‘the
shooting must take place where the film takes place’ (rule 3); the prescribed use of colour film and the ban on optical filters are diametrically opposed to the use of monochrome with supplemental colour elements in von Trier’s so-called Europa trilogy (The Element of Crime, Epidemic and Europa); the ban on mentioning the director’s name flies in the face of von Trier’s oversized directorial credits for Europa, and the Dogma oath in which filmmakers renounce their artistry and any recourse to ‘personal taste’ is difficult to square with the claim that a film reproduces the director’s vision.

Notwithstanding these unequivocal differences, there exists a remarkable continuity in von Trier’s pre-Dogma, Dogma and post-Dogma film practices. To start with, the Dogma Manifesto is not the first manifesto von Trier ever wrote: he has drawn one up for every one of his nine films.²
Virtual explorations: The Europa trilogy

In the period between 1984 and 1991 in which the Europa trilogy was made, the term ‘virtual reality’ had barely reached beyond computer and media labs and a few experimental artist circles. Nevertheless, virtuality plays an important, not to say crucial, role in all three films, in different ways. Firstly, the reality (or diegesis) of the worlds depicted in these films is undermined from the start because these worlds are the mental projections of the principal characters, and these projections are not necessarily based on reliable perceptual evidence. Secondly, these worlds are constructed using purely photographic and cinematographic means, in the most literal sense. Objects and locations become mere lighting effects. And thirdly, space and time are flexible categories having little in common with physical, Newtonian reality.

Virtual worlds

Journeys through the mind

In The Element of Crime Fisher undergoes hypnosis, at the direction of his Egyptian psychotherapist’s thickly accented voice, back to the Europe from which he has just returned. A remark by the psychiatrist – ‘You always come back after the fact, to let me cure your headaches’ – tells us that The Element of Crime is going to show us a mental reconstruction of Fisher’s earlier experiences in Europe. Because his adventures have given him headaches and he can-
not embark on the exploration of his memories except under the guidance of a psychotherapist, it is clear from the start that Fisher’s mental exertions will not necessarily yield an accurate picture of his experiences.

**Europa** opens with an image of railway tracks gliding past, while in voice-over Max von Sydow addresses a ‘you’ of whom it is unclear whether this is the viewer or the principal character of the film. The voice-over transports this person by hypnosis into the world of history: ‘At the count of ten you’ll be in Europe 1945... one... two...’ The images of the past in this film are therefore modalised from the outset as a hallucinatory journey through the imagination of the protagonist and the spectator at one and the same time. The world in **Europa** is not a representation of an independently existent reality, but is continuously conjured up by the voice of the narrator, who thereby becomes the creator of a world of which he himself forms no part.

Finally, in **Epidemic**, a voice-over by von Trier links the first section, pseudo-documentary in style, in which he and Niels Vørsel have to produce a new film script in a few days, with a second section, filmed by Henning Bendtsen, the erstwhile cameraman of Carl Theodor Dreyer, which purports to show fragments of the film that von Trier and Vørsel are working on. Von Trier’s voice-over also links the fictional events depicted in the film with the ‘reality’ of the film by asserting that the epidemic forming the subject of the film had actually broken out for real on the day that the script was ready.

The ‘film-within-the-film’ is therefore not only virtual in the sense that as the movie begins it remains to be conceived, written and shot; it is also virtual in the sense that a feedback loop exists between the reality of the framing film and the virtuality of the embedded film. The epidemic that von Trier and Vørsel invent for their film project contaminates their reality – which, of course, is also thereby virtualised. The world of the film is blatantly presented as a mental projection. Again and again we see how von Trier, in particular, derives inspiration from objects and documents occurring in the film frame, and how the film emerges, so to speak, in his mind’s eye. At the end of the film, the theme of hypnosis – one central to the worlds of both **The Element of Crime** and **Europa** – returns to spectacular effect when at the dinner at which the scriptwriters are to hand the finished script to the DFI advisor, a hypnotised medium (played by Gitte Lind) is asked to ‘go into the film’.

This last scene points to another aspect of virtuality: the worlds presented in these films are the mental constructs not only of the films’ characters, but also – and more importantly – of its spectators.
Many films, one game

Just as von Trier’s ‘naturalistic’ Dogma film Idioterne was seen as a radical break with his earlier, highly stylised proofs of cinematographic mastery, the films he made after Idioterne were seen as a radical break with the Dogma aesthetic. For instance, film critic Rodriguez (2004) wrote that Dogma 95 ‘championed naturalistic filmmaking with no artificial lights or sounds’, while Simon Spiegel (2003) wrote of Dogville: ‘(Der) Regieexzentriker von Trier geht also nach seinem Dogma-Experiment einmal mehr daran, das Kino radikal neu zu erfinden’ and called Dogville ‘das krasse Gegenteil des Dogma-Naturalismus’. It was no doubt partly the result of the interview with von Trier which was printed along with the production notes in the Dogville press pack, that wide reference was made to the consciously Brechtian aesthetic that was supposed to have taken the place of Dogma naturalism (even where this influence was contested – see Bots 2003) or to the minimalist, theatrical character of the film (see French 2004).

And Dogville is, indeed, the opposite of a Dogma film. Pretty much every rule of the Dogma 95 Manifesto is transgressed: the film takes place in the America of the Great Depression and as a historical costume drama it violates both the ban on ‘temporal alienation’ and the prohibitions on props and costumes. Much use is also made of sound that was not recorded on set, as von Trier himself explains: ‘you hear gravel crunch under the actor’s feet even if there’s no gravel visible on the studio floor’ (in Björkman 2004). Lighting effects and special effects are not avoided, such as the Alpenglünen which shines through the window of the blind Jack McKay (played by Ben Gazarra), the blosssom that descends during the meal held on the Fourth of July, and the snow that falls during Grace’s plea during the last Dogville residents meeting. The finale of the film is, of course, the most flagrant violation of Dogma’s ban on ‘superficial action’ (‘murders and weapons, etc. must not occur’).

However, these transgressions of the Dogma rules can only be seen as representing a break with ‘Dogma naturalism’ if the Manifesto is read and interpreted from the perspective of Bazinian or neo-Bazinian realism (see Conrich and Tincknell 2000). Seen from a ludological and model-oriented standpoint,
the rules point to a very different conceptualisation of film and reality (see chapter 2). If the rules are seen as guidelines that assist the filmmaker in being able to concentrate only on the genuinely important elements with which a situation is to be modelled, (the ‘actors and settings’, as the Manifesto describes), and if every performance of a scene is no more than the contingent actualisation of the infinite number of virtual variations comprised in the ‘script’, then one performance is no more ‘natural’ than another, and props and costumes, extra light or sound are no more than the incidental ‘colouring’ or detailing of the model.

If von Trier has radically reinvented film then this is not because he has tried a new style or approach with every film, one which would represent a radical break with all his former films. Von Trier’s reinvention of film consists of a totally original concept of ‘what film is’, a concept that represents a radical break with the classical and the modernistic concept of the film as a representation of reality in all its social, political, psychological and aesthetic varieties (see chapter 2). Film for von Trier is a playful, rule-bound activity. His scenes are not imitations of an original historic or fictional situation, designed to resemble the original as closely as possible; they are models in which the behaviour of a system is simulated under different circumstances. Every execution is no more – and no less! – than a given state in the state space defined by the parameters of the situation concerned and its context.

From this viewpoint, the differences between Idioterne and Dogville (and between Idioterne and Dancer in the Dark, the film that immediately followed it) are not as fundamental or radical as they may at first appear from a classical or modernistic perspective.