

# Rescuing the Last Grains of Truth: On Metacinematic Elements in *The Idiots*\*

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## 1. *The Idiots* or how the cinema questions itself

If, as more than one filmmaker has asserted, every movie is a documentary of its own filming, it could be argued that every film, when it signals itself to us as a movie, offers us the possibility of analysing and assessing its metacinematic aspects. In this sense, in a mainstream cinema production we may identify a metacinematic exercise every time it employs codes previously used and established by other films. However, in commercial cinema the appearance of metacinematic elements does not tend to be associated with a discursive self-consciousness that is able to break away from the complacency of the cinematic imaginary shaped by the hegemonic model. Quite different in this respect, however, are avant-garde films, which, because of their rejection of the type of filmmaking that seeks transparency of representation and their disavowal of the diegetic absorption of the audience in a believable world whose process of construction is concealed from us, offer a much more fertile field of analysis of the metacinematic phenomenon. Conscious deviations from the hegemonic model employ metacinematic mechanisms with the aim of subverting established codes and proposing a new cinematic approach to reality, thereby posing a series of questions in their products that push far beyond the ideological boundaries of mainstream cinema.

In my opinion, there are four major questions that effectively condense all the issues raised by the metacinematic devices used in these alternative movements. First of all, the metacinematic mechanism points clearly to a reflection on cinema as a means of expression, often

accompanied by the exploration of its possibilities, especially those most commonly repressed by commercial cinema. Closely related to this first question, of *what is cinema*, we find the second, which can also be addressed from a Bazinian point of view, which explores the ontological condition of cinema, in an effort to determine *what is the relationship established between cinema and reality*. The assessment of this relationship leads us inevitably to the third question, namely, *what is reality*, whose veiled answer is often suggested by the film. Finally, the metacinematic device fully develops its potential when

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it enables the film to pose the fourth question, *what is the role of the audience*, not only in relation with the film they are watching but also with the reality of the world they inhabit. With these questions in mind, my objective in this article is to consider the use of metacinematic elements in *The Idiots* (Dogme #2. Idioterne, Lars von Trier, 1998) and assess how it makes use of the space offered by the film itself to prompt the audience to ponder these four questions.

Von Trier released *The Idiots* in 1998. It was his first and only film made following the guidelines set by the Dogme 95 movement launched three years earlier with the presentation of its principles to the cinema world. The Dogme 95 “Manifesto” and “Vow of Chastity”<sup>1</sup> were written by Thomas Vinterberg and Lars Von Trier, who directed, respectively, *The Celebration* (Dogme #1. Festen, 1998) and *The Idiots*, the first two films to be awarded the Certificate given by the movement. According to the manifesto, Dogme 95 is defined as a filmmaking movement established in reaction against the predominance of a cinema of illusion that has been *cosmeticized* to death. The new movement was committed to the democratization of the medium, the recovery of the essence of cinema and a quest for the truth in every character and scene.

To begin this consideration of the contribution of *The Idiots* to my exploration of the “film within a film”, I could identify the influence of the films and filmmakers to which von Trier’s film seems something of a homage. It is easy to detect in *The Idiots* the same taste for *épater les bourgeois* that we find in films like *Blow-Out* (La grande bouffe, Marco Ferreri, 1973) or *Weekend* (Palle Kjaerulff-Schmidt, 1962), the first film in Denmark to emulate the practices of the French New Wave. Also evi-

dent is the influence of *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) in the conversation between Karen and Susanne, two of the protagonists in *The Idiots*, about the right to be happy. And there are also noticeable traces of Fellini and Truffaut in the scene in the woods, and the influence of Dreyer, another of von Trier’s idols, which is especially visible in the last minutes of the film (ROCKWELL, 2003: 39).

However, in view of my purpose here as outlined above, an analysis of the elements of homage (a practice also widespread in mainstream cinema) in *The Idiots* would not offer the same possibilities as a study of the metacinematic question from other perspectives. Thus, although the homage holds an indisputable place in explorations of metacinema, in this article I will focus on self-reflexive devices in *The Idiots* that may help answer the questions outlined above. With this in mind, for explanatory purposes, in the next section I will consider the *what* of *The Idiots* (i.e., the story it tells us), and then in the third section I will consider the *how* (or the discourse of the film) (CHATMAN, 1990:20), always with attention to my expressed objective, namely, to explore how the self-reflexive and metacinematic elements present in the story and the discourse of *The Idiots* contribute to its reflection on cinema and reality, the relationship between them and the role of the audience. Finally, in my conclusion, in addition to offering evidence of the convergence of the purposes of form and content in the film, I will attempt to answer the four questions posed above based on the argument developed over the course of the article.

## 2. A film about idiots<sup>2</sup>

*The Idiots* narrates the experience of a group of young people with the time and means to philosophise about life, who make a collective decision to discover their inner idiot. Led by Stoffer, the group, all holed up in the empty house of Stoffer’s uncle, begin to behave (act, live, be) as if they were mentally disabled. The experiment leads them to interact with the outside world, to the shock and embarrassment of those who are not in on the joke. At a restaurant, they accidentally bump into Karen, at first a victim of the group’s deception, who soon decides to join them. Karen, who in the beginning is unimpressed by their antics, finds herself attracted to the joy expressed in their idiocy and ends up becoming part of the group, taking part in some of their activities: visiting a factory, swimming in a public pool, being taken by surprise by a group of genuinely disabled people and witnessing an improvised orgy that takes place in the house. Stoffer then decides to take his plan to the limit: beyond merely playing the idiot in the privacy of the house or pretending to be people with disabilities outside it, the ultimate test for the members of the group is to show their inner idiot to their closest circle, either at work or

at home. But the group fails to take their idiocy to that point. Karen, on the other hand, who is secretly weighed down by the grief of having lost a child, is prepared to experiment with the game's therapeutic capacity and faces the ultimate test with her own family.

The episodes in the film devoted to the group's activities are interrupted by statements made to the camera by the members of this little commune, commenting on their past experience in the house which, as members of the audience, we are witnessing unfold. A total of nine interviews, filmed with a still camera, documentary tone and a very different aesthetic from the rest of the film, are inserted between the various episodes that outline a structure without an obvious narrative thread. The curious aspect of these interviews, as Jerslev, citing Langkjaer, points out (JERSLEV, 2002: 54), is the fact that they can be interpreted in three different ways: we can view them as the characters talking about themselves and their past experience of pretending to be idiots, as the actors talking to the camera about the characters they played, or even as the actors being interviewed about what the experience of shooting this film meant to them. The fact that we recognise the voice of von Trier himself in some of these interviews only raises more doubts in the mind of the viewer, who is thus prompted to question the role played by the interviewer with respect to the diegesis.

The interruption of these interviews, ambiguous in the sense noted above, helps to establish the existence within the film of what might be called three different ontological levels. On the first level (1) would be the actors and actresses, as well as von Trier himself and the rest of the film crew, which appears more than once in frame in the course of filming. This level is also, logically, the one in which we, as viewers, locate ourselves. On the second level (2), belonging to the diegesis, would be the characters of the film (Stoffer, Karen, Jeppe, Josephine...). But there is also a third ontological level (3), which opens the doors to some considerations explored below, in which we find the character (or, if you will, metacharacter) being played by the level 2 characters. This is the level of the idiot-character, the inner idiot that most of the members of the group are trying to find, and which appears several times throughout the film. The boundaries between these three ontological levels, of person (1), character (2) and idiot-character (3), far from being presented as clearly defined and demarcated, appear blurred, transporting us into a *mise en abyme* of constant shifts from one level to another.

I will begin with a brief exploration of what I consider to be the most significant of the shifts that take place between levels 2 and 3 (i.e., between character and idiot-character). One of these is the orgy scene that unfolds in the house upon the suggestion of idiot-Stoffer. Jeppe and Josephine, two members of the group who, like the rest, are



*The Idiots* (Dogme #2. *Idioterne*, Lars von Trier, 1998)

fully immersed in their idiot-characters, decide to leave the room where the action is taking place and go upstairs to a bedroom. We have already been given signs of the attraction that one character feels for the other (2) as something latent (although more obvious in the moments when they play their idiot-selves), but their real connection only occurs when idiot-Jeppe and idiot-Josephine (3), while jerking spasmodically, begin caressing one another in the bedroom and end up making love while the others continue with the orgy downstairs. The question here is not so much how their inner idiot led them to do what they wanted, to reveal the truth they concealed within, but rather how difficult it is to establish the moment at which idiot-Jeppe and idiot-Josephine become simply Jeppe and Josephine. At some moment between the first caresses and her "I love you" they have stopped playing their idiot-selves, although this fact hardly clarifies the moment or level (2 or 3) where the connection between them was most authentic. The scene that follows reinforces this idea. The next morning, Josephine's father arrives at the house with the intention of taking his daughter home, against her will as well as Jeppe's, who is visibly shaken. When Josephine's father starts his car, Jeppe runs to stand in its way to prevent its departure. His inability to articulate anything but screams and moans suggests that it is not Jeppe (2) but idiot-Jeppe (3) who throws himself onto the bonnet of the car. Or perhaps it is the most authentic part of Jeppe,

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which is his idiot-self. Or perhaps, as suggested above, there is no way of distinguishing with absolute certainty between one and the other.

Apart from the overlap between levels 2 and 3 revealed by Jeppe and Josephine in these two consecutive scenes, the most important shift between character and idiot-character is, undoubtedly, the one that takes place in the film's final scene, featuring Karen/idiot-Karen. After her experience with the group, Karen decides to go back home to show her family her inner idiot. It is only then that we discover that Karen joined the group shortly after the death of her son and that, since then, her family has not heard from her. But Karen does not come home with the intention of taking up the challenge posited by Stoffer, and this may be why, when she reveals her inner idiot at the family reunion, her spasms are different from those of the other members of the group: she plays her idiot-self perfectly because her performance is her. Beyond the rational anti-rationalism imposed by the group, with her spasms Karen transgresses the symbolic order out of pure emotion, the only channel through which her trauma can be articulated (Jerslev, 2002: 62).

We can see from these examples the particular way in which von Trier introduces a story within a story through the inclusion of a third ontological level (the idiot-character level), but above all how the leaps and overlaps between levels 2 and 3 (character and idiot-character) offer an effective way of making the audience conscious of the constructed nature of what they are watching, thus fostering their critical detachment. It is no accident that the shifts between levels 2 and 3 point indirectly to level 1, as do the parallel shifts that occur between levels 1 and 2. In other words, the overlap of levels 2 and 3 invites the audience to reflect on the distance, the difference and the heterogeneity of the space from which they watch the film (1). This distance prevents us from entering and losing ourselves in a seamless universe like the one that mainstream cinema tempts us with.

But apart from this indirect allusion to the first ontological level and to its possible overlaps with level 2, *The Idiots*, as noted above, also bluntly and directly addresses the shifts and feedback between levels 1 and 2 (actor and character), of which the case of the interviews mentioned above would constitute a plausible example. As mentioned above, not only is the mysterious location (between levels 1 and 2) of the interviewer marked by ambiguity, but also the level on which the interviewees are located: is it an interview with the actors (1) or with the charac-

ters (2)?<sup>3</sup> Many more examples of this could be found, especially if we were to focus on von Trier's direction of the actors and his intention that they should inject their character(s) with as much of their true selves as possible. But I am more interested here in examining what I consider to be the key level shift of all those that the film offers us, in which a group of people with functional diversity burst unexpectedly into the idiots' communal house. The contrast is evident at all levels: the arrival of people who are not pretending to be but actually are disabled makes the characters (2) forget their idiot-characters (3) while sharing space with their guests. Josephine's reaction, whereby she attempts to avoid the situation, Katrine's lie when asked by one of their visitors what they are doing in the house, Stoffer's violent reaction...<sup>4</sup> The scene also



*The Idiots* (Dogme #2. Idioterne, Lars von Trier, 1998)

makes an impact on and appeal to the viewer who has been entering the dynamic of this peculiar commune and who now, like the whole group, receives a slap in the face and is left wondering as to the ontological level in which the newcomers should be located. Are they acting (2)? Are they not (1)? Are they playing themselves (1 and 2)? Again, the boundaries are blurred: where is the line between the person and the character? And furthermore, in assessing the reaction of the main characters, where is the boundary between character and character-idiot? And beyond all this, playing upon the viewer's mind, there is the same question that the main characters (and the actors) are wondering: at what point does playing the idiot cease to be a game?

This may be the key scene for understanding the aim for authenticity that drives the film. Von Trier exposes himself, and exposes the characters and the audience, much more completely (although of course less literally) than in the scene of the orgy mentioned above. The cards are turned over and everyone is exposed: the idiot-char-

acters, the characters, the actors and von Trier himself. The film is also exposed with this *mise en abyme*, with cameras and microphones entering the frame with no attempt to hide them, since the aim is to make us conscious of the construction that the film necessarily entails, in which we participate as viewers. The Dogme 95 movement is also exposed through the metaphorical reading of the film, which invites us to consider the Dogme group as a collective willing to play the idiot in the film world or, if you will, to extol the virtues of idiotic (and thus authentic) cinema. And of course, we, as viewers, are also exposed, urged to be on the alert from the very beginning of the film when we discover, along with Karen in the taxi scene, that we are being teased and that things are not as they seem. Intermittently invited into the diegesis



*The Idiots* (Dogme #2. Idioterne, Lars von Trier, 1998)

only to be brusquely pushed out again and again, we have no choice but to succumb to the repeated appeals and be aware of a distance maintained by the film's discourse.

### 3. A film by idiots

In this section, my objective is to explore the discourse of *The Idiots* to identify how a discursive analysis can lead us, albeit by a different path, back to the same conclusions as does the above reflection on the metacinematic elements present at the level of the story, to help further clarify the answers to the questions posed at the beginning of the article.

This approach to the discourse of *The Idiots* inevitably requires a consideration of the Dogme 95's Manifesto and Vow of Chastity, which establishes the movement's formal principles and with which the film engages in a dialogue. As Anne Jerslev maintains (JERSLEV, 2002:43), *The Idiots* should not be considered in isolation, but as part of a larger project (what she calls the *Idiot Project*) which includes, in addition to the film itself and its script,

the Dogme Manifesto and its Vow of Chastity, von Trier's diary (which was recorded during the making of the film and whose transcript was subsequently published alongside the script) and *The Humiliated* (De ydmygede, Jesper Jargil, 1999), the documentary which, in the style of a making-of, documents the filming of *The Idiots*. This intertextuality, this amalgam of interconnected simultaneous texts that straddle the line between fiction and non-fiction leads us, according to Jerslev, to a *mise en abyme* of the *Idiot Project* understood as a whole. Despite the significance of Jerslev's suggestion, for reasons of space I will limit myself here to assessing how the *disabled* technique used in *The Idiots*, which is clearly the result of the translation to the screen of the rules of the Vow of Chastity that the film puts into practice, contributes to a blurring of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in its discourse, in tune with the confusion between the different ontological levels noted above with regard to the story.

Whereas the story of *The Idiots* proposes the rejection of social control and artifice, its discourse, in a parallel way, challenges aesthetic control and artifice by dispensing with those elements used in mainstream cinema to promote plausibility. This is the spirit that underpins practically every rule of the Vow of Chastity, i.e., to strip and expose the film as much as possible in the interests of the truth. Thus, there is no sign in *The Idiots* of any effort to naturalise the space of representation with the use of realistic sets; instead, in accordance with the first rule of the Vow, real locations are used. The aim to reduce the distance between what is taken from reality and the end result of the film is what prompts the movement to which *The Idiots* belongs to reject cosmetic devices and artifices such as the use of optical work and filters (rule 5), temporal and geographical alienation (rule 7) and conventions of genre (rule 8) and to use colour in their films as well as natural lighting (rule 4). Following these rules thus calls classical film perception into question and prevents, in keeping with my observations above, the possibility of establishing a clear boundary between filmic and profilmic elements. The same intention lies behind the second rule of the Vow which forbids extra-diegetic music (which is observed in *The Idiots*, although with a few exceptions) and insists on indissolubility between image and sound. The fact that images and sounds are blended and reciprocally related to each other in the film in the same way as they are in our natural perception of reality contributes to a certain *punctum*, with a similar effect to the one attributed by Barthes to the photographic image

(JERSLEV, 2002: 50) and which *The Idiots* also achieves through the wounding detail provided by the use of videotaping.

The use of video recording, which did not prevent the distribution of the film in 35mm format as required by rule 9, allowed shooting with a handheld camera which, following the third rule, places the camera wherever the action takes place, preventing the development of the action from being constrained by the camera position. This creates the ideal conditions to suggest that the actors are being and living rather than acting or representing, thereby allowing the film to reveal its truth. In short, this is yet another way of blurring the boundaries that separate the character and the person, cinema and reality.

But although the use of video cameras, as noted above, create an intimate effect with the film's grainy, documentary-like appearance, the spasmodic filming techniques often have the opposite effect on the audience. Close-ups with invasive cameras, conceived of as participants rather than as open windows onto the world, have



*The Idiots* (Dogme #2. Idioterne, Lars von Trier, 1998)

a disquieting effect on the viewer in their efforts to show reality while abandoning the conventional identification and emotional connection to which mainstream cinema has accustomed us. The result is a curious combination of the unadorned performance and minimalist style with camera work that distances us from the action and invites us to reflect on it; a kind of complex, intellectual

and emotional realism (VAN DER VLIET, 2009) that has the same effect as mentioned above of drawing the viewer constantly in and out of the diegesis.

But neither the *disabled* aesthetics in which *The Idiots* immerses us nor this game with the viewer is based solely on the rules established by the Vow of Chastity. Before suggesting some answers to the four questions with which my analysis began, it is important to note one last formal aspect of the film which, although not reflected in the Vow, is highly relevant to this discussion: the con-

tribution of the editing to making the artifice of the film visible and exposing its constructed nature. Indeed, *The Idiots* is the antithesis of mainstream cinema, especially in terms of the preoccupation of the latter with recreating a false continuity through the use of the match cut. As part of its subversion of mainstream ideology, the excessively visible edits in *The Idiots* disconcert us while inviting us to denaturalise the experience of film reception to which we are accustomed. The film thus succeeds in drawing our attention to what normally goes unnoticed in the cinema of illusion: the techniques it uses to communicate and the message itself.

#### 4. A film... for idiots?

The above exploration of the metacinematic aspects that pepper the story and the discourse of *The Idiots* has revealed how, by different but convergent routes, the film effectively pulls the carpet out from under the viewers, drawing them into ambiguous ontological locations halfway between fiction and non-fiction. The film's continuous appeals to the level on which the audience watches reveal the structural inconsistency that affects all discourses, highlighting the limits of their construction and encouraging a critical distance in a manner that recalls Brecht, compelling us to recognise our role as viewers, or even making it possible for the I-viewer to turn into the I-see-that-I-am-a-viewer (LEDO, 2004:153), with all the ethical implications for the cinema and the world that this conversion entails. The film's content and form jointly and repeatedly push the audience towards that unstable ground from which they can only emerge with the awareness that they, as viewers, are the ones who must decide and give meaning to what they see. This is

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precisely the role that the film reserves for the audience, the role of active and necessary participants who are invited to reflect on the aesthetic and ethical issues raised by the film that will help them formulate some answers to the other questions that the film poses. It will thus be my fourth question, about the role of the audience, that will be the first to find a possible answer. This is logically inevitable, since none of the other three questions can be answered without the recognition of the viewer's subjectivity, as no truth can be found in *The Idiots* without a subject to sustain it.

The film offers us the freedom to consider it either as a mockumentary about a group of people on a quest for their inner idiot or as a film about art and authenticity or about cinema, performance and life (ROCKWELL, 2003: 8, 45). Or even as a (false?) documentary about the filmmaking process of the Dogma collective, which, incidentally, is reflected perfectly in the consideration with which I began this article. Making use of the freedom offered by the film, and based on my reflections here, I would propose that *The Idiots* is suggestive of a kind of film that understands itself (and reveals itself) as film theory.

Having sketched out these possible answers to the questions about the viewer's role and the conception of cinema posited by the film analysed here, to conclude I will conclude by turning to my questions about reality and the relationship between reality and cinema. In this respect, *The Idiots* suggests an aesthetic of presence and immediacy (in the sense of the "here" and "now" required by the seventh rule) opposed to the classical idea of representation, so often reviled by the avant-garde. It is for this reason that the narrative progression of the film, as discussed above, is relegated to the background to give precedent to the intense moments that imbue the different episodes with authenticity. But von Trier's legitimate efforts to capture authenticity and allow the truth to be revealed in his film should not confuse us: for Dogme 95, his films are not transparent reality telling its own story. *The Idiots* shows signs of the awareness that its construction involves a necessary mediation, but also demonstrates its aim to capture the world that is shown to us (and concealed from us) in a language, because it is shown to us and it is the world that is shown to us. The type of realism that inspires *The Idiots*, diametrically opposed to that pursued by the cinema of illusion, thus facilitates a re-appraisal of the world, of the profilmic world, turning the cinematic medium into an instrument for interrogating reality while also being committed to it. According to this approach, which not only advocates a formal (aesthetic) realism but also an ethical realism, the camera can capture a reality that is ambiguous and which, whether we like it or not, has no intrinsic meaning. ■

## Notes

\*Editor's Note: *L'Atalante. International Film Studies Journal* would like to thank Zentropa for authorisation the publication of the images accompanying this article.

1 The Vow of Chastity, which includes the ten rules that establish the formal parameters of the movement, is reproduced below:

"I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by DOGME 95:

1 Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).

2 The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)

3 The camera must be handheld. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.)

4 The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)

5 Optical work and filters are forbidden.

6 The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)

7 Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)

8 Genre movies are not acceptable.

9 The film format must be Academy 35 mm.

10 The director must not be credited.

Furthermore I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work", as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

Thus I make my VOW OF CHASTITY."

2 The titles of the three following sections play on the phrase which was used as a caption to accompany the film's title in the press kits for various film festivals, as well as on the covers of several editions on VHS and DVD: "a film by idiots, about idiots, for idiots".

3 Apparently, this doubt not only seizes the audience, but also the interviewees themselves, who later confessed that they did not know whether von Trier was asking the questions of the characters or themselves, as the actors, when he was filming them.

4 Here again, the actors, while the scene was being recorded, did not manage to stay in character (2) and began to call each other by their real names (1).

**THE IDIOTS IS SUGGESTIVE OF A KIND OF FILM THAT UNDERSTANDS ITSELF (AND REVEALS ITSELF) AS FILM THEORY**

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