The *Dekalog* series is a new list of bi-annual publications, released each March and September, dedicated to presenting serious and insightful criticism on a wide range of subjects across the full spectrum of contemporary global cinema.

Each issue is a guest-edited specially-themed volume including the writings of a diverse collection of authors, from academic scholars and cultural theorists, film and media critics, and filmmakers and producers, to various personalities involved in all kinds of institutionalised cinephilia such as film festival directors, cinema programmers and film museum curators.

The intention, therefore, is to include the multiple voices of informed and complementary commentators on all things cinematic in dedicated volumes on subjects of real critical interest, especially those not usually served by established periodicals or book-length publications.

In addition to specially commissioned essays, each issue also includes an exclusive '*Dekalog* Interview' with a leading figure related to the theme in question, and a '*Dekalog* Re-View' section where readers' feedback will be edited by respective guest editors and published in subsequent editions. All readers are therefore very much invited to participate in the discussions by contacting any of the series' guest editors on dekalog@wallflowerpress.co.uk

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dekalog 1

On The Five Obstructions

GUEST EDITOR: METTE HJORT

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Constraint, Cruelty and Conversation

HECTOR RODRIGUEZ

The motivation for writing this essay developed out of three overlapping concerns. The first was related to the emerging field of game studies. I had just completed an essay about the relationship between play and seriousness (Rodriguez 2006); this topic is the subject of an ongoing debate. Some scholars claim that playing is essentially not a serious activity, but a voluntary interruption of everyday affairs; it is fundamentally a diversion from the more pressing business of living one's life. Those who defend this thesis regard games as artificial formal systems purposefully isolated from the world. Others claim that playing can be a vehicle of education, social change, self-transformation and other serious aims. Games are, from this point of view, intimately intertwined with deep questions of life. My essay analyses in some detail Johan Huizinga's seminal book *Homo Ludens* (1998), which is often understood as an extended argument on behalf of the thesis that play constitutes a realm apart, a 'magic circle' strictly segregated from quotidian goals and interests. I conclude that Huizinga calls attention to the boundary between the playful and the serious only to show the fluctuating and ambiguous status of this distinction. The playful is not always and everywhere cleanly demarcated from the serious.

The second area of concern that underpins the present essay pertains to the role of constraints in the creative process. A constraint is a limitation or obstacle voluntarily accepted by the artist. The writers of the Oulipo group, such as Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino, Georges Perec or Harry Matthews, advocate working within self-chosen constraints. Perec, for instance, set for himself the task of writing a novel, *A Void*, without ever using the letter 'e'. What is important is the obvious difficulty of this mission. Writing a book without the letter 'x', for instance, would not have posed much of a challenge because of the relative infrequency of the letter in English-language use.[1] For the writers of the Oulipo collective, creative work largely presupposes the establishment of an obstacle or challenge as a productive impetus to creative activity. They saw their work as essentially Indic, since every game forces the player to struggle against some artificial obstacle, so this idea ties up with my ongoing interest in the study of play. The Oulipo group is central to my own work as a practicing digital artist. Recently, I have been closely involved with the Writing Machine collective founded by Linda Lai; this group, one of the most promising initiatives in the current Hong Kong media art scene, has also promoted the value of self-chosen constraints as a major artistic approach.[2] The work of this collective raises the following question: whether generative or constraint-based artworks must always comprise tightly closed formal systems, or whether (and how) formal constraints can also open up the work to the life that is lived while making it.

The third set of concerns that inspired this essay arose in response to the film *The Five Obstructions*. I view this work principally as the occasion for a rich interpersonal interaction, at once playful and profoundly serious, between the two filmmakers. *The Five Obstructions* is an unfolding conversation. Its artistic content and value is inseparable from the dialogic process of its production; its subject matter is the kind of life that is being lived in the act of making it. More specifically, the film documents a sequence of challenges. Director Lars von Trier asked his long-time friend and mentor Jørgen Leth to remake Leth's influential 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* no less than five times, each under a different set of stringent conditions. Thus von Trier requires his mentor to shoot his film in Cuba and India, to keep the length of every shot down to 12 frames, to

make a cartoon version, and to fulfil other increasingly more demanding constraints. Each 'obstruction' was designed as a trial for Leth. It is the nature of a challenge that it might not turn out as expected. *The Five Obstructions* is the opposite of a carefully pre-designed or storyboarded film, the style, structure and themes of which have been fixed in advance by its auteur; instead, it was deliberately set up as a creative and open-ended adventure. The viewer invariably experiences the film as a process whose outcome was not premeditated. This openness corresponds to an important concern of von Trier's, which perhaps manifests itself most strongly in *The Idiots* (*Idioterne*, 1998): his belief that cinema should extend the authors' (and also the viewers') ways of thinking and perceiving, leading beyond ordinary frames of expectation towards the new, the unseen, the unthought. Instead of treating cinematic style as a closed formal system, the aim is to open the cinema to the outside, to the flesh-and-blood richness of human life. This attitude of extreme receptivity and openness to the outside defines the only model of filmmaking that I find worth pursuing and celebrating. I feel a mounting dissatisfaction with the questions of visual style, narrative form and thematic meaning, which constitute the core content of a traditional cinema studies curriculum. Films are often treated as closed systems of form or meaning. There is nothing inherently false or unethical about this way of thinking, but its hegemony has sealed off other ways of reflecting about the act of cinema. I prefer instead to view the cinematic both as a ludic activity, closely connected to the study of games, and as a process of working through very serious matters pertaining to the care of the self and its relation to other people.

The starting point for this essay is the concept of play, which runs through the three concerns that motivated the writing of it.

The excellent study *Man, Play, and Games*, written by the French sociologist Roger Caillois (1961), contains an extended treatment of the relationship between playing and constraint. Its fundamental assumption is that there are two ways of playing, which Caillois famously calls *paidia* and *ludus*.

Paidia is characterised by a free and spontaneous enjoyment. It has an impromptu, uncontrolled and disorderly quality that is linked to sensory stimulation. Many living creatures relish the immediate experience

of changing sounds, colours, movements and other physical sensations. Obvious examples include a dog sniffing a bone, a cat entangled in a blanket, a child making bubbles and a toddler responding with laughter at the sound of a rattle. The active exploration of, and interaction with, objects becomes a source of joy. Children grasp, drop, throw, smell and taste all sorts of things. There is a love of sheer surprise, motion and change. Moreover, this type of activity is essentially improvisational. Caillois is not primarily thinking of jazz musicians or actors whose improvisations rest on a solid foundation of sophisticated techniques and conventions. Pure *paidia* is impulsive and effortless. Skills, discipline, challenge and training are not involved. This form of free enjoyment is for Caillois the original form of playful activity.

The second mode of playing, *ludus*, grows *out of paidia*, when children deliberately set arbitrary challenges for themselves, such as, for instance, throwing a ball into a basket. *Ludus* denotes any system of rules deliberately designed to generate a *gratuitous obstacle or challenge* for the player. The difficulty is the point of playing. The obstacle is gratuitous in the sense that it has been set up solely for the pleasure of overcoming it. According to most theorists, games (as opposed to other forms of playing) largely consist of rule systems designed to establish arbitrary challenges, which the player voluntarily sets out to conquer. In his book *The Grasshopper*, for instance, Bernard Suits describes the action of playing a game as 'the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (1978: 41). A golf player cannot, for instance, simply grab the ball, walk to the hole and drop it in; instead, he must patiently keep on striking the ball with a club. It would be profoundly misleading to claim that the objective of golf is to introduce the ball into the hole. The point of playing the game is to overcome the difficulties brought about by the rules of the game, and so to overcome a challenge that has been conventionally established. The achievement of the final goal is pointless independently of the framework of rules that calls for skill, patience and effort. Suits describes the player's voluntary submission to an arbitrary rule system as the adoption of a 'lusory attitude' (1978: 35). The lusory attitude consists in choosing to accept the rules of the game, just so that the activity afforded by such rules can be carried out.[3]

The game player goes through a challenge that puts her intelligence, resistance, inventiveness, strategy, courage and endurance to the test. *Ludus* contains a strong element of suspense. When that tension is absent, the purpose of the action has been defeated. Consider the multiplayer game *MazeWar*, which requires players to shoot each other while moving about inside a maze. Some players discovered that they could easily make themselves invulnerable simply by positioning themselves inside a dead end and, facing the only entryway, shooting every passerby. This strategy, which is not technically in breach of the rules of the game, exploits a loophole in the rules to circumvent the challenge. Game designer Chris Crawford has observed: 'This behaviour was perfectly legal within the framework of rules, but everybody knew it was "not fair"' (2003: 39). Crawford's point is that the ultimate goal is not 'to beat the system enclosing the challenge' by achieving the objective in conformity with the formal rules; the objective is to conquer the challenge itself. The player must pass the test, not circumvent it. Those who exploit loopholes in the system are thereby betraying the spirit of the game, even if they are not technically violating the letter of its rules. The element of difficulty is essential, and so a game cannot be described as only a formal system, independently of the abilities and limitations of human players.

Ludus consists of sharply differentiated conventions, tools and resources that require specialised skills. Specialisatiou is crucial. This ludic spirit already underpins the first 'games' that children are capable of naming, such as, for instance, hopscotch, rope jumping, cops and robbers, hide-and-seek, tic-tac-toe, and so forth. The rise of *ludus* also manifests itself in other activities, which are not always described as games but which nonetheless present a distinctly specialised character, such as kite-flying or skateboarding; each activity displays distinctive conventions and utensils distinguishing it from other forms of play. Each must be learnt, and each presents some difficulty for the player. The rise of *ludus* out of *paidia* consists in the differentiation of children's play into distinct games; this process brings about an essential transformation in the nature of play, which becomes conventionalised and, in a (nonpejorative) sense, institutionalised. *Ludus* constitutes an enrichment of play, which acquires pro-

gressively more refined and diversified resources and concerns. Caillois' deep point is this: the acquisition of new resources – such as materials, utensils, technologies, goals and strategies – changes the internal quality of play. These resources are not external decorations; they are constitutive of the intrinsic experience of a ludic action. Crucially, they must be learnt. Wherever there is *ludus*, there is the possibility of training, the acquisition and refinement of skills. Whereas pure *paidia* cherishes effortless gratification, *ludus* requires effort, patience and practice. The player may gradually master the operation of a tool, such as a kite or a yo-yo, or more abstract reasoning skills like the ability to solve puzzles or mysteries.

Additional examples of games with strong *ludus* elements include crossword puzzles, mathematical recreations, anagrams, mazes, rope jumping, pinball machines, sports and most role-playing games. Hobbies like the meticulous construction of scale models or the invention of new gadgets also require persistence and self-discipline. Hacking can also be viewed as a form of *ludus*, since it is often done purely for the sake of mastering a difficulty. The player of *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories* who undertakes several taxi missions to improve his/her driving skills is thereby enjoying the element of *ludus* that is obviously central to the game. Some digital games, for example *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*, include shooting galleries where players can take time fine-tuning their skills. Many computer adventure games begin with relatively simple missions, such as driving a car to a particular location or throwing simple objects, all designed to train the player in such basic game mechanics as character motion and weapon handling. Playing a game requires patience, concentration, training and discipline.

To highlight the importance of *ludus* is to emphasise the importance of constraints in all forms of adult playfulness. In particular, the concept of constraint remains an essential feature of many forms of artistic production. Artists often work within a system of norms, such as the rules of poetic rhyme and pictorial perspective, the division of literature and film into narrative genres with fairly strict rules, or the codification of specialised musical forms like the sonata or the canon. Artistic equipment, such as a musical instrument or a photographer's camera, can also be considered as the physical embodiment of a set of constraints that must

be mastered. These constraints are all received by the artist in the form of codified traditions that are recorded, taught and learnt.

Although the evolution of constraints clearly enhances human culture, the joyful improvisation characteristic of *paidia* nonetheless remains a vital aspect of adult play and creativity. It persists as a source of unruly spontaneity even in the midst of highly disciplined games. The contrast of *ludus* and *paidia*, then, is not an exclusive opposition. Even computer games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, which require extensive skills in driving or shooting, also allow players the immediate pleasure of exploring a sprawling urban environment by, for instance, undertaking small missions or simply walking and driving around. This exploratory craving for perceptual discovery retains a strong element of *paidia*.

There is another sense in which *ludus* is sometimes intimately connected with *paidia*. The copresence of both aspects is essential to the nature of certain cultural activities whose main characteristic is this: improvisation and spontaneity are prominent, but only when the agent has mastered the requisite skill to the degree that its performance becomes automatic. In the case of improvisational music and acting, for instance, the person undertakes creative actions which are at once spontaneously performed and skills-based. Excellence in Chinese calligraphy calls for training, and yet its performance is often executed rapidly, before the ink dries up. Perhaps the combination of improvisation and spontaneity is a core aspect of all forms of play. Consider the case of skateboarding. On one hand, its performance clearly demands special skills acquired and refined through persistent exercising. On the other, the activity also involves a high level of moment-by-moment improvisation; the urban skateboarder must cultivate a state of alert readiness to respond to the unexpected. Moreover, this effort is motivated by a desire for intense and immediate physical sensations arising from gliding, leaping, and so forth, and thus manifests the fascination with perceptual change and surprise that Caillois identifies as essential to *paidia*. This intertwinement of skill and spontaneity also figures prominently in documentary filmmaking. The filmmakers must understand fully the operation of the camera and sound recording equipment; yet they must respond immediately to the ongoing contingencies of unpredictable situations, and embrace the value

of surprise and novelty. Improvisation is central to most documentaries. (Theoretical discussions of documentary cinema, which tend to focus on epistemological questions about truth, objectivity and authority, often ignore the role of improvisation in the filmmaking process.)

Spontaneity is not incompatible with constraint. The very possibility of spontaneous action may in some cases require the presence of strong constraints. Spontaneity is something that, sometimes, we must work towards. This can be illustrated with reference to the so-called 'fundamental rule' of Freudian free association. Freud would ask his patients to report whatever would spring to mind, even when it might appear irrelevant, embarrassing or offensive. The free flow of ideas is thus guaranteed by a constraint. The purpose of the constraint is in this case to provide a framework for the spontaneous access to unconscious ways of thinking. Improvisation is here not only compatible with but also made possible by the existence of a constraint. It is even possible to conceive of a constraint stating that there should be no constraints. In *The Five Obstructions*, for instance, von Trier once lays down the rule that there should be no rules.

Ludus and *paidia* are also intertwined in another set of cases, those in which the constraints themselves evolve spontaneously, through some sort of improvisational action. To explain what is involved in this type of ludic action, I need to introduce the concept of a self-generated constraint.

Although constraints are primarily mediated through traditions, some artists prefer to devise their own systems of norms. The invention of such self-generated constraints has played a prominent role in contemporary art. Abstract painter Piet Mondrian deliberately restricted his colour scheme to black, white and the subtractive primaries (blue, yellow and red); he also eschewed all curves and diagonals and used only sharply delimited geometric forms. In his mature films, Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu avoided fades and dissolves, working largely with straight cuts, little or no camera movement and mostly low viewing positions. These two artists deliberately restricted the range of choices available to them.

It would seem that self-generated boundaries set strict limits on the spontaneity of the agent, but self-generated constraints sometimes evolve spontaneously. Consider the following instance: in a classical game situation, every player knows every rule in advance of the start of play. The

rules have been fixed beforehand and all participants voluntarily submit to them. But it is possible to conceive of a game whose rules do not precede – but rather arise during – the playing of the game. Players might start out with only a few basic constraints and evolve the rest of the rules through a free-flowing conversation. The point is not how players here respond to the rules, but how they create the rules in the first place. Those norms might conceivably remain provisional and subject to revision throughout the process of playing. In this situation, players would have to negotiate the rules of their interaction. As I have noted elsewhere: 'The experimental emergence, sustenance and transformation of community would thus become the core subject and aim of the game' (Rodriguez 2006). I would now add that another possible topic of such a game is the display of the self, insofar as it unfolds in relation to the needs and judgements of others. The game may be designed so as to put friendship, love, trust, confession, suspicion, betrayal and other aspects of *intimacy* and *self-disclosure* into play. To elaborate on this aspect of serious play, I propose to consider the concept of self-generated constraint at greater length.

In particular, I want to examine some of the reasons why artists might choose to invent their own constraints. The decision to work within a system of self-chosen limitations has been justified by philosophers and artists in terms of five principal motives.

Some abstract painters sometimes assert that artistic beauty radically differs from natural beauty. Mondrian's self-imposed restrictions were designed to avoid any colours, lines and shapes that might possibly recall those in the natural world. Whereas nature dazzles the eye with varied forms and shades of colour, Mondrian restricted his vocabulary to a rigid set of basic elements. The use of exact and closed contour lines and the restriction of the artist's colour palette resulted in perceptual experiences radically different from those available in a natural setting. In general, the creation of artificial constraints can thus be used to highlight the conventional nature of artistic systems.

A second viewpoint justifies the construction of constraints as an assertion of freedom. The philosopher Jon Elster has expressed this rationale eloquently: 'If we regard an action very generally as the outcome of a choice within constraints, then typically the choice will represent an element of freedom and the constraints an element of necessity. If, however, the constraints themselves are freely chosen, the element of necessity is to some extent mastered and harnessed to a purpose'[4] (1984: 80). In a superb monograph, David Bordwell has drawn on Elster's discussion to describe the films of Yasujiro Ozu as a deliberate narrowing down of the basic set of stylistic options available to him (1988: 162–3). He views Ozu as a filmmaker who purposefully restricted his choices by setting up intrinsic norms and developing ludic variations on these norms. Insofar as it is self-imposed, this restriction is not a loss of freedom but rather an assertion of it.

The voluntary limitation of resources can also be viewed as a way for the artist to focus her attention in a manner that could be loosely described as experimental. The designer of an experiment typically maintains certain features rigidly constant in order to observe the effect of varying a limited set of parameters. The existence of carefully designed constraints is thus a core aspect of experimental action. Its purpose is to eliminate the effects of irrelevant factors and to maintain a situation of control. Modern artists have sometimes adopted an experimental research agenda. Painter and educator Josef Albers spent years primarily painting squares, in order to concentrate his activity on the perceptual effects of different relations between colours.

The construction of a new constraint can be seen as a vehicle of artistic progress, as the invention of a new technique. Each new constraint is a novel artistic resource made available to the artistic community. This can be seen in the work of the members of the Oulipo group, who saw themselves as inventors of new techniques that augment the repertoire of literary techniques.

The Oulipo writers also celebrated constraints as antidotes against romantic values like inspiration and self-expression. In their view, an important aspect of creative work is the artist's voluntary submission to a system of limitations. I have always found this idea extremely fruitful in my teaching: whenever students find themselves thwarted by a creative block, waiting helplessly for some mysterious source of inspiration, it is useful to suggest that they should let some arbitrary constraint guide the execution of the work. Why not try, for instance, to make a comic book

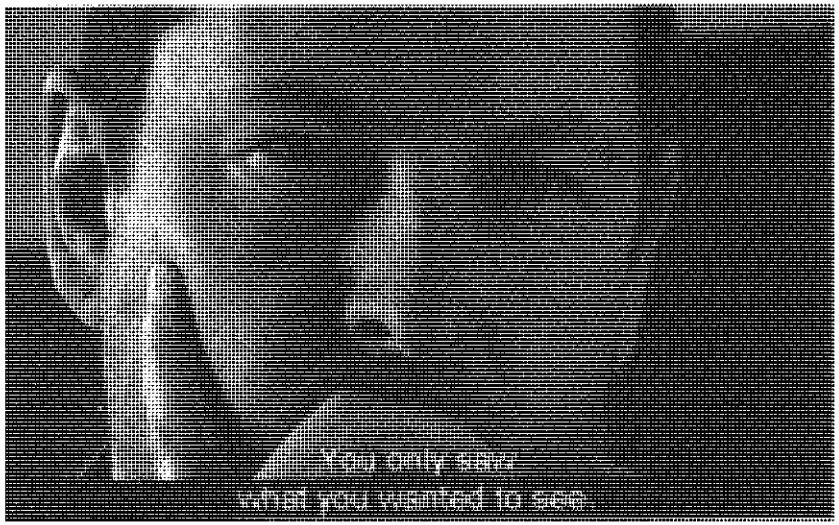
that can be read upside down, diagonally, or following the movement of a knight in chess? The confrontation with an artificial difficulty is an important source of artistic ideas. This idea is relevant to *The Five Obstructions*, which can be described as the process whereby one filmmaker (von Trier) helps another (Leth) to overcome an artistic block, precisely by setting up a series of constraints.

Artists and philosophers have, then, described and justified the invention of new constraints with reference to at least five goals: (i) distinguishing art from nature; (ii) affirming the artist's freedom or mastery; (iii) concentrating the artist's attention on an experimental research agenda; (iv) enriching art by discovering new techniques; and (v) undermining the importance of inspiration in art-making. In addition to these five aims, *The Five Obstructions* brings out another way of thinking about the role of constraints. To understand what is involved here requires that we reconsider the question of difficulty in creative activity. In what ways can artistic activity be difficult?

Most discussions assume that a difficult task is demanding on our intellectual or physical skills. Its execution requires training and effort. Making a perspective drawing, for instance, is time-consuming; dancing and skateboarding call for long hours of arduous practice. But some activities are difficult because we deeply resist doing them. Scholars who analyse games often forget that people do not always find playing pleasurable: children sometimes experience sports as deeply intimidating; some adults treat games involving close physical contact with other players as either repugnant or embarrassing. There is such a thing as *resistance* to playing. Another activity that many people fear entering into is psychoanalysis, which requires from the patient an attitude of submission to strict constraints, such as the discipline of keeping appointed times, attending sessions regularly and (especially) speaking freely about one's experiences. Psychoanalysis is difficult *because we are not inclined to conform to those constraints*. The source of the fear is not the constraints themselves but the experiences with which the constraints are designed to bring us face to face. The frightening nature of these experiences is revealed in the insistent efforts patients frequently make to bargain their way out of the rigours of therapeutic dialogue.

The concept of resistance has not, to my mind, been sufficiently discussed in the literature on aesthetics. An activity can be difficult not only because it requires a high level of manual or intellectual skill, but also because it is deeply feared. The nature of the difficulty lies in our resistance to the activity. Working through this resistance essentially calls for an interpersonal situation. What is resisted – the source of the patient's fear in a therapeutic situation – is the experience of being exposed intimately to another person. This is very different from the sort of difficulty involved in solving a mathematical puzzle or composing a musical canon. It is the sort of difficulty involved in *The Five Obstructions*. One feature of this type of interpersonal situation is that compassionate concern cannot always be definitely disentangled from cruelty and the thirst for power. To describe what is involved in more concrete terms, it is illuminating to consider the film in some detail.

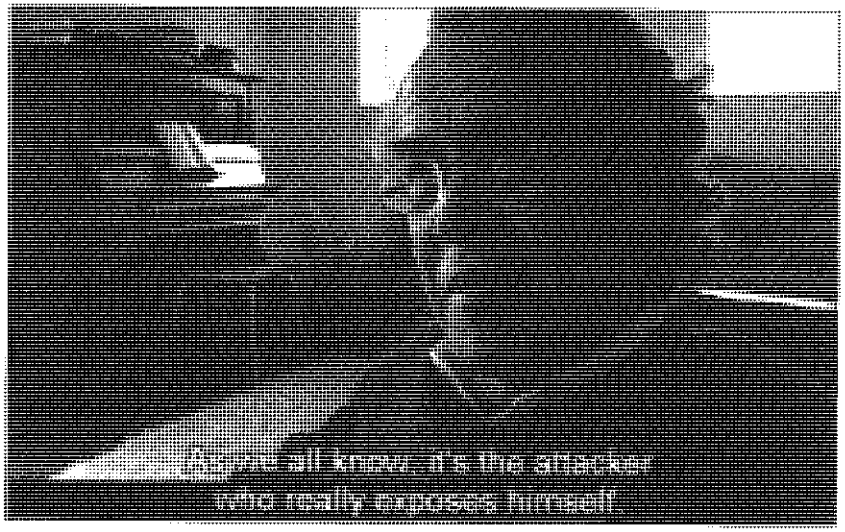
The Five Obstructions documents a conversation between friends. The nature of this conversation, the unpredictable ebb and flow of its ongoing dynamic, is the subject of the film. Both filmmakers start out by agreeing on a basic, overarching constraint: Leth agrees to fulfil the tasks stipulated by von Trier, however unreasonable they might appear to be. The content of each task is not, however, agreed upon at the outset. Von Trier often invents new rules on the spot, in response to casual comments made by Leth. When Leth mentions his love of Havana cigars, for instance, his friend immediately stipulates that the next film must be shot in Cuba. One filmmaker spontaneously makes a constraint out of the remarks spontaneously proffered by the other. Some constraints are based on von Trier's long-term knowledge of his friend; for instance, his requirement that one film should consist only of 12-frame shots reflects his awareness that Leth prefers a long-take style. Throughout the film, von Trier adopts a special attitude towards the utterances of his friend, regarding them as raw materials with which to elaborate a new constraint, and Leth becomes increasingly more cautious as he realises that anything he says may be turned against him. The interplay between self-revelation and the formation of constraints is perhaps the core mechanism of *The Five Obstructions*. Too much critical attention has been devoted to the ways Leth responds to the obstructions stipulated by von Trier; few commentators have ad-



Lars von Trier spars...

dressed the process whereby those constraints were conceived in the first place. The five obstructions emerge out of a conversation. The constraints are thus spontaneously generated, bringing together *ludus* and *paidia*.

The Five Obstructions provides a model for creativity as ludic action. Its basic feature is the spontaneous generation of constraints in a situation of intimate conversation. But the dialogue is essentially conflict-ridden. An 'obstruction' is not exactly the same as a 'constraint'. The term suggests something like the clash of two footballers on opposite teams, one person deliberately blocking the advances of another. Thus the interplay of force and counter-force is crucial here. If there is a ludic element, it is profoundly agonistic; it recalls games of competition. The five obstructions are stages in an active confrontation. Von Trier clearly enjoys taunting and provoking his friend. He sees himself as the originator of the idea and the driving force behind its execution, assertively placing himself in the position of a teacher and a psychoanalyst, and he clearly relishes the position of authority that he has reserved for himself. The ethos of this project is obviously very far removed from the love of intellectual games and mathematical puzzles characteristic of the Oulipo group.



...with Jørgen Leth

A crucial aspect of the dialogue is the element of subjection. From the very start, Leth agrees to conform to the constraints put into place by von Trier, who likes to speak of 'self-flagellation' and 'sacrifice'. He describes his obstructions as having a twofold aim. The first is to hurt his friend. But hurting him is not enough. The tasks are also designed, secondly, to make a deep mark in Leth's character. One of the obstructions, which obliges Leth to visit a red light district in Bombay, is meant to question the director's detached, observational style – which von Trier regards as a carefully engineered and cultivated pose – by confronting him with a situation of extreme misery. In *The Five Obstructions*, the principal task for Leth is not to make a series of good films but to fulfil obediently the requirements set for him. Subjection, not the pursuit of aesthetic value, is the core focus of the enterprise. Leth often attempts to circumvent the task at hand by interpreting it loosely, bargaining his way around it or evading it altogether. But for each task there can be success or failure, and the absolutely final test is von Trier's acceptance or rejection of whatever film Leth brings back. The master's instructions cannot be interpreted loosely: 'It was not the film I asked for,' is his devastating reply to one of

Leth's projects. The film that his friend had ended up making, von Trier acknowledges, is probably superior to the film actually requested, but the aesthetic quality of the product is not the point. Von Trier is particularly concerned to prevent his friend from hiding behind a façade of cleverness, feigned indifference or sensuous beauty.

In this context, questions of ethics naturally come to the foreground, because of the obvious possibility that one person might take advantage of the other. Von Trier's obstructions often have an element of sadistic aggression. The line between hostility and compassionate care is difficult to define with any degree of certainty. Von Trier explicitly states that the project's basic conception was a personal attack against his friend and mentor, and yet it was also meant kindly. Throughout *The Five Obstructions*, the boundary between aggressivity and kindness is often blurred. This ambivalence gives the peculiar character of cruelty to the film.

Elaborating on this element of cruelty, von Trier adds that he only chastised his friend because he himself desired chastisement, so his aggressiveness can be viewed as a form of projective identification. It was from the start an act of martyrdom, displaced onto another person. In some sense, one could read this element of projection as a metaphor for a certain form of cinematic masochism. In fiction films like *Breaking the Waves* (1996) or *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), von Trier portrays characters, often women, undergoing painful humiliations, and these characters can all be seen as projective fulfilments of the filmmaker's deep-rooted desire for self-flagellation. But the documentary format of *The Five Obstructions* introduces an important variation to this projective scheme. The other person is not a fictional character wholly created by the author-god but an autonomous person who can actively resist von Trier's attacks. In a newspaper interview, Leth himself criticised von Trier's conviction that truth only arises through extreme humiliation: 'Lars has this crazy theory that truth comes out if you are broken. And I don't agree with that. It is a romantic and sentimental notion. He wanted me to break down. But it will not happen. Not with me' (quoted in Brooks 2003). Leth clearly sees himself as resisting his friend's attacks. The autonomy of the other is an important ethical (and also artistic) aspect of the film. The viewer is always aware that *The Five Obstructions* lacks a single authorial voice. It is not the

case that a filmmaker shapes a character in line with his own projective fantasies. The clash of subjectivities is a fundamental aspect of the work.

To recapitulate, *The Five Obstructions* gives a model of ludic interaction having the following features: the initial constraint, agreed upon prior to the start of the game, stipulates that one filmmaker (the 'subject') will implement the restrictions imposed by the other (the 'game master'). The latter will judge what does or does not count as a successful implementation. The actual gameplay consists of three core activities. The first is a series of conversations where the game master uses comments from the subject, as well as his own personal knowledge of the subject, to specify several tasks. The second activity consists of the efforts by the subject to fulfil those tasks. The third is the moment of judgement, whereby the game master decides whether or not the intentions have actually been fulfilled. Judgement is followed by a reward or a punishment. The game master has carefully designed this process deliberately to inflict pain, and also to make a permanent mark on the subject. The design must be based on the master's own personal familiarity with the subject, cemented through ongoing conversations. The master's psychological motivations are ambivalent, mixing cruelty and compassion. The subject chooses to resist this aggression by various means, such as evading or reinterpreting the task, refusing to speak words that might reveal his true feelings, and so forth.

Near the film's conclusion, von Trier mentions that perhaps he has seen only what he expected to see. This statement brings out a core theme of the film, the struggle within and against the cognitive schemata that frame our expectations. To view *The Five Obstructions* is to notice the ambiguities involved in one person's perceptions of the other. The entire project becomes a hall of mirrors, shot through with ambiguities,[5] which manifest themselves primarily in two areas. The first involves the power relation between the two filmmakers. The viewer becomes increasingly unsure about which persou is actually directing the entire situation. Leth gradually appears to gain the upper hand; he grows progressively more self-confident, while von Trier's own self-assurance is progressively eroded. If *The Five Obstructions* is partly about the intertwinement of power and care, the nature of the power relation is difficult to describe precisely.

The second area of ambiguity pertains to the question of self-disclosure. Von Trier highlights this topic in the concluding segment of the film, which he himself directs but using Leth's name and Leth's voice-over: he describes the Leth persona as a carefully tailored fiction. Von Trier's stated aim was, at least in part, to penetrate the mask and undermine the fiction. But whose self is in the end really exposed? Whose personality is revealed? Perhaps the film exposes far more about von Trier's arrogance, and about his ambivalence regarding a key father figure in his life, than about Leth's own character. Von Trier notes: 'It is always the attacker who is exposed.' *The Five Obstructions* concludes on a note of failure: 'Nothing was revealed, and nothing helped.' The viewer emerges from this confrontation uncertain as to its outcome. Has the entire project really been a failure? What, if anything, has been learnt about the two artists? What, if anything, has changed in their lives? In this game of attack and counter-attack, power relations become ambiguous, and the success or failure of the entire project remains obscure.

Ambiguity is of course a familiar modernist trope. Some would say, no doubt with good reason, that it has become a pretentious and tiresome cliché. In *The Five Obstructions*, however, ambiguity does some very important work. As a first approximation, we might say that ambiguity calls attention to the fluidity of interpersonal situations. It is difficult to describe precisely who dominates whom, and it is difficult to separate the mask from the authentic self. This difficulty is not a matter of some contingent cognitive limitation on the part of either filmmaker; it is in the nature of an interpersonal situation that these determinations should remain essentially elusive. There are no precise or definite facts of the matter. The point of this indefiniteness is not, as another cliché would have it, to encourage viewers to 'think for themselves'. Rather, the point is to express an image of thought, a paradigm of what it means to think. More specifically, the film tackles the possibility of thinking thoughts that defy clear-cut categorisation. Thinking is not (at least not only) the application of a predefined image or schema that enables recognition and identification. Rather, thought is an opening to the new. Ambiguity is thus not an end in itself; it is an aspect of a mode of thinking as radical openness, without a predefined image. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze

has expressed this point, which to my mind is the key to his entire oeuvre: 'the problem is not to direct or methodically apply a thought which pre-exists in principle and in nature, but to bring into being that which does not yet exist ... To think is to create' (1994: 147).

The making of *The Five Obstructions* is a work of thinking as problematising. As I have noted elsewhere, paraphrasing Huizinga:

> The etymological roots of the word 'problem' ... reveal two closely related meanings: 'problemata' were (a) shields used for protection and (b) things thrown for another person to grab hold of. The ideas of skill, competition and challenge are everywhere evident. The philosophical *aporia* or paradox, for instance, was originally understood as an enigma without a definite answer, often put forth as a challenge to a real or imaginary opponent. (Rodriguez 2006)

Each task is an open problem that von Trier aggressively throws at Leth. But the need for von Trier to invent each successive task also constitutes a problem, since the rules are not designed in advance. Thinking unfolds, as it should, in fits and starts, uncertain of its destiny, its path and its nature. Here we see the key point of the dialectic of *ludus* and *paidia*, of constraint and improvisation, in *The Five Obstructions*: it is about the origin of thinking as an open adventure, beyond mere recognition, out of a conflict-ridden encounter with a loved one.

NOTES

1 A comprehensive collection of Oulipoean techniques can be found in Motte Jr (1998).

2 See http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/blog/?page_id=11.

3 For an extended discussion of this topic, see Bradford (n.d.).

4 I am grateful to Paisley Livingston for a fruitful conversation about this topic.

5 He also notes that he is only putting words into his friend's mouth to avoid saying them himself.

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