

American Museum of the

# Moving Image

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## LARS VON TRIER

March 13-28, 2004

Presented with the assistance of The Danish Film Institute

Saturday, March 13

1:00 p.m. INTRODUCED BY JORGEN LETH

### **THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS**

2004, Koch Lorber Films, 90 mins. 35 mm print source: Koch Lorber Films

*Directed by Jørgen Leth and Lars von Trier. Produced by Carsten Holst. Photographed by Dan Holmberg. Edited by Camilla Skousen & Morten Hojbjerg. With Jørgen Leth, Lars von Trier, Jacqueline Arenal, Daniel Hernández Rodríguez, Patrick Bauchau, Alexandra Vandernoot.*

3:30 p.m. FILMS BY JORGEN LETH

### **MOTION PICTURE**

1970, Denmark, 20 mins. 16 mm print source: Danish Film Institute

*Directed by Jørgen Leth. Written, produced and edited by Ole John and Jørgen Leth. Photographed by Ole John. Original Music by James Brown. With Torben Ulrich.*

### **I'M ALIVE. SOREN ULRIK THOMSEN: A DANISH POET**

1999, Denmark, 40 mins. 35 mm print source: Danish Film Institute

*Written and directed by Jørgen Leth. Produced by Annette Norregaard-Jensen. Photographed by Dan Holmberg. Edited by Camilla Skousen. Original Music by Krzysztof Komeda (Tomasz Stanko Septet) and Randall Meyers. With Søren Ulrik Thomsen.*

### **NEW SCENES FROM AMERICA**

2002, Denmark, 43 mins. 35 mm print source: Danish Film Institute

*Written and directed by Jørgen Leth. Produced by Marianne Christensen and Mette Heide. Photographed by Dan Holmberg. Edited by Camilla Skousen. Original Music by John Cale. With John Ashbery, John Cale, Robert Frank, Roy Haynes, Dennis Hopper, Mark Kurlansky, Albert Maysles, Patrick Slavin.*

6:30 p.m. SPECIAL PREVIEW SCREENING

### **DOGVILLE**

2004, Lions Gate Films, 177 mins. 35 mm print source: Lions Gate Films.

*Written and directed by Lars von Trier. Produced by Vibeke Windelov. Photographed by Anthony Dod Mantle. Edited by Molly Malene Stensgaard. Costume Design by Manon*

Rasmussen. *Non-Original Music by Antonio Vivaldi. Principal Cast: Nicole Kidman (as Grace), Harriet Andersson (Gloria), Lauren Bacall (Ma Ginger), Jean-Marc Barr (The Man with the Big Hat), Paul Bettany (Tom Edison), Blair Brown (Mrs. Henson), James Caan (The Big Man), Patricia Clarkson (Vera), Jeremy Davies (Bill Henson), Ben Gazzara (Jack McKay), Philip Baker Hall (Tom Edison, Sr.), Chloë Sevigny (Liz Henson).*

### **The Five Obstructions**

From *Film# Special Issue/Leth* (2002, Danish Film Institute):

Dear Jørgen,

The challenge/The Film you are supposed to make/solve is called *The Five Obstructions*.

As a starting point I would like you to show me a 10-minute film you have made, *The Perfect Human Being* [sic].

We will watch the movie together and talk about it—then I will set up limitations, commands or prohibitions, which means you have to do the film all over again

This we will do five times—of this the title. I would find it natural if our conversations became a part of the final movie—with the six small films, of course.

I hope you're happy with the assignment. Maybe the subject for the first movie should be something we came to an agreement about? Of course we would have the most fun if the subject is of a character that gives us as big a difference as possible between film one and six?

Let me know how you feel about this. Please write.

Best regards

Lars

Dear Lars,

I find the assignment tempting. I can see an interesting development between film one and six, the route around the obstacles, the conversations, I'm sure we'll get a lot out of this. It is exciting. I look forward to your obstructions.

I really like the idea about having to change, adjust, and reduce according to given conditions in the process.

Best regards

Jørgen

To understand the mindset that underlies *The Five Obstructions* one must understand the documentary 'poetics' of Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth as they themselves have formulated them in the following texts:

#### **DEFOCUS**

We are searching for something fictional, not factual. Fiction is limited by our imagination and facts by our insight, and the part of the world that we are seeking cannot be encompassed by a "story" or embraced from an "angle". The subject matter we seek is found in the same reality that

inspires fiction-makers; the reality that journalists believe they are describing. But they cannot find this unusual subject matter because their techniques blind them. Nor do they want to find it, because the techniques have become the goal itself.

If one discovers or seeks a story, to say nothing of a point that communicates, then one suppresses it. By emphasizing a single pattern a simple pattern, genuine or artificial; by presenting the world with a picture puzzle with solutions chosen in advance.

The story, the point, the disclosure and the sensation have taken this subject matter from us—this; the rest of the world which is not nearly so easy to pass on, but which we cannot live without!

The story is the villain. The theme presented at the expense of all decency. But also the case in which a point's importance is presumably submitted for the audience to evaluate, assisted by viewpoints and facts counterbalanced by their antitheses. The worship of pattern, the one and only, at the expense of the subject matter from which it comes. How do we rediscover it, and how do we impart or describe it? The ultimate challenge of the future—to see without looking: to defocus! In a world where the media kneel before the altar of sharpness, draining life out of life in the process, the DEFOCUSIST will be the communicators of our era—nothing more, nothing less!

—Lars von Trier, March 2000

### THE MOMENT COMES

The part of a film I enjoy the most is when one can feel time flow through a single scene. There should always be room for time. A film should breath naturally. When we go out, we set a trap for reality, so that we may persuade it to fit into that mindset we have organized. We are relaxed, attentive and noncommittal. Things happen when they happen. We are just as clever and just as stupid as fishermen. We can go out when we like in any defined direction and sometimes we stumble over a magic moment. That is what we are searching for, but we must not be too eager or too sure of it. Experience tells us that it exists. In our work, we are armed with our instinct, our eyes and our ears. We concentrate on empty space as well as occupied space. We observe silence and noise. We trust in chance's limitless gifts and yet the place in which we find ourselves isn't necessarily a product of chance. The moment suddenly comes when we are no longer astonished by its appearance. There we are. We are ready to capture it, to come to terms with it. We don't know where it will lead us. We follow the flow, we see where it wants to go and what it wants to do with us. We watch it take form and come together but we must ground it while it is still flowing and not too defined. We are in love. A feeling has hit us, we try to perceive it during its superficial passage yet are afraid of losing it again by understanding it too well.

—Jørgen Leth, April 2000

### Motion Picture

From *Film# Special Issue/Leth* (Danish Film Institute):

*Motion Picture* is an experimental film with and not about the Danish tennis player Torben Ulrich, who is merely credited as "Example." The film may be viewed as a study of the nature of the medium and more specifically of the phenomena of framing, movement, and synchronicity of sound and picture.

The material consists of Ulrich training strokes against a wall, volleys at the net and serves, but also of strange enactments in which Ulrich runs towards the camera, arms and legs twitching, dances a crazy racket dance or fakes slow motion as he sits down at a table and pours a cup of tea. These are all studies of movement. At the same time, the framing is absolute: Ulrich moves in and out of the picture without any attempt by the camera to follow him, thus constantly emphasizing the role of framing.

The complex nature of film is indicated by Jørgen Leth's short appearances as a living clapperboard for synchronizing sound and image. Jørgen Leth and Ole John ran the film through the camera several times to create a couple of doubly-exposed scenes, and the result is the mysterious perception of several of Torben Ulrich's servings on top of one another almost as if in a choreographed dance. One last narrative element introduced several places in the film is very

sparse subtitles, such as “table chair tea”. At the premiere at the Carlton cinema *Motion Picture* was shown prior to Francois Truffaut’s *L’enfant sauvage*.

### **I’m Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet**

From an interview with Jørgen Leth by Mette Hjort and Ib Bondeberg, *The Danish Directors—Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema*, 2001, reproduced in *Film# Special Issue/Leth*:

I hate it when poems are illustrated with images. Film simply cannot compete with the suggestive power of poetry’s imagery. I don’t like it when a film intrudes on a poem and appropriates its language. What is required is a much more controlled strategy. Søren Ulrik Thomsen had himself expressed a desire to see me make the film about him. I was nervous in the beginning, because I didn’t know whether our chemistry would be right, but everything worked out very nicely. I’m very pleased with that film. It’s as though I was offered that project at exactly the right moment. Søren Ulrik’s poetry and personality have inspired me, and my collaborators, to make something very powerful and pure. Dan Holmberg, my photographer, has produced some of the most beautiful work he’s ever done, and the same is true of Camilla Skousen, my editor.

I dare say that the poems inspired us to make a film that itself is a kind of a poem. Søren Ulrik came to Haiti so that we could talk about the project, and the first thing he said was that it was important to him to know that I would make a film that I would be pleased with from an artistic point of view. I presented a potential problem to him, the fact that I refuse to illustrate poems, although I did want to be able to make use of a lot of decontextualized images from his poetry. He solved this by simply giving me carte blanche to cannibalize his poems as I saw fit. He repeatedly said that he was sure that my cool aesthetic distance in relation to what he called his “overheated” poetry would lead to something good. I think he was right.

The stories he tells in the film, about his childhood and his method, he had those in his head right from the start. He outlined several of them for me in Haiti a year before we started. Those were things he wanted to give to the film, I clearly understood that, and I also regard them as a gift. The fact that the stories in question were so polished and complete also helped to establish the film’s style. Søren Ulrik Thomsen as a person and poet was fully present and at the same time at a comfortable distance. I felt like making a film with emblematically clear images. So I asked myself: What do I have? I have the poet’s poetry, I have him as a physical person, I have what he wants to say and I have his concrete environments, his tools and immediate milieu. Those are the elements. No mediating, connective tissue, just the pure goods. I think the film reveals Søren Ulrik Thomsen’s stature as a poet and his generosity as a person. That’s not nothing.

### **New Scenes from America**

From Jørgen Leth’s correspondence with Allan Berg Nielsen before and after 9/11, reproduced in *Film# Special Issue/Leth*:

We would like to make a film that would go well with the original [*66 Scenes from America*, 1981] in an international context, an observation anew that will put the era in perspective, an update, toying with the idea of describing the West.

We want to gather and organize new film material from the America that continues to inspire us visually. We are interested in immersion, filmic iconography, economy of structure. We aim to make our methods more sophisticated by using the minimum of means. Our method of production will be mobile and extremely simplified. In *66 Scenes from America* we conducted ourselves playfully with the iconographic wealth available on the spot; we toyed with the way the West frames life.

We want to go further, with the experience and sensitivity we possess, the age we are at, and the tenderness combined with sobriety we feel we are able to bring to bear on the inexhaustible material we know still awaits us.

We envisage a playful, elegant film. One shouldn’t be afraid of repeating oneself. On the contrary; great artists return to the same themes. Without wishing to compare ourselves to them, we will adopt the same working model. Simple means. Black and white film. highways, motels,

[Robert] Frank, Edward Hopper, and then Leth and Holmberg. Today at around the turn of the century. What does America look like when we seek out the visual templates that are so expressive? Observations. Notes.

We are doing the final takes for *New Scenes from America*. The title has certainly assumed a profounder significance. [...] We had just finished shooting in New York three days before hell broke loose. [...] But I have given a lot of thought to the fact that it will be necessary to shoot one more vital scene. It is odd to think of the scenes we shot two weeks ago from Jersey City with the Lower Manhattan skyline as a fantastic backdrop, sparkling with the reflected sundown across the River Hudson. That profile has now changed, just as the world changed on that day.

Now for the vital idea that I believe must be realized in order to put everything into perspective. We'll have to go back to New York in November when the dust has settled and shoot a new picture of the Lower Manhattan skyline from Jersey as a possible closing image.

I have given it a great deal of thought. At first I thought it would be too hard hitting. Today I am convinced it must be done. The reasons are simple. I don't think I'd ever forgive myself if we didn't do it. I think the film will acquire decisive value through the addition of such a scene.

The film has been made the way it was conceived from the start. We never refer to what took place. Nobody mentions it with a single word in the film. But we have made a film about America within a specific time frame. We can't get round that. And that is how it will be perceived. It will of course have a profound effect that there is a scene with a New York fire fighter who introduces himself thus: "I'm a New York fire fighter. I live and put out fires in New York City". But we shot it four days before the terrorist attack.

We can shoot the proposed scene very tastefully without compromising the poker-faced attitude of the film. We've got to have that image. We've made a film in a time frame in which Lower Manhattan looks resplendent at first and then suddenly loses its teeth. In the sundown reflected from New Jersey.

Life is our subject matter, after all. We are making images of the way things look in America. I don't think I could live with just leaving the first image to stand alone.

### Dogville

Comments by Lars von Trier from Lions Gate Films production notes:

Two things inspired me to write *Dogville*. First of all, I went to Cannes with *Dancer in the Dark* and I was criticized by some American journalists for making a film about the U.S. without ever having been there. This provoked me because, as far as I can recall, they never went to Casablanca when they made *Casablanca*. I thought that was unfair so I decided then and there that I would make more films that take place in America. That was one thing.

Then I was listening to "Pirate Jenny," the song by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill from *The Threepenny Opera*. It's a very powerful song and it has a revenge theme that I liked very much.

The film needed to be set in an isolated place because "Pirate Jenny" takes place in an isolated town. I decided that *Dogville* would be in the Rocky Mountains because if you have never been there, that sounds fantastic. What mountains aren't rocky? Does that mean these mountains are particularly rocky? It sounds like a name you might invent for a fairy tale. And I decided that it would take place during the Depression because I thought that would provide the right atmosphere.

*Dogville* takes place in America but it's only America as seen from my point of view. I haven't restricted myself in the sense that I said, 'Now I have to research this and this and this'. It's not a scientific film and it's not a historical film. It's an emotional film. Yes, it's about the United States but it's also about any small town anywhere in the world

I learned when I was very small that if you are strong, you also have to be just and good, and that's not something you see in America at all. I like the individual Americans I know very much, but this is more of an image of a country I do not know but that I have a feeling about. I don't think that Americans are more evil than others but then again, I don't see them as less evil than the

bandit states Mr. Bush has been talking so much about. I think that people are more or less the same everywhere. What can I say about America? Power corrupts. And that's a fact. Then again, since they are so powerful, it's okay to tease because I can't harm America, right?

The idea behind Grace's treatment at the hands of the townspeople was that if you present yourself to others as a gift, then that is dangerous. The power that gives people over the individual corrupts them. If you give yourself away, it will never work. You have to have some limits. I think that the people of *Dogville* were okay until Grace came along, just as I'm sure that America would be a beautiful, beautiful country if there were nothing there but millionaires playing golf. It would be a wonderful, peaceful society but that's not how it is, as far as I'm told. There are unfortunately a lot of losers there, too.

When you invent characters you take somebody you know and put them in new situations. So the people of *Dogville* are all Danes, they're actually real people. You then take yourself—your own character—and you split it up between the two or three people who more or less carry the story (in this case, Tom and Grace). I can defend all the characters in the film but Grace and Tom are the ones who portray me to some degree.

Does this mean that I see myself in Tom? Oh, yes. Very often people start off with very good intentions, especially artists, but then they themselves become more and more important and their cause recedes into the background. Sometimes they lose sight of it completely. So I'd say that Tom, to a certain extent, is a self-portrait. It's not very nice and it's not flattering but I suppose it comes close to the truth. He tries so hard and he never gets the girl...He's the *only* one who doesn't get the girl...

And Grace is not a heroine by any means. She's a human being with the best intentions but she's still a human being. I suppose I can understand that people might interpret some of what I do as martyring women but I would say that these characters are not so much females as they are a part of me. It's very interesting to work with women. They do my character well. I think they portray me in a good way and I can relate to them.

I know that some people think that I don't like women but obviously that's not true—it's men I have problems with. It's like the problem you have if you're a deer. The old buck with the long antlers has all the females gathered around him and he has a hell of a job keeping the youngsters away. They all try to piss up against him, just a little bit, you know, to make their mark. For some reason, in my little environment, everyone is allowed to piss on me. Which is fine, of course, but it's tiring...I'm looking around all the time, saying "Okay, who did that!?" as another youngster comes to piss on my back. And that's my problem with men. The women don't do that. Then again, if you can handle the constant pissing, you can have wonderful relationships with other males.

Nicole said that she wanted to work with me and I wrote the part of Grace for her or rather, for the image I had of her. I found out that she's a very, very good actor. It was interesting to take someone who had mostly done these colder characters and to let her do something else. And of course it's intriguing to take a Hollywood film star and put her in a film like this. It might give us a different audience than we otherwise would have had, so long as they are not scared away by the fact that there's nothing but a black floor with actors on it...

*Dogville* is, above all, a film and as a film, I'm satisfied with the form and the content and the acting. I know it's not hip-hop, but I'm quite proud that I'm not, in my mind, as old as I feel.

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