



Illusions of Reality and Fiction or the Desired Reality of Fiction: Dogme 95 and the Representation of Reality

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Abstract. The paper identifies a two channel strategy developed by the authors of the Danish Dogme films having as goal the generation of the illusion of reality. The first channel is aiming at the visual layer of the movies, which shows a firm decision to break with the style of the traditional fiction films. The second channel of this strategy is concerned with the narration of the films. In this regard Dogme – contrary to what had been declared in the *Vow of Chastity* – chose one of the most popular film and TV genres: melodrama. On the one hand Dogme films created a highly self-reflexive visual style and then they combined it on the other hand with a genre which calls for extreme audience identification. Documentarism and deeply conventionalized stories are put together in most Dogme films to create the reality of fiction.

“Movie is not an illusion” states the *Manifesto*,¹ and thus it makes us clear that the movement tries to say something about one of the major themes of cinema and film theory (and of visual communication in general): the representation of reality. It is well known that the initiators of Dogme 95²

¹The two founding documents of the Dogme 95 are the *Manifesto* and the *Vow of Chastity*. Until recently they were to be found on the official website (www.dogme95.dk) of the movement, which in February 2009, during the final revision of this paper, became unavailable.

²There is no specific rule for the correct spelling of Dogme 95 in English texts as some publications use Dogma, others prefer the Danish version Dogme. This paper will employ the latter which is used in the official documents of the movement, written originally also in English.

thought that the renewal of contemporary cinema is possible through some technical issues: “by using new technology anyone at any time can wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation” (Trier and Vinterberg 1995a). This is why the *Vow of Chastity* imposes some technical rules which should eliminate technology from cinema in the search of cinematic truth. It is obvious, that the rules imposed by the Dogme documents are only partial limitations of technology which is of course not suppressed completely – as this would be impossible. It is also unclear how the lack of technology could make possible more realistic images, but this is not really important. What is relevant for us at this moment is the fact that the initiators of the movement consider important to discuss the ability of cinema to represent reality and they think that the realism of film is an important issue. This is why this essay will try to understand some aspects of the realistic effect of the Dogme films.

Movie is of course an illusion, in fact in its traditional form of presentation (cinema) it is one of the most illusionistic forms of media. However, I would like to state from the very beginning that this essay – even if it uses several times the texts of the *Manifesto* and the *Vow of Chastity* – will not try to have a theoretical debate with the founding documents of the movement. The documents written by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg are not theoretical texts, one should consider them artistic gestures so I think there is no reason to follow all those theorists who try to find logical and artistic contradictions in them. As we can read in one of Ove Christensen’s papers: “There is a gap between poetics and works of art. One can not judge say a Dogma film on the basis of the *Manifesto* and *The Vow of Chastity*. These two texts present a poetics of Dogma filmmaking. However, the films made in accordance with the principles of Dogma 95 have to be regarded as individual films.” (Christensen, 2000) It is much more important to analyze the films inspired by these documents and the relationship of these films to the Dogme 95 movement, than to try to force a theoretical and analytical approach on these texts. The realism of the Dogme films will be discussed focusing on the context of the reception and will not try to prove the theoretical deficiencies of the authors.

The Irrelevance of Photographic Reality

In order to shape the frames of the arguments to be presented, it seems adequate to say a few words about the well known theoretical approaches which

will not be part of this essay. The much discussed classical theories of Bazin and Kracauer on filmic realism based on the consideration that cinema is a direct development of photography will not help us in the search for the sources of the realistic effect of the Dogme films due to several reasons. First they are basing their arguments only on the photographic characteristics of film, which proves to be more and more inadequate in the era of non-photographic, digital filmmaking. Secondly they seek for answers only inside the medium without looking at the context of their reception. The third objection against these theories says that they are based on a misunderstanding of photography itself. I will shortly elaborate on this, using the ideas of Hans Belting.

The German art historian in his *Anthropology of Images* argues that photographs never showed reality, they were only presenting our gaze directed towards the world. There are no images out there, we always create them inside of us, and so our images are always fictional. This means that when we analyze the world through photographs – thinking that they are better in recording reality than our eyes – we are in fact trying to know the world through fiction. (Belting 2001) If this is true, it is much more important to know what kind of “fictional” images viewers are used to in researching reality, than to find out if those images are really representing reality. It is more important to understand the beliefs that are guiding the reception than to discuss the actual realism of images, photos and films.

Our belief in perception, analyzed thoroughly by Merleau-Ponty, should also be mentioned here. The French philosopher talks about our common belief which makes us accept everything which comes to us through our sensory organs and especially our eyes. The uncontrolled gesture of masking our eyes in front of a danger shows – explains Merleau-Ponty – that we don’t believe the world itself, but we think that our vision leads us to the things (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1993, 17, 48–57). This perceptual belief is extremely important for cinema, and it is also discussed from a different perspective by Peter Wuss.

Producing Realism

The realism effect of the films produced and presented in the spirit of Dogme 95 is indisputable. Peter Wuss’s analysis of the realism of Dogme films focuses not only on the style of the films but on the functioning of the human perception (Wuss 2002). Of course – he says – the “so-called reality effect or impression of authenticity is a peculiarity of film reception, or, more broadly, of the processes

of reception of audiovisual media,” but what we need to understand is the role of the active viewer in this process.

Based on Gibson’s ecological analysis (Gibson 1986), Wuss is focusing on the role of perceptual learning in the functioning of the reality effect in cinema and especially in Dogme films. In his approach “the reality effect is [...] never simply a cinematic structure per se, but rather always the result of psychological activity on the part of the viewer” (Wuss 2002). This reality effect can be achieved through a specific combination of already known and new elements – the repetition of this structure makes us possible to accept as realistic a representation that is different from the realistic representations we were used to before through perceptual learning. “The reality effect – explains Wuss – is not an isolated phenomenon of perception, but instead becomes effectual within a feedback process that links the individual work and its innovative observations to the entire media culture” (Wuss 2002).

Here we have to emphasize two things. First it is important to note that every filmic phenomenon has to be analyzed together with its entire context, and this is also true for Dogme films. Secondly it is also very useful to observe and take into account the fact that Dogme films were part of a movement. In this way, through the intertextuality created by their “marketing” they were able to “help” each other by repeating a certain kind of representation, enhancing the perceptual learning process of the audience. As the spectators were somehow familiar with the style used by the Danish filmmakers and thus the reality effect has been established, as they have previously accepted the structure, they were even able to accept improbable events in the story.

Following Wuss’s train of thought we may say, that the mixture of the already known and new elements can make a representation more or less realistic. Although we need “perceptual learning” for most of the elements, we will consider the representation less realistic than in the case in which we have already known elements. “Realism is a matter of habit” says Nelson Goodman, arguing that it is not the inherent characteristics of an image that make it realistic, because “representational customs, which govern realism, also tend to generate resemblance”. (Goodman, 1969, 39) He rejects the idea that the most realistic image is the one that provides the greatest amount of pertinent information. Realism relies “not in quantity of information but in how easily it issues. And this depends upon how stereotyped the mode of representation is, upon how commonplace the labels and their uses have become.” (Goodman, 1969, 36)

According to him realism is relative and it is always defined by a representational system which is standard or normative for a person or for

a culture at a given time. Realism is not a particular style, rather there is always a way for realistic representation, which is specific for a certain time, space or culture. And the norm of realism can change very fast: something which seems the authentic copy of reality today, tomorrow might be considered a manipulated representation. So the realism of an image is always based on the convention of the day. The utterance that an image is like reality means nothing more than the fact that it looks the same as reality is usually represented.

When we watch Dogme films at first glance we find an unusual form of representation, as the specific visual style developed by the Danish directors is not following the norms of the realistic filmic representation used by mainstream cinema. If we consider the norms of traditional cinema we might think that the use of hand-held cameras, the shaking and granular images, the faded colours have a self-reflexive effect on the viewer, making him or her acknowledge that he/she is watching a representation and not reality itself. However due to the same reasons Dogme films look less professional and less artificial than mainstream feature films usually do, and they create the feeling that we watch the live and unorchestrated recording of real events. And this is the moment where we have to take into account other antecedents than those of film history: the fact that viewers are not surprised by this style and they accept it as realistic representation, if we follow Goodman's train of thought, means that this representation has its roots somewhere else.

When the initiators of the Dogme movement wanted to introduce something new, when they wanted to refresh cinema they tried to get rid of the stereotyped representation which – upon Goodman – is the most important factor of realism. Introducing some elaborate technical rules and creating the imagery considered nowadays specific to Dogme films, they have in fact only changed the field of reference, the context. When viewers consider Dogme films realistic it is not because they have the impression that they look like other realistic movies they have seen before. In these situations people simply refer to other visual experiences they had outside the cinemas. In order to find those representations that make Dogme films look realistic, we just have to enlarge our perspective and take into consideration a much wider range of visual imagery than those referred usually by film historians.

The Double Strategy for Reality

There is a two channel strategy developed by the authors of Dogme films having as goal the generation of the illusion of reality. The first channel aims at the visual layer of the movies, which shows a firm decision to break with the style of the traditional fiction films. The so called “poor” looking images, which are nowadays considered a trademark of Dogme, are radically going against one of the main convictions of cinema: in order to create the cinematic illusion and the identification of the viewer, the film has to hide the apparatus, it has to hide its own production process. By the suppression of continuous editing and the extreme use of hand-held cameras, Dogme filmmakers elaborated a visual style that appeals for non-cinematic “cultural and communicational conventions” (Gombrich 1972) which exist outside of the traditional cinema and are to be found especially in the world of the television programs. The second channel of this strategy is concerned with the narration of the films. In this regard Dogme – contrary to what had been declared in the *Vow of Chastity* – chose one of the most popular film and TV genres: melodrama. On the one hand Dogme films created a highly self-reflexive visual style and on the other hand they combined it with a genre, which calls for extreme audience identification. Documentarism and deeply conventionalized stories are put together in most Dogme films to create the reality of fiction.

The New Style of News Programs

If we try to understand why Dogme films are able to achieve the so called reality effect without using the well-known methodology of mainstream cinema it is useful to look beyond the traditional forms of film, and analyze for example the recent developments of television news programs. It is easy to tell that the news programs have changed dramatically in the last 15–20 years. One of the most important changes in the way of thinking of television producers is that instead of suggesting to the viewers the professional production of news, the TV channels are more and more eager to emphasize the spontaneity, the on-the-spot recording of the events, and the participation, the witness role of the crew. Instead of well prepared, correctly filmed and edited coverage of events we see journalists “caught in the action,” reacting spontaneously and without knowing the outcome of the situations. Visually these reports became closer than ever to some of the techniques used by experimental filmmakers.

This process – as Nick Rombes argues – was also accelerated by the US Army, which hosts some programs producing some of the most experimental DV films.

He calls the Joint Combat Camera Program of the Department of Defense's Defense Visual Information (DVI) Directorate "an avant-garde studio" which produces films using "the tactics of guerilla filmmaking, the New Wave, the fast-and-go immediacy of post-punk film." The US military uses DV technique, and "we see a rawer, more experimental aesthetics of DV filmmaking emerging, one that borrows in terms of its theory and its production tactics many of the signature characteristics of the Dogme 95 movement." Rombes considers that the US military is producing nowadays "some of the most startling cinema verité" (Rombes).

One would think that this kind of filmmaking is inevitable on a battlefield, where it is impossible to produce professionally looking footage. But recently it has become more and more usual that reports from normal, peaceful locations are using low-budget techniques. For a few years now the Hungarian National Television shows its Washington correspondent through a webcam connection. Beside the evident cost-effectiveness of this solution we have to observe the message of this medium: the low quality, ragged images transmit to the viewer the information that the image has been taken on the spot. The well-polished images of a studio are not able any more to make us feel the presence of the journalist on the location of the events.

Nick Rombes also draws attention on another feature of this visual style: its self-reflexivity. The shaking images of hand-held cameras, the spontaneous, unexpected camera movements, the "faults" of the coverage create a feeling of medium awareness in the viewer. He distinguishes a self-theorizing dimension of films in movies and even music videos. (His main example is Michel Gondry's music video, *Lucas with the Lid Off*, where "the story the video tells is essentially the story of its production, although without resorting to the usual methods of revealing the camera"). One of the main features of non-fictional cinema is that it does not need to hide the fact of the recording – this is why continuous editing is ignored and jump cut is often acceptable.

These practices of mainstream films and media made possible for Dogme films to be presented in an environment where the representation techniques that were crucial for the movement were already known by the audiences. Elements of the non-fictional films were brought into fictional cinema, but without becoming *cinéma vérité*, as the story still remained highly fictional. The link towards more traditional narrative film is created by a very conscious appeal to genres.

Genre, the Forbidden Fruit

The refusal of genre movies by the founders of Dogme is complete: “Genre movies are not acceptable” (Trier and Vinterberg, 1995b). However, essays and reviews of Dogme films continuously point out the powerful presence of quite popular genres. Genres – as Jenő Király states – are the elements of stability in every work of art (Király 1998), even in those which seek novelty and try to break up with the traditions. The recognition of already known situations, characters or dramaturgical stereotypes provide the points of anchor that viewers need in order to be able to accept a shocking story or a radically new visual style.

In a remarkable essay Palle Schantz Lauridsen draws our attention to the fact that Vinterberg’s *Festen* (*The Celebration*, 1998) in its dramaturgy uses the conventions and the solutions of the classical Aristotelian tragedy and of the television docu-soaps (Lauridsen, 2000). Although the *Manifesto* specifically states that the well developed dramaturgy results in extreme predictability, Vinterberg neglects this rule in the very first film of the movement. He adapts almost without any change the classical rule of unity of space, time and action. From the point of view of the dramaturgy, *Festen* (and most of the Dogme films) is quite conventional, and respects the rule that every story has to be composed of several distinct parts. The different parts of the story can be precisely observed, they are based upon each other, and when a small detail is emphasized somewhere, we can be sure that it will have an important role to play at a certain point of the story. From a dramaturgical point of view – says Lauridsen – “*The Celebration* is flawlessly Hollywood” (Lauridsen 2000).

The classical dramaturgy is however presented through a visual style (shaking and granular images recorded with hand-held camera, obvious “mistakes” in editing) which is not usual in traditional fiction films. This style has been used for a long time in documentaries, but it is very important to follow Lauridsen in finding its presence in some much more popular genres: reality shows and docu-soaps. “The aesthetics of *The Celebration* provides the film with a strong documentary coding, no matter how fictitious the story and how Aristotelian the dramaturgy.” (Lauridsen 2000) Besides the use of non-conventional images and editing style, the uncredited director pays attention to the switches between different dimensions of space, time and consciousness (reality – dream – fantasy) which are always easy to identify: the viewer is able to follow the story. In this way audiences are simultaneously given the possibility to intellectually perceive the artistic style and to enjoy

the story. In Király's definition this is the most important characteristic of the midcult.³

Melodrama is one of the most frequently used genres in Dogme films. As I have shown it in an earlier article, Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (which is not an official Dogme film, but it is considered their direct predecessor) presents most of the characteristics of classical melodrama (Gyenge 2007). The presence of melodrama is important due to the fact that – as András Bálint Kovács notes it – this is the genre which bridged art films and popular movies even in the time of modern film (Kovács 2005, 106). Besides this, Lars von Trier also bridges classical and modern melodramas thus creating a powerful tension between the complex, overdecorated declarational style of classical heroes (Brooks 1985) and the inability to speak of the modern situation emphasized by the rigid, economical and laconic visual style.

Reality of Fiction

Ove Christensen talks about three different meanings of Realism in the history of cinema. First he discusses the epistemological level, which refers to the situation when we consider cinema as a *representation* of a world outside of it. "The truth is placed in the external world and the task of the medium is to represent it" (Christensen 2000) In this case a comparison of the image with the outer world can make us decide if a film was realistic or not. Of course we can use this approach only regarding documentaries, as they try to present actual events, places and characters. The realism of fiction films has to be analyzed on other levels. Christensen calls formal the level which describes the realism of conventional filmic storytelling. In this case "the truth is contained within the film's world (of make-believe) and the task is to give access to this world." Conventional stories create a reality of their own, a reality of the fictional situation – so the task of realism in this case is to make the viewer believe (at least for a moment) that the events and feelings presented are in a way real even if the actual characters and places are fictional.

There is also a third, thematic (or ideological) level which refers to the films where the emphasis is only indirectly or symbolically related to a defined reality and it is more based on an idea. "The truth is an apprehension or an opinion that is not directly accessible, so the task is to convince the spectator, who has to see the truth for him- or herself." In this case the fictionality of the whole

³More details on the relation of the films of Lars von Trier and midcult can be found in Ildikó Bartha's article (Bartha, 2006).

situation presented in the film is not important until the truth of the idea can be seen.

It is clear, that Dogme films are especially concerned with the second and third level of realism. As we have shown above, Dogme filmmakers are using the conventional dramaturgy full of passion of melodrama in order to let the viewers operate in the reception of the story those practices they are already used to. In order to make the films' realism function on ideological level, they are using the visual style of non-fictional filmmaking borrowed from documentaries and especially television news programs. This visual style attracts the viewer's attention upon the importance of the main message, which is often related to some frightening sides of the "normal" human behaviour. This is how Dogme films create the reality of their fiction.

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