

Title of the Module:  
Dogme 95

The word 'dogma' generally denotes a set of principles or tenets which constitutes the fundamental practices of a school of philosophy, or a religious community, or a legal framework, or a movement in art and literature. Etymologically, we can trace the origin of the word 'dogma' in the Greek language. In the Greek linguistic tradition, 'dogma' literally means 'something which is believed to be true'. As belief is the crux of any dogma, rational justifications of such system of belief seem to be impractical. Therefore, the word 'dogma' is used in common parlance with a pejorative connotation of a web of control mechanisms, or a network of disciplinary apparatuses imposed forcefully on people by an overarching power structure from outside. However, a willing adherence to a bunch of broad basic principles by a community of people in their artistic or philosophical praxes also has to be acknowledged. In that sense, dogma is a general value system observed by a collective of believers, activists, artists, philosophers and so on. Though dogma implies a closed system of doctrines often some constituent protocols of a dogmatic system could be deleted or added. So, dogmata, the plural form of the lexeme dogma, of a school of thought often remain flexible, open to reconsiderations from time to time. Dogmata of a system provides it an order or definitiveness. That's why words like 'ambiguity' or 'uncertainty' or 'indecision' stand in antonymous to the word 'dogma'. Dogme 95 can be addressed as a movement in film that got officially inaugurated, in theory with the release of "Vows of Chastity", on 13<sup>th</sup> March, 1995, in Copenhagen, the capital city of Denmark. However, the first Dogme 95 film was released only in 1998, three years after release of the manifesto of Dogme 95. Often the phrases Dogme 95 and Dogma 95 are interchangeably used to refer to the same movement.

Learning Objectives:

To enable the learner to:

- a) understand the meaning and implications of the word 'dogma'
- b) follow the historical background of the Dogme 95 as a movement in cinema
- c) comprehend the basic principles of Dogme 95
- d) identify the major films and filmmakers of Dogme 95
- e) critically respond and appreciate a few Dogme 95 films.

Dogme 95 film movement began in a grand and legal style with a crisp and brief written manifesto having just about 250 words, prescribing the tenets of the new movement, the primary aim of it was to bring cinema back to its basics, liberating it from the confinement of the studio system. Claire Thomson says that, "the Dogma 95 manifest declared itself a 'rescue action.' The [mainstream] cinema had become corrupted by 'the film of illusion' and 'the individual film.'" (3). The Dogme 95 Manifesto was jointly written by the duo Danish filmmakers, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. Afterwards, two more Danish filmmakers joined them, forming a filmmaker quattro. The Dogme 95 Danish quattro filmmakers comprise: Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, Kristian Levring and Soren Kragh-Jacobsen. This film philosophers-cum-filmmakers quattro later got rechristened as the Dogme Brotherhood.

Dogme 95 movement's primary objective is to make "chaste" or pure films, because it believed that mainstream films, both commercial and art-house movies, are ridden with impurities of various kind. Impurities here means unwanted cinematic embellishments. The Dogme 95 propagators upholds the philosophical notion that pure cinema is possible even in the absence of certain value-added features which are found in mainstream cinema.

Lars von Trier is a key-figure in the Dogme 95 film movement. He was born in 1956 in Lyngby, a Danish town near to Copenhagen in a well-off family. He is a professionally trained filmmaker who has undertaken courses in film theory and film direction from University of Copenhagen and National Film School of Denmark, respectively. As a student of film, in 1982, he achieved the rarest of rare distinction of getting a theatrical release for his graduation film Images of Liberation. It is a film on the life of people in the post-second world war. The film features a German official who is on a visit to Copenhagen to meet his former mistress after the German occupation of Denmark had been over. The horror and trauma, along with the indispensable memories the male protagonist undergo are the major

thematic layers of the film. Images of Liberation has a predominant presence of low-key lighting, reddish frames, shadows, gloomy air and a melancholic voice over. All wars come with a cost seems to be message of the film.

On the following aspects of filmmaking the Dogme 95 movement prescribed certain restrictions or control mechanisms: film location, properties in film, film sound and music, type of camera and camera movements, colour and lighting in film, optical filters, cinematic action, temporal and spatial coherence, film genre and format, role of the director in film, and finally the rejection of the notion that cinema is a “work” of art.

Let’s now critically look into these ten plus cardinal principles of the movement, which are famously known as the Dogme 95 “Vows of Chastity”.

#### Insistence on shooting on location

The proscription of film shooting within the studio-set location happens to be the foremost principle of the Dogme 95 movement in cinema. Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg’s 1998 film, *Festen* (The Celebration) is considered to be the first film made according to the Dogme 95 principles. Instead of shooting in the studio-set, the movement proposed that film shooting should be executed on real locations, both indoor and/or outdoor. Such practices will attribute more artistic authenticity as far as film locale and plot are concerned. Moreover, this practice will completely erase the role of scenario creators which in turn would make filmmaking financially affordable.

#### Rejection of unwanted properties and artificial film-sets

Commercial films make extensive use of filmic properties and expensive sets in order to make films spectacular. Unnecessary properties and elaborate artificial sets actually reduce the film to an object of ocular pleasure. Therefore, in the context of Dogme 95 film praxis, usage of filmic properties are brought to the minimum level possible. Lars von Trier’s 1998 film, *Idioterne* (The Idiots) is the second classic Dogme 95 film. Only those properties which are absolutely necessary for a particular cinematic narrative in a particular cinematic context are permissible. This particular provision also presses the need to find those necessary properties from the real location of action itself. A foreign, or alien property cannot be imported to the cinematic context.

#### Insistence on Organic Film Sound and Music

A film’s soundscape or the whole aural landscape of the film should be organic and it must be perfectly compatible with the images or sequences show. Enrichment of the soundtrack of the film with additional or external sound layers must be avoided under the Dogme 95 conceptualization of film sound. Similarly, music in film must be compatible with the demand of the image or scene. Soren Kragh-Jacobsen’s film *Mifunes sidste sang* (Mifune’s Last Song, 1999) is the third film of the Dogme 95 movement. Dogme films avoid the usage of music in film for emotionalization, dramatization, beautification etc. Dubbing of sounds, enhancement of sync-sound captured during shooting, and background scores are also generally avoided in the Dogme 95 tradition of filmmaking. However, enriched sound tracks with non-diegetic sound elements are often used in many films that come under the category of Dogme 95 films.

#### Usage of hand-held camera

Dogme 95 principle vehemently recommend the used of hand-held camera in the filmshooting process. The basic aesthetic philosophy behind the adherence to hand-held camera aims at making movie making and movie watching experience closer to the biological faculty of human eye. Kristian Levring’s *A King is Alive* (2000) is also considered to be an ideal Dogme 95 film which follows the Dogme 95 principle on cinematographic practices. Aerial shots, crane shots, microscopic visuals etc. are avoided in Dogme 95 films. Furthermore, the camera movements were limited to the capacity of movements of human hand. However, this restriction did not prohibit any experimental hand-held camera movement and camera angle. Camera shots achieved with dollies, cranes, drones, and other devices actually turn cinema into an ocular spectacle. Hand-held camera prevents such impurities of ocular feasts.

#### Usage of colour filmstock and Natural lighting

Many a time in the history of world cinema, the usage of black-and-white filmstock was considered to be experimental and aesthetically deep. In the context of Dogme 95, the usage of colour films was accepted because visuals shot in colour filmstock makes them natural and human eyes see in colour. Dogme 95 movement did not confine itself within the territory of Denmark only. Many French, American and British filmmakers have contributed to bourgeoning of Dogme 95 films. French filmmaker Jean-Marc Barr's film *Lovers* (1995) is a notable addition to the movement. Dogme 95 also restricted the usage of elaborate artificial lighting while shooting a film. It proposed even a cut, when enough light is not available to shoot a scene. Maximum, a single, camera-mount light lighting source was permitted by the Dogme 95 canon.

#### Avoidance of optical filters

Photographic filters or optical filters attached to the camera function like an instrument of modification of the image or sequence which is being captured. Such tools could modify the shape, breadth and width, colour, texture etc. of an image. In Dogme 95 films, such optical filters or optical manipulations are avoided both while shooting and during editing. The avoidance of such filters renders a natural aura to the cinematic image. *Julien the Donkey Boy*, by the American director Harmony Korine, is considered to be the first out-of-Europe Dogme 95 film. It features the life of a schizophrenic young Julian in a family which has been dysfunctional over decades.

#### Refusal of superficial action

Most of the mainstream cinematic actions are supernatural or superhuman which have got no real-life counterparts. Mainstream cinematic actions and scenes either over-play or under-play human activities. In the case of cinematic events also, such exaggerations and playing-downs is applicable. This makes cinematic actions un-real or fictional. To take the cinematic action more similar to real life, Dogme 95 avoided superficial actions, exaggerated events, eroticized sex-scenes, elaborate and choreographed murder scenes etc. The visual idiom of Dogme 95 is that of naturalism. Argentinian movie director Jose Louis Marques film *Fuckland*, released in the year 2000, is about the proposed sexual conquest by impregnation of Falkland Islands' women by Argentine men.

#### Adherence to temporal and spatial unity

Sudden cuts that affect a total geographical shift and complete rearrangement of time are prohibited in Dogme 95 films. Such locational and temporal jumpy shifts bring in disorientation both to the cinematic plot and to the spectator imagination. However, Dutch director, Lone Scherfig's rom-com, *Italian for Beginners*, which is considered to be a model Dogme 95 film, has a geographical shift from Denmark to Italy. A general policy of geographically here and temporally now reinvigorates Dogme 95 cinematic imagination and approach. The cinematic action should unfold in this particular geographical space and in the temporal moment of now.

#### Discontinuance of the idea of genre movies

There are many a genres in cinema. Western, rom-com, science-fiction, historical, epic, war-films, expressionist films and so on and so forth. Different mise-en-scene and filmmaking practices are followed in the making of genre movies. Dogme 95 as an avant-garde filmmaking approach dispense with the idea of genre movies altogether. The reason could be the fact that genre movies take the spectators through expected paths; horror is expected in horror movies, suspense is expected in crime thrillers, aliens are expected in science fiction films, and romance is expected in romantic drama. In the case of Dogme 95 film movement, each movies is a genre itself. James' Marendino's movie *Amerikana* (2001) defies any generic classification being a fiction film taken in the documentary style.

#### Acceptance of Academy 35 mm as the ideal format

A few of the commonly used formats of filmstock in movie making are: 8 mm, 16 mm, 35 mm, and 65 mm. 35 mm film, the most popular of all these formats is perforated on two sides. It is known as Academy 35 mm format because in 1923 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

standardized the aspect ratio of the 35 mm film format. The Academy Annual awards are generally known as Oscar Awards. Dogme 95 movement insists on using the standard Academy 35 mm film format.

#### Un-acknowledgement of film director

Amongst all the principles of Dogme 95, this is the most frequent flouted tenets. In principle, Dogme 95 does not believe that a director is not an artist. This view is in perfect contradiction with that of the French New Wave cinema movement of the 1950s which upheld the notion that the film director is an auteur, one who is equated with an author. In the Dogme 95 tradition, a director enjoys only the status of a facilitator who refrains from his personal taste and aesthetic orientations while making a film. Most of the Dogme 95 films unflinchingly give directorial credits to individual director.

The following quote from the book Dogme 95 sums up the larger goals of Dogme 95 movement. “The goal of the Dogme collective is to purify filmmaking by refusing expensive and spectacular special effects, postproduction modifications and other gimmicks. The emphasis on purity force the filmmakers to focus on the actual story and on the actors’ performances. The audience may also be more engaged as they do not have overproduction to alienate them from the narrative, themes and mood” (2). Dogme 95 films’ bare mise-en-scene style, adherence to naturalistically unfolding storyline, minimal technology and life-like acting etc. provides the audience a fresh viewing experience. Availability of high quality portable digital camera and computer editing suits made it easier for filmmakers to follow the Dogme 95 principles. After about a decade of its emergence, the Dogme 95 movement came to a halt by 2005.

#### References:

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Kelley, Richard T. The Name of this Book is Dogme 95. Faber and Faber, 2011.

#### Web Links:

<https://filmschoolrejects.com/beginners-guide-dogme-95/>

<https://nofilmschool.com/2014/02/explanation-of-the-controversial-film-movement-dogme-95-by-co-creator-lars-von-trier>

<https://www.movementsinfilm.com/dogme-95>

<http://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity/>