

interview with Jorgen Leth from www.indiewire.com

Breaking Von Trier: Jorgen Leth Survives "The Five Obstructions"

by Anthony Kaufman

Jorgen Leth in "The Five Obstructions," which he co-directed with Lars von Trier. Photo courtesy of Koch Lorber Films.

Danish directors Jorgen Leth and Lars von Trier have created the ultimate exercise in sado-masochistic filmmaking. And guess who's the sadist? In "The Five Obstructions," Lars von Trier subjects his predecessor Leth to a series of five filmmaking trials, each based on the remaking of Leth's 1967 short film "The Perfect Human" according to different "obstructions." Reminiscent of von Trier's Dogme rules, the regulations include, among others, that every shot should be 12 frames in length, that one version had to be filmed in the most miserable place in the world, and one version had to be animated.

But Leth's 12-minute experimental work already came from notions of obstruction; the Danish maverick originally made the film as a "polemic against imperfection," a reaction against the Danish verite social documentaries of the time. "They were obsessed with social problems and I was totally disgusted by it," says the 66-year-old filmmaker, poet, and sports commentator. "So I wanted to do something about perfection."

Leth also proves himself a worthy opponent to his young rival -- always using von Trier's mischievous limitations as springboards for creative solutions. (As von Trier whines, "The trouble is you're so clever that whatever I say inspires you.") In fact, all of Leth's altered "Perfect Humans" are gems of innovative filmmaking. By the end of "The Five Obstructions," it's not easy to discern between obstructor and obstructed, victor and vanquished.

indieWIRE contributor Anthony Kaufman spoke with Jorgen Leth on two occasions, once during the Sundance Film Festival and more recently, in New York, where Leth had traveled from his part-time home of Jacmel, Haiti, as the country teetered on the edge of all-out Civil War. Koch Lorber opens the film at New York's Film Forum today (Leth will be present at tonight's 8:20 screening).

indieWIRE: Haiti has been called one of the worst places to live in the world by the United Nations. When I heard that, I couldn't help but think of Von Trier's obstruction, "Go to the most miserable place in the world." In Haiti, you've found one and you're comfortable there.

Jorgen Leth: Lars knows I'm accustomed to miserable places, it's true. And I could have shot this scene in Haiti, but I thought that would have been a smaller challenge. So that's why I chose India. But really, when I think about it after, Haiti would have been more miserable in certain areas. But by living in Haiti, I'm learning a lot about life.

iW: The more I read about your work, the more I think you were totally prepared for these five obstructions.

Leth: Yes, and Lars also knew that I'm interested in experimenting with film language and innovative new storytelling and aesthetic strategies, so in that way it was appealing to me. In normally all of my work, I have an experimental urge to present things in a new fresh way. And I like to do difficult things. So yes, in that way, I was prepared to receive limitations and obstructions.

iW: And the same with games, right? This is all inextricably part of your work.

Leth: Yes, I've done films about games. What I like with games is that there is this uncertain outcome and the element of chance. You cannot know what a bicycle race leads to, so it's an uncertain story. [Leth is a radio commentator for the Tour de France.] I like to apply storytelling methods and techniques to try to frame the story in an interesting way, but you can never control what's happening. When I make films, I'm very conscious about leaving space for this uncertainty, and for some unexpected things. So filmmaking is also a game.

iW: So while watching the film, I was actually quite moved by it as a portrait of a brilliant filmmaker, but a tragic man. Would you agree with this view of the film?

Leth: Well, I'm a man who struggles with melancholy and depression, but I am a very productive filmmaker and I work constantly, with no pause. Even in the worst of crises, I manage to produce work. And that's keeping me alive.

iW: So are you still based in Haiti?

Leth: Haiti is the best cure against melancholy; it is also the most creative place for me to be. My productivity has increased enormously since I moved to Haiti. That's where I write my stories, develop my ideas and write nonstop, so it's a productive time, not a sleepy time.

iW: In the film, that wasn't made clear.

Leth: Lars is just playing with everything. When we meet each other, we always talk about our mental health. And he has his problems, too. He's actually happy that I have problems of my own. So he has cleverly discovered that what I've found in Haiti is a constructive depressiveness, where there is space for thinking through thoughts. Because you don't have space for that if you live in a normal society. Every time I go to Haiti after a season of busy work in Europe, I feel like I'm submerging into a certain state of mind, which is very productive.

iW: So how exactly did you meet Lars von Trier? He wasn't exactly a student of yours, right?

Leth: I was lecturing at a school; Thomas Vinterberg, Lone Scherfig, Kristian Levring, Susanne Bier were my students, especially Vinterberg. But Lars was never my direct student. There was some influence there; I'm quite sure the Dogme brothers picked up something from my teaching. With Lars, I met him earlier. He was an intern at the Danish Film Institute archive and I was a programmer/editor at the same place. And that's when he was looking at "The Perfect Human" on an editing table again and again, and he wanted to talk to me about it. But I snubbed him. I never talked to him. So I think that's coming back to me now.

iW: There is this sense that Lars wants to kill "the Father."

Leth: There's this element as he declares quite openly that my films have inspired him and influenced him, he's paying credit to that. And that's why I said yes to the project. And by making it about my film, it's an homage to that film. But this is also a very playful and evil game. And I am aware of his evilness and that's part of the game.

iW: How much of Lars' cruelty is actually real?

Leth: I think he has a purity complex. I don't believe in these ideas. I contest them. With this intelligence, he is able to do such evil games. But I think it's a romantic notion that I don't agree with. But I think he's honestly very interested in the process of destructing -- in a religious way -- to rebuild everything. That interests me, too, but I'm not so religiously obsessed with it.

He's always paying this credit to the way I was eliminating the technical possibilities by working out of very strict rules in my filmmaking. But a very important influence for him is Carl Dreyer, and Dreyer's "Joan of Arc" is one of the strongest examples of a director torturing an actress -- but

also this fantastic, hypnotic quality in the work of Dreyer's work with actors. So I think he's taking a lot from that, or that's why he's connecting to his work.

I like Lars very much, and I never felt he betrayed me during the work. Only once, I thought he came up with something that could stop the film, like when I found out how difficult it was to make an animated film in the time we had. I wondered, "Did he know that he would really stop me there?" I was very lucky that I found Bob Sabiston.

iW: Each film is a miracle of improvised filmmaking. How much time did you have?

Leth: I had plenty of time. When I got the Cuban one, I had a half a year to prepare it. But I had other things to do. But I had plenty of time between the conversation and the shooting, but the shooting was limited. We had one week in Cuba. The crew was there six days. We shot a lot of scenes, as it was necessary. There were like 1200 cuts.

iW: You're also a poet and I was wondering how you relate your poetry to your filmmaking, because poetry doesn't seem to have any limits. And yet you say that limitations help to create art?

Leth: For me, poetry has a strong link to my filmmaking. My films learn from my poetry. In poetry, you're free. You start in the corner and you don't know where it leads you. I have no message, I have nothing I want to tell, I just start and I see where it leads, and it's a big surprise and relief if it's good. That's the ideal state for filmmaking. I like the idea of chance coming into filmmaking, in shooting, in editing, and I do make space in my rules of game for chance. William Burroughs, Andy Warhol and John Cage are major influences for my work. Godard is the only cineastic influence.

iW: But "The Five Obstructions" is such a great argument for limitations and structure in art.

Leth: It's strange, it's a contradiction, but it's true. When I have something to work against, it liberates my imagination. I believe very much in authentic inspiration. I'm not about calculation. I find in Lars' films there is sometimes too much calculation. I like the honesty in this work that we've done together, because that's really the fundamental rule: that there's an extreme degree of honesty between us. He knows I'll never cheat. He says he wants me to make crap, but he knows I'll seek solutions that satisfy myself. And he counts on that.

iW: What do you tell your students about arriving at poetry in the cinema?

Leth: To not be too happy with the possibilities at hand. I hate films with a clear message, ones that have their answers already when they start.

iW: Tell me about your new project, "The Erotic Human."

Leth: I'm not fully financed yet, but I expect the Danish Film Institute is going to invest in it and I can find the rest of the money. The idea is that I want to explore the erotic life in different cultures, to pretend to be an anthropologist who wants to know how to categorize and understand erotic life in different cultures. So the anthropologist is a fictional character and he will travel to different cultures like Brazil, Senegal, Japan, someplace in Europe, and Cambodia or Laos. And there's a simple story: this anthropologist is a living man, of course, I don't know if I'll show him in the film, but during the process of making this exploration, he's drawn into the subject, too closely, so he loses the distance and maybe becomes more human in the process.