

# Creative Restrictions in Student filmmaking: the Lessons of Dogme 95

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How do we approach media education in the current political climate? How do we teach students the importance of critical thinking when examining the media? The rise of movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up make media one of the most important degrees to pursue. Students often have a romantic notion when approaching a media degree that they will soon become content producers that will propel them into the global fame stratosphere. However, when embarking on such a degree, they soon learn there's more to just pushing the record button on a camera. This does not make anyone a filmmaker. Critical thinking and creativity sparked by the confines of briefs, assessment criteria and quick deadlines help students develop their skills. YouTube superstars seem to be more their heroes than the greatest filmmakers in world. I often panic when students have never heard of the greats, such as Lynne Ramsay, Claire Denis, and David Lynch. Should I be looking more at the YouTube creators than anxiously awaiting their next masterpieces? I'm often hesitant to gravitate to the website but I often remind myself that YouTube is a fantastic platform for media: when used properly. And what I mean by that is as a cinema resource. How many lecturers get anxious when the film clip you need is conveniently uploaded on YouTube but then doesn't load properly during a lecture? YouTube shouldn't be ignored, it should be

embraced as a website that hosts many wonderful introductions to the world of cinema.

This article will reflect upon my experiences within tertiary education and some of the techniques I have adopted to inspire students' creativity. This is not a 'how to' guide but rather a reflection on where I see my practice being able to expand as developments grow within media education. I will break down my approach to practical filmmaking courses. To be more precise, the article will explore the role of creative restrictions within film production papers where, to quote Heidi Philipsen, "I would like filmmakers interested in thinking 'outside the box' to recognise that they can benefit from being placed 'inside the box'" (Philipsen 2009: 1). Media education has, historically been perceived as an, "[...] inherently 'critical' enterprise, which should have nothing whatsoever to do with training for employment" (Buckingham 2013: 26). However, as new platforms arise to distribute content, media education can no longer ignore the benefits of including practical filmmaking in their courses and the fusion of theory and practice has become more popular within academia over the past two decades.

## A Danish Method

Through its training institutes, notably National Film

School of Denmark, new talent is trained to work within certain constraints to be creative in overcoming obstacles and restrictions, which could be utilising minimal resources or a low budget. From this, students can develop their skills which will enable them to work within the confines of the most minimal of budgets:

It has to do with the virtues of working under constraints. In other words, finding the way to produce maximal effect within a given set of parameters rather than seeking to expand or exceed these parameters creates artistic challenges and accomplishment. This is basic pedagogical form used in National Film School of Denmark, where the students are given exercises in which they work according to very specific limiting parameters. (Mathieu 2013: 54)

The structure of the National Film School of Denmark, its use of restrictions and obstacles, have benefited students as they can choose, '[...] to produce their own set of rules in their professional filmmaking, as Von Trier, Vinterberg and Leth have done ...' (Philipsen 2009: 14). With this method ingrained in the likes of Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, they notoriously created their own set of rules for filmmakers around the world in the Dogme 95 manifesto.

Dogme 95 is perhaps best understood as a low-budget enterprise that inspires creativity, or, "[...] a back-to-basics blueprint for low-budget filmmaking that belies Denmark's prosperous standing" (Goss 2009: 215). The primary goal was to establish a cinema of authenticity (Bainbridge 2007: 91). The manifesto had strict criteria within the parameters of 'rules' in which the filmmaker takes a 'Vow of Chastity', a term that evokes, "[...] not only a purity of style, moderation or restraint, but also celibacy, continence or virtue" (Lynes 2010: 599). To adhere to this vow, filmmakers must follow, "[...] a set of minimalistic technical and narrative rules to which the profilmic has to subjugate itself thereby formulating a broader film aesthetics founded in a notion of realism and the real" (Jerslev 2002: 48). The 'rules' of Dogme 95 were a pastiche of the Ten Commandments and created to allow creative inspiration to overcome the restrictions, with certain demands such as "[...] filming be accomplished with a hand-held camera on location where all props are already present" (Goss 2009: 218). The 'rules' also have, "[...] the double intention of subverting Hollywood aesthetics and of carving out a formal terrain on which low-budget, independent films can compete against films with eight or nine figure production costs" (Ogden 2009: 55).

The restrictions emphasised a lo-fi approach to filmmaking and inspired creativity. Not only were films to be shot handheld but on location, without non-diegetic music, unable to use special effects and must be shot in colour. Ultimately, a strict adherence to the rules is redundant in the manifesto's overall purpose to achieve a level of authenticity to rival Hollywood's artificiality. The purpose was not to literally translate these restrictions into a film but rather 'creatively interpret' the manifesto:



Thomas Bo Larsen in Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (Denmark 1998), officially Dogme #1

*The Idiots* is an obvious realisation of Dogme rule number two, which states that genre films are not accepted; it is an art film claiming a serious theme. But the exciting thing about the film is not the explicit meaning, the story about social and individual transgression. (Jerslev 2002: 46)

Dogme 95's success is varied yet it cannot be denied that it had resonance worldwide. American filmmaker Harmony Korine's *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999) adhered to the rules and the film was subsequently certified by the manifesto. If we consider the role of a 'manifesto' within media education, students develop their creativity 'inside the box'.

### Inside the Box

To take this restrictive method further, Lars von Trier devised 'The Five Obstructions' (2003). Here, Von Trier documents his need to manipulate other filmmakers, in this case Jørgen Leth. Von Trier asked Leth to remake his 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* with stipulations for each version:

The filmmaking process that Leth undergoes is both difficult and an eye opener to himself as well as fun and exciting. In this film the creative processes of film making are [...] described with the aid of rules rather than explained away by 'intuition'. Leth calls the rules given to him 'a gift' from Von Trier. (Philipsen 2009: 13)

The result saw Leth produce five variations of his original short, where the first film, "[...] must have no shot lasting longer than twelve frames, and must provide answers to the questions posed in the original film; that the second must 'get close' to a harrowing situation; and the that the fourth must be a cartoon (a form both directors claim to hate)" (Perkins 2010: 152). What can be concluded about this exercise is a further demonstration of the use of restrictions to develop creativity, even at a professional level.

The Five Obstructions' intent to 'gift' the filmmaker illustrates the benefits of applying constraints on the production process. The film has a central metaphor

of the experiment as a, "[...] therapeutic encounter, where von Trier attempts to 'help' Leth break down his mannered style to access his own 'truth'" (Perkins 2010: 150). This 'truth' Leth discovers by going through this process reveals that the journey is, in fact, more inclined to be reflexive. The challenges Trier presents to Leth were in many ways to 'expand his horizons'. However, the process is not without its flaws, particularly on the Trier's part where his 'gifting' can be seen to have, "[...] all the elements of sadism required for the film's mythical quest, but his obstructions [...] are staged as impediments to Leth's own 'virile modesty'" (Lynes 2010: 607). Trier pushes Leth to his limits, especially in the second restriction which has Leth film in the 'most miserable place on earth', an experiment that ultimately fails. Yet, the intent to move Leth out of his comfort zone as a filmmaker is the experiment's greatest achievement and also the primary element used when applying the method to student's processes.

### Reflection on Restrictions

Inspired by The Five Obstructions, I will now use the remainder of the article to discuss my use of certain restrictions within production papers. Teaching across undergraduate film and media degrees, from first to fourth year, has been useful in observing the various stages of student's skills and development as filmmakers.

First year students have, typically, come straight from secondary education where they have had support measures in place to facilitate their learning and had thorough guidance to achieve their academic goals. Not that higher education does not provide these measures – on the contrary, there are more support mechanisms in place to aid students. However, within the classroom with twenty or so peers all at the same level, there is a different relationship and atmosphere. One of the benefits within university education is that students are often blended with peers from other degrees with different perspectives and backgrounds that shape their filmmaking processes. This often makes group work an exciting prospect after the initial awkwardness of working with complete strangers.

Each member of the group will have their own tastes, philosophies, experiences to bring flavour to the process. However, when applying the restrictions on their work, group work becomes essential as, "[...] an idea or product that deserves the label 'creative' arises from the synergy of many sources and not only from the mind of a single person" (Csikzentmihalyi 1996: 1) To instigate the first part of the production process, I have found it beneficial to have groups of no more than five to create a short film of thirty seconds based around a particular theme.

Some of the most creative films have been developed from the theme of dreams, happiness and injustice. The constraint of time is the primary bind for this experiment, both the length of the film and the fact that students only have two hours to complete the project, including editing. The other constraint is the use of technology. I often have students in this first

instance to use their mobile phones to shoot the film whilst providing appropriate, professional editing software such as Final Cut Pro or Premiere Pro. Though the footage is often quickly filmed without tripods and framing has yet to be developed, the exercise provides students their first foray into working with their peers that soon, hopefully, grow into a collaborative unit on future projects. This is then further illustrated during the post-screening discussion where students articulate their production process.

As students work their way through film production papers, more and more restrictions are applied to their briefs. One of the most success restrictions I have applied is the use of a controlled 'duologue'. Essentially, students have to write and shoot a short film of no more than three minutes and 27 seconds that is centred on two characters having a conversation. To push the students further, I ask that the film be set in a public place, where they have to organise a quick shoot, arrange for extras and understand the limitations of filming in a location where they can't control every aspect of the production process. This must be completed within two weeks. I additionally apply caveats that include:

1. No superficial action or violence
2. There can be more than two characters but only two can be in the same scene at any given time
3. An emphasis on colour related to the environment (students can emphasise a particular colour motif based on the nature of the conversation)
4. Only allowed one close-up
5. There can be no diegetic music

These constraints focus students on the nature of their scripts and the style of the film they want to pursue. The most successful films to come from this experiment feature little dialogue as students often focus more on the visual look of the film. The purpose is not to replicate a sense of realism but to have students place their creativity into the image construction of their film, subverting the initial intention of a duologue: the dialogue becomes redundant.

### Conclusion

The 'Danish Method' of teaching has been one of the most inspiring approaches to filmmaking. The notion of confines often frustrate but always yield results with students who sometimes have difficulty thinking of ideas to turn into a film. As students develop through production papers, and through their degrees, they find the liberation within the assessment briefs. Often when I tell students to go and make whatever they want, they struggle and miss the benefits of something to fight against within the constraints. I find that by fourth year of an honours degree, a few have truly found their voice and are able to tackle difficult subject matter. I have even witnessed final year students creating their own manifestos in the vein of Dogme 95 that will initiate them into the professional filmmaking world by taking on the system. Now is the time for students, teachers, and lecturers all over the world to approach the issues within today's society. There should be films about

#MeToo and Time's Up. Students should be shaping cinema's future. And by attaining a media degree, they will have all the tools necessary to become the next voices. I for one am looking forward to the next Denis or Ramsay that will shake things up.

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