

## ASCETICISM IN THE FILMS OF RUBEN ÖSTLUND

Asceticism, the act of self-deprivation, has from time to time been applied as an artistic principle by film makers. In Scandinavian cinema, the idea has been present from Dreyer to Dogme 95, and most recently in the cinema of Swedish Ruben Östlund. A non-cinephile extreme sports photographer turned arthouse favorite, Östlund has an elaborated ontological and technical approach to the idea of parsimonious expression and developed this idea in films such as *De ofrivilliga* (2008), *Play* (2011) and *Force majeure* (2014). In short the approach consists in the act of carefully limiting one's artistic tools to a minimum, imposing a harsh set of rules to abide by in one's craft. What are the means and goals of asceticism in cinema when the idea is divorced from its religious/spiritual origin? Why does the artist become an ascetic?

The notion of asceticism is somewhat of a religious universal. In most major religions one can see the idea of self-deprivation as the highest virtue occurring under more or less similar forms. Hinduism and Buddhism have provided some of the more widespread embodiments of the notion: anti-materialistic ideology and varying

forms of bodily exercises that have made their way into Western secular contexts (i.e. meditation and yoga). The word itself is of Greek origin and originally signified 'exercise' or 'training' in order to achieve spiritual or corporal perfection.

In Christian tradition, ascetic living is seen as the ultimate expression of Man's plight: to joylessly toil by the sweat of his brow, as is his fate after the Original sin. But it is also through the observance of rigorous rules, passed down by tradition, that Man is able to abandon earthly pleasures and thus remove the obstacles for a connection to God. This dual sense of the Christian asceticism – both as a punishment and as a path toward higher pleasures (removing the rubble of the material world from the way) – can be found in the thought of prominent film makers associated with the concept.

In European cinema the notion of «asceticism» is perhaps most strongly associated with the French director Robert Bresson. A devout catholic, Bresson was determined to forsake the language of mainstream cinema in order to create a true cinematic expression, the *cinématographe*. Bresson maintains a sharp distinction between true and false films: «Deux sortes de films: ceux qui emploient les moyens du théâtre (acteurs, mise en scène etc.) et se servent de la caméra afin de *reproduire*; ceux qui emploient les moyens du cinématographe et se servent de la

caméra afin de *créer*». According to Bresson, the cinematograph is an art of its own. As such it cannot be reliant on set design, acting, music and other independent art forms, lest it become mere "recorded theatre". It is a unique craft, with its proper raw materials to be molded by the artist: «Le cinématographe est une écriture avec des images en mouvement et des sons». The ascetic film maker must observe two principles: «Me débarrasser des erreurs et faussetés accumulés. Connaître mes moyens, m'assurer d'eux». And the path towards mastering the craft is parsimony and self-restraint: «La faculté de bien me servir de mes moyens diminue lorsque leur nombre augmente.»<sup>1</sup>

The ideas expressed above do not explicitly make reference to spiritual or religious experience, but it is clear from the structure of Bresson's thought that Christian asceticism has furnished him with a (practically unattainable) ideal, which can only be reached through a strict rejection of the impurities of mainstream cinema.

If Bresson's asceticism has sprung out of a mode of dualistic thinking, rooted in Roman Catholic tradition, his dichotomy between pure and impure cinema has inspired others that have dispensed with the religious connotations and substituted them with a political/ideological one. The Austrian film maker Michael Haneke has engaged in a battle against "fascist cinema", an authoritarian cinema that

imposes its content on the viewer, rather than inspiring reflection. In his film *71 Fragmente – einer Chronologie des Zufalls* (1994), Haneke follows a young man about to commit a mass murder. In a key scene the young man is playing table tennis against a wall. The take is long and without dialogue. Haneke explains: «First you think, 'Oh, the film maker is using table tennis to show a man who is frustrated and angry, okay we get it'». As the scene drags on for several minutes, the viewers grow skeptic and begin to truly see what is happening in the scene, forgetting what the scene is *supposed* to convey. The inherent ambiguity of Haneke's images and his lacuna-riddled narratives are weapons for combating the "fascist" notion of one truth, one interpretation. All potentially manipulative, imposing means of expression such as background music, camera movement and editing must therefore be kept in check.

This dichotomy between two kinds of cinema – we may call them fascist and emancipatory – may be political or ideological in nature, but in its dualistic structure, the notion bears an unmistakable kinship to the religiously inspired asceticism of Bresson. The corruption of mainstream expression and the redeeming promise of the pure cinema are clearly present in the philosophy of Haneke as well.

Yet another elaboration of the idea of asceticism in cinema was launched by the Dogme 95-movement. The very choice of word *dogma*

and the fact that directors wishing to certify their films as Dogme-films had to adhere to a *Vow of chastity* evoke religious connotations and situates the movement in a Christian context. The stated goals of the movement were to “counter certain tendencies” in cinema today, most notably “the film of illusion” and “a bourgeois perception of art”. While the original goals have fallen into obscurity by now, the means by which these tendencies were to be countered are well remembered: no props, no artificial lighting, no non-diegetic music, no genre movies nor superficial action, only handheld cameras etc.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, none of the official Dogme 95-certified films were able to follow the rules exactly because of the very strict way in which the *Vow of chastity* was formulated.

We have seen through the examples above some embodiments of asceticism as a mode of film making, all in one way or another serving the dual purpose of being a harsh exercise intended to humble the artist and purifying the art of cinema itself from decadence, whether it be “filmed theater”, “fascism” or “a bourgeois perception of art”. But can cinematic asceticism be completely divorced from dualistic, pseudo-Christian thinking?

It is not uncommon in the history of ideas to see the same thoughts reemerge in different time periods and contexts, seemingly without any

connection between occurrences. Drawing a parallel from the field of genetics, the evolution of eyes has been found to have taken place independently in at least 40 different species, without any common hereditary basis.

The old idea of cinematic chastity has been applied anew to the film craft by the Cannes-awarded film director Ruben Östlund, internationally known for his pitiless study on the downfall of the nuclear family, *Force Majeure* (2014). In his native Sweden, he debuted as a film maker with his semi-documentary examination of eccentric personalities on the outskirts of Sweden next-largest city Gothenburg, *Gitarrmongot* (2003). The film, both praised and deplored in Swedish press, featured among other characters a young boy with Down's syndrome playing rude punk rock songs on the streets of Gothenburg. This film was followed by *De ofrivilliga* (2008), a brutal examination of the destructive nature of conformity and the stereotypical Swedish avoiding of interpersonal conflicts. Its subject matter and narrative structure do deserve an extensive discussion, but for the present purpose it is important to stress Östlund's craft and mode of expression. Apart from a closing scene where the camera is sitting in an ambulance, rushing through nocturnal city streets, the camera is static throughout the film, the lighting natural, background music absent and

the individual stories are told through a series of long, uninterrupted takes, often from angles that conceal rather than display what is happening in the scene. Östlund also features a cast of unknowns and has them acting out scenes with a pre-determined outcome in a semi-improvised manner. The film, then, is a series of carefully framed “clips” featuring uneasy situations in which various pathologies of Swedish society are laid bare through very concrete everyday situations.

In the history of cinema, as the art form evolved from long, static takes towards a montage-based expression, where the actions were analyzed into components and pieced together through the use of editing techniques, the cinematic expression also underwent a change from showing actions to implying them, or manipulating the viewer into reading into the images content that was not actually shown, as famously noted by André Bazin in his *L'Ontologie de l'image photographique*<sup>3</sup>. The refinement of the montage technique made it possible for cinema to more forcefully manipulate the viewer and to present the world in a manner which was unique to cinema. For many, thus, the art of juxtaposing of images to incite and create emotional or intellectual responses in the viewer is the very essence of cinematic expression.

Why then, does a modern film maker decide to dispense with this

most cinematic of film tools – the montage? The reasons, for Östlund are part technical, part ontological in nature. Firstly, Östlund started his film making career filming downhill skiing and discovered that the long, unedited take of a skier was a much more compelling sequence than an edited one, since editing can be used to smooth over mistakes and combining different takes into an illusion of a single skiing performance. The more attentive viewers will see through the deception, while the long, unedited take will be perceived as showing reality as such, as it were. For Östlund, the long take is a way to convey the image he has of reality to the viewer in a direct, unadulterated manner.

But besides being a means of fidelity to one's perception of the world, the self-imposed limitation of the unedited take and static camera are a spark of creativity. In an interview that the present author conducted with Östlund in the summer of 2010, he explained his ascetic approach in the following way: «If I want to capture a situation on film, there will always be an abundance of possible ways in which to do it. The possibilities are so numerous that they drain creative energy. Now, if I instead decide to observe certain formal constraints, such as only filming from a given angle, using a still camera, not editing within a scene and so forth, it suddenly becomes clear to me what my options

are and I am forced to find a narrative innovation for the scene. For me, this creates a massive amount of energy.»<sup>4</sup>

What is the role of the ascetic exercise, then, for Östlund? The exercise of restraint serves the twofold purpose of stimulating artistic creativity and of being true to one's perception of reality. Östlund is a self-proclaimed non-cinephile and thus his limitations are not an intended to cleanse cinema as an art form, nor do they seem ideologically motivated or religious in nature. It has simply risen out of a practical need: what do I need to make a scene work, and to convey the story to the viewer? How can I create anything when the means that are offered are practically limitless? In its most basic form, it is possible to distinguish a link from this technical exercise to the asceticism in religious thought: the removing of excess to discover essence.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, Collection Folio, Gallimard, Paris 1995.

<sup>2</sup> The movement is now disbanded but the manifesto and the Vow of chastity are available at: <http://www.dogme95.dk/dogma-95/>.

<sup>3</sup> André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, Collection 7e Art, Cerf, Paris 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Blomqvist, *Att köra rakt mot rött*, in *Filmjournalen* issue 2/2010.