



## Tripping up the perfect

Jørgen Leth, Sverre Raffnsøe and Peder Holm-Pedersen

*In mid-2008 the editor of Turbulens.net Peder Holm-Pedersen brought together film director and author Jørgen Leth and Sverre Raffnsøe, Professor of Philosophy at the Copenhagen Business School and head of the research program Management of Self-Management, to talk about rules, freedom and productivity in art and the modern workplace. We reprint a translated version of the conversation in this issue.*

*The conversation begins with a discussion of a film that Leth made with Lars von Trier, The Five Obstructions, which, according to Raffnsøe, displays a number of characteristic features of how power, rules and freedom operate in contemporary society and, especially, the modern workplace. They also discuss whether von Trier is a good coach for Leth, and why the sport of cycling is an excellent metaphor for the modern human condition and the form of freedom to which we are all committed.*

**Holm-Pedersen:** By way of introduction, could you, Sverre Raffnsøe, give us an overview of what aspects of the film by Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth, *The Five Obstructions*, you can use for philosophical reflection on the modern workplace?

**Raffnsøe:** We use *The Five Obstructions* as a springboard because I found a number of relationships and management technologies in the film that we recognized from the modern workplace. The film takes these technologies to an extreme, explores them, even reconfigures and augments them.

For example, the interaction between you and Lars von Trier can be seen as a series of performance and development reviews, so-called PDR meetings, where managers and employees meet and set goals for performance in the future.

There are also elements of coaching at play. Von Trier clearly has the idea that he wants to unleash something or other in you.

**Leth:** Yes, it's highly suspicious ...

**Raffnsøe:** It almost slips into a therapeutic relationship in which, for Trier, it's all about saving or healing you and your soul even in spite of yourself. We're almost talking about forced therapy.

**Leth:** And then there are the hidden agendas. What I want from him. I'm the innocent pawn of von Trier but might have my own agenda.

**Raffnsøe:** That is another aspect of the relationships at play in the film. From this perspective, your relationship can be viewed as a competition in which you challenge and tussle with each other. You talk about it in the film as a sort of tennis match in which von Trier serves and you return.

It's like an updated version of the Homeric agon, the ancient Greek contest in which people constantly challenged each other and competed to outdo the other, so that the competition could take them someplace new, both together and separately.

Last but not least, the rules have a quite elemental function in the film. That a set of rules is agreed upon, and they must be followed. Of course, they must, it could be said, but the goal and function of the rules is not so much given by the fact that you follow them. It has more to do with the fact that the rules make possible and animate the process of getting somewhere you otherwise would not have gone.

It seems to me that all these features are beginning to appear in social life generally – and particularly in the modern workplace – with all the challenges and possibilities that come with them.

**Holm-Pedersen:** However, aren't there also a number of marked differences in the way in which these rules and technologies are developed in the film and the way they are traditionally used in modern work life? Here I'm thinking, first of all, of the distinct power relationship and the strictness with which the rules are formulated. They are not up for negotiation.

**Raffnsøe:** In a certain sense, the film makes visible a lot of what often lies hidden in modern management technologies. In PDR meetings, for example, people don't really want to admit that there are rules and a power relationship at play. It's very soft, something you want to negotiate together through dialogue. What would you like? What goals shall we set? And so on.

The film and von Trier clearly play on this. One of his first lines in the film is: 'Let's see what we can come up with. I'm not the one who decides' – whereupon he dictates everything to come. It's totally top down management. Von Trier is the boss, he gives the orders, and you are the underling.

**Leth:** There is no doubt that there are some strict rules laid down in the film. They aren't something we can just talk about. It's not like society today. It's a dictatorship.

But it's not a chain of command laid down by nature. It's a rule of the game we agreed on from the start. And the distribution of roles is quite natural. Von Trier would very much like to be the villain, while I would like to be the hero. You can see this in a lot of his other films. He's looking for a victim, Nicole Kidman and me, right? So, it's a question of how you behave as a victim, whether he gets something out of it himself.

He's interested in that sort of down-and-dirty power game. In a certain sense, he is trying to attain purity through the torments to which he subjects his victims. There is something sadistic about it.

**Holm-Pedersen:** Could the division of roles have been different? Could you have laid down rules for von Trier?

**Leth:** No, I couldn't. I could never be as quick as he is. I'm not a dynamic force who can lay down a bunch of diabolical rules. But I can react to the rules and hit the ball back into his court – in a diabolical way.

**Raffnsøe:** There is also something liberating and productive about power stepping out into the open. There are some clear rules that you can challenge and play against, just as there is a certain relief connected with the fact that power is out in the open. Von Trier says at one point: 'You can take it easy, Jørgen. The responsibility is mine.'

This is sometimes missing from modern work life. You don't want to be in a power relationship, and so everything becomes weirdly confluent, where you can't really assign either blame or responsibility. It creates uncertainty. And, somehow or other, I think that there is much more power entwined in these technologies than we want to admit.

That may also be part of what von Trier wants to show. The film might very well be a part of a little project about modern work life. After all, he later directed *The Boss of It All*.

**Leth:** It's possible there is something political about it from von Trier's side. My peculiar innocence lies in the fact that I don't think politically. Except for Haiti. I don't think about 'exposing' political intentions.

In the film, there is always this balance of power in which I am quite clearly promoting my naiveté and innocence. I'm actually using my innocence to respond to his guilt, his completely 'loaded' approach in which he holds all the cards and may even have a political ambition. I don't know. But it is deeply satisfying, when you can meet the challenges. When you can use the rules expansively. The rules have a set of springs in them. You can jump on them and catapult yourself further.

**Raffnsøe:** From a broader power perspective in which power is not just about deciding – in the sense of commanding or ruling others, there can be an incredible power in promoting one's naiveté and innocence. Especially for people who, like von Trier, are almost aroused by innocence and naiveté. He'll try to get power over and manipulate it to see what happens when you befoul and besmirch innocence. Whether it is destroyed or could, perhaps, return in a higher, purer and more liberated form. This has been an ongoing quest for von Trier ever since *The Element of Crime* or, at least, since *Epidemic*.

In this context, the naive and innocent can achieve incredibly great power by virtue of the fact that he – or she, as it most often is – who is allotted that role is capable of

bringing his or her counterpart actively onto the field and establish a binding mutual connection.

**Holm-Pedersen:** So, in this Greek contest, you exploit your naiveté, your apparent powerlessness, to become powerful and, perhaps, even win the contest?

**Leth:** I think it's interesting to be subjected to raw power in that way, to do something on the conditions he dictates, conditions that are supposed to get me to make something crappy, as he says. This is the premise for the contest: can he force me to do something hackneyed or get me to make something crappy. I accept that, but with the express – and unexpressed – knowledge that I count on being able to meet all the challenges. I don't doubt that for a moment.

**Raffnsøe:** Not even while you were making the film?

**Leth:** While I was making it, I had some doubts. But the more we got into the film, the clearer it became to me that I had won the match. And then he got more and more malicious, diabolical and calculating, and it became impossible for me to predict what he was going to come up with.

But the more he pressed me, the more I thought that this is my film, that I'm winning, that I can beat him even on the worst terms he can set. This is the drive, the engine, that's pushing me. An agonism in which it's no good if he just gets his way. In the game, it is clear that I use my naiveté. It is one of my weapons, which allows me to resist and respond to his attack and actually make a good film. But it would never have come about without him and the rules he sets, so it's not that I don't want to share the credit for the film with him.

**Raffnsøe:** The plot development in the film also points to a development in the way power makes itself felt. On one level, the film shows a traditional and slightly old-fashioned display of power in which one party tries to establish himself as the person who decides and sets the rules and the framework for the other.

On another level, it is an exercise of power in which you seem mutually committed to each other. It is an exercise of power that presumes freedom on both sides of the relationship. Where power and freedom are not contradictions of each other but presuppositions for each other because, at the same time that you exercise power over each other, you promote or encourage each other's freedom. It is on this level that I can see a modern version of classic agonism in the film, because in an agon you establish a sort of mutual relationship between free individuals, the effect of which is to challenge and develop each other mutually.

During the course of *The Five Obstructions*, there is a shift from the first to the second level. So, it also becomes more and more difficult to say who is really deciding and has taken over as the film progresses. And it is difficult to determine who has really won. Perhaps, you both won by virtue of the fact that you have gone places with each other you would never have gone, at the same time you each become more clearly who you are in your difference. Through the contest, in Pindar's words, you can 'become who

you are, by learning': stand forth and become clear in relation to others who challenge you.

**Leth:** In a tennis match, the players each step into character in their contest with each other. They become clear. In their style of playing and mode of being.

**Raffnsøe:** In the modern workplace, you can see a similar shift toward greater mutuality and mutual freedom take place. This doesn't prevent the parties from trying to get power over each other and to decide what other people do.

In industrialism's forms of production, as we know them from the factory, it is clear who is in control and who makes the decisions. It is the manager. From some sovereign perch high above the others, he makes sure that the work process goes smoothly. He exercises power over others and charts out the rules to be followed.

The new forms of labor and production that are prominent today are based to an increasing degree on self-management. The individual employee is at the center. It is from here that production and value creation are supposed to come. This means that traditional authoritarian forms of power and traditional management have a hard time or, at least, they lose self-evidence. Rules are no longer something you just have to act in accordance with. Instead, they are supposed to get the self-managing employee going. He or she must relate independently to himself or herself and the rules that have been laid down. That is, it is expected that, as an employee, you will do what you have been told but also that you will add something to the process. You have to do something extra. Come back with something unexpected.

As I see it, this is a problem you tackle in *The Five Obstructions*. The rules don't merely function as a limit; they also have a productive function – as a path for creating something new. As obstructions, the rules are also a path for exploration and learning in relation to what you are working on, be it the artistic process, yourself, or a work project.

**Holm-Pedersen:** How is it that rules and obstructions can be so productive?

**Leth:** The more stringent the rules, the more creative it becomes. That is absolutely the lesson from *The Five Obstructions*: the stricter the conditions, the more interesting the result. I know all about that. It comes as no surprise to me, because that's how I've always worked. Because in sticking to some very strict rules, you have to invent a new language, something you didn't already bring with you.

What I brought with me is a creative relationship to the concept of the rules of the game. I'm very faithful to rules; they must not be stretched or changed around. They are to be used, because they provide an enormous productive freedom in what you're doing.

I have a little saying I use in my artistic practice: throw something out there and see what happens.

But you have to throw something out there. Otherwise, it isn't interesting to see what happens. It has to happen within the rules. They provide the springboard for the artistic leap.

When, for example, I made my America film, I had a rule that the camera could not be moved and that I couldn't use the zoom. That is a very tough rule. What was going to happen had to happen within the frame of the picture I had selected.

If a hamburger came into the picture frame, fine. If it didn't, that was fine, too. If a fly came in, that was excellent. And if it didn't, then a stretch of time was filmed. I love that sort of thing, because I'm convinced that you enter into a sort of magic contract with chance. The more severe the rules, the better the contract. In a way, it's a sort of metaphysics I'm dealing with.

**Raffnsøe:** It's also interesting in relation to a more theoretical discussion of aesthetics. In the aesthetics of rules and beauty that was dominant until sometime in the 1700s, rules were something to be followed and observed. This appears in the normative tradition from Aristotle's Poetics up to, for example, Boileau, who in his 1674 *Art poétique* (The Art of Poetry) was still formulating the rules that the artist and the aesthetic must comply with throughout all time, if one wants to be able to produce proper and beautiful works of art.

Today, the rules have acquired a completely different function and status. Certainly, rules are still incredibly important, but they are not in themselves essential. They are not the goal but rather the path, because now it's what turns up with the help of the rules that's interesting. In this way, the concept of the sublime or the elevated begins to gain increased significance in relation to the beautiful. Not just as one aesthetic experience among others but as a fundamental aesthetic category that, from the Enlightenment onwards, is the aesthetic experience par excellence.

When the world is beautiful, we experience an immediate accord between the world of our senses and a higher being, between our rules and what we are trying to grasp through them. This intuition of an immediate accord or connection disappears in our experience of the sublime. Here, we experience a discord – a going beyond. What appears through the rules is too big, too boundless, too dynamic to allow itself to be fixed within rules.

This doesn't mean that rules don't matter, quite the opposite. They become the indispensable approach to the sublime, a way out of our own narrow, little subjectivity.

**Leth:** And von Trier knows I have that kind of a relationship with rules. And that relationship, of course, becomes clearer than ever in *The Five Obstructions*, because it is von Trier and not me who formulates the rules. He is also more malicious than I could be myself.

But he crosses the line and breaches the contract, when he sets me a task without rules. He has discovered that I react pretty damn positively to rules. Of course, he knew that before, but he experiences it first hand in our little game. He also has his own vanity on

the line here, because it's not just a contest. There is an Oedipal aspect to it as well. He wants to kill the father.

**Raffnsøe:** As I see it, you both breach the contract or, at least, threaten to breach it. You put it into play and thus renegotiate the agreement. He, for his part, is supposed to set the rules and, instead, he says: I won't do it. And you, on the other hand, breach the contract, since you refuse to go back to Bombay and re-make the film he believes has not lived up to the rules.

This again is very telling in relation to the modern workplace, because we have here a negotiation of what the whole contract is supposed to be about. That is, what are the criteria and guidelines that form the basis for an assessment of the work? In principle, everything is open to negotiation.

**Leth:** I believe I fulfilled the contract. That I only indulged in a slightly creative interpretation of the rules and that von Trier was just being the worst kind of stickler.

**Holm-Pedersen:** Obstructions and rules are also a way of bringing something alien, something you have not conceived or could not conceive, into your work. Like the fly that comes to visit. Can you draw a parallel in this connection to the way value is created today? Here, it is also to a high degree a matter of getting something new, something alien, into the productive process. Repetition on an assembly line is no longer value-creating. It's all about repetition with a difference. And rules seem to be an effective way of creating this.

**Leth:** For me, it's clear that the rules act as the scaffolding that makes it possible to do anything. If you start with nothing at all, with no rules, you're left to your own stupid devices. And what do you really have to offer yourself?

That's why it is crucial that something alien come into the work, and you can get that through these rules or obstructions. They may be disgusting or pleasant, any sort of substance. But they have to be there. There has to be something to butt your head against, a challenge that demands a solution from you and gets you going. And as you tackle the difficulties, rage against them and, hopefully, overcome them, you absorb the material, the alienness of which the difficulties consist. They become part of the work.

Therefore, the rules must also be strict because, if you can just blithely leap over the obstructions, it's not interesting. Then, they haven't really been used. The difficulties must be absorbed into the work as a part of the structure and the dregs that remain and make it into a grubby work. A wonderfully grubby work that contains all the odds and ends, the emptiness and the fragments. All the dregs from the everyday.

**Raffnsøe:** It has to do with getting beyond self-referentiality, one's own repetitiveness. And when the rules come in, there is an alienness to start with.

Once again, if we draw a parallel to the way the economy functions today, you see here some developments that, as you point out in your question, have to do with the fact that value is no longer created through repetition but through repetition with a difference. It can be added parenthetically that this is precisely the project you're engaged in by re-

making *The Perfect Human*. Through the many obstructions, something new is introduced into the old film, i.e. a repetition with a difference.

Whereas, in the industrial age, you created value through monotonous labor on an assembly line, the eternal repetition of mass production, we have established an economy today in which productivity and added value arise where we do something else, something different from what we've done before. For the same reason, the entrepreneur is attributed crucial significance. For he is the symbol of the economic actor who creates innovation.

Likewise, change is not something you try to keep out of the production process, as was the case in classic mass production. Instead, it becomes vital for the management and organization of the work to integrate change and innovation into the firm or organization and their production processes.

The current fascination in business and management literature with art and the special processes of artistic creation must also be seen in this context. For in these creative processes, people have not traditionally put repetition but the production of something new and unique at the center. They have developed tools, methods, and existential modes of relating that put the creation of something new and unique in the spotlight.

**Holm-Pedersen:** Raffnsøe mentioned *The Perfect Human*, which *The Five Obstructions* takes as its starting point. Can you try to say a little about the motivation for making the film? You wouldn't immediately think that there was much room for the dregs you talked about before in a film with that title.

**Leth:** When I made *The Perfect Human* at the end of the '60s, I was reacting against what I thought was the most boring kind of social documentary films. It was simply the most boring idea that, by just walking out into reality where it's rainy and gray, like now, you could gain more credibility, importance and conscientiousness. I had to reject that way of working and go the opposite way.

For me, it was more interesting to use the world of advertising and empty space to study people. And so the model became that I would try to study the phenomenon of perfection, which is the driving inner force of advertising, to teach the human being to be perfect--with the help of what we can buy, of course, but still.

So I created a white room, brought in two people, put them in their Sunday best, and watched what happened. I held up perfection as a model, the almost porcelain-like surface. The white room and the camera movements, which were very gentle and incredibly white. The rest was pretty much process and improvisation. And the process consisted of the fact that the two people were in no way perfect. The perfect human did everything imperfectly. He couldn't get the cork out of the bottle, so he used his teeth. He fumbled with the fish. The clumsy, actually, quite petit bourgeois, way of pouring the sauce on the potatoes. It was all one gift after another.

There are always cracks in the perfect surface. The imperfect inevitably turned up and became very clear within this framework. And this is what is documented. The cracks and the imperfection. So there is a lot of imperfection in *The Perfect Human*, and this is



not to be sublated or completed in any grand, magnificent gesture. It should just stay where it is.

**Raffnsøe:** There's a crack in everything. That's how the light (and the life) gets in, as Leonard Cohen once suggested. Paradoxically, it is through strict rules that you can establish and maintain these sorts of cracks or openings. In this way, a seriality also appears. The individual product comes rather to function like a springboard for going further than a stable, rounded work that represents everything and which you can be finished with describing or comprehending.

**Leth:** It is a sort of aggregation strategy. Through some rules, you collect the material that appears and see where it is heading. But there is no expectation or hope of a final conclusion or a definitive answer. Only the curiosity and the material that guides you.

**Holm-Pedersen:** I'd like for us to talk a little about the relationship between rules and freedom. At first glance, it seems paradoxical that rules can be liberating. At least, in certain conceptions of freedom, they should be contradictory. Can rules help create another form of freedom?

**Raffnsøe:** As I see it, the relationship between freedom and rules that is expressed in and taken to an extreme in the film has gradually become a part of a general social contract to which we are all committed today.

On one hand, we operate with a liberal and negative concept of freedom in which freedom implies a freedom from different forms of external compulsion or limitation. There has to be room in which to develop your freedom. As far as possible without limitations.

We have also traditionally operated with another more positive and substantive concept of freedom, namely, the conception that you are free when you are free to develop and realize yourself and your innermost being. We are talking about freedom for something. It is this concept of freedom, for example, that Kant operates with, when he claims that we can become free by following and subjecting ourselves to the moral law and what it bids us to do.

But in the gap between these two concepts of freedom, there appears a third concept of freedom that is applicable to a degree today and which I also believe is at play in the film. Kant begins to outline the contours of this concept of freedom in his 1783 writing, *What is Enlightenment?* This is the crucial question: How can human beings emerge from or leave behind their (previous) self-incurred immaturity? This third form of freedom is not a freedom from or a freedom for something. Instead, it has to do with the fact that we become free individuals by constantly overcoming ourselves and the situation to which we are bound. In this sense, we are not free as a starting point. It is something we are always on the way toward becoming. Freedom is something that is continually becoming or emanating. We are always on the way toward becoming mature and adult but without achieving a persistent form. Always *unterwegs* und *zwischen*. The eternal teenager struggling to become independent, free and mature.

It can produce the strange sensation of standing at the edge of the abyss, because you have nothing firm to grab onto. Therefore, some help with the task would be welcome, and the rules can provide this. It is a classic, ancient experience that, for example, we rediscover in antiquity's concepts of asceticism. Asceticism has to do with imposing limitations on yourself in order to become powerful, i.e., to be able to control yourself to such a degree that it becomes possible to overcome yourself.

**Leth:** Or like the great Buddhists. Asceticism makes them free. It's very strange.

**Raffnsøe:** But it works. Today, we have a lot of these technologies such as coaching and PDR meetings to help us realize ourselves. But here the rules also have a slightly different function. It is not just expected and stated that people are supposed to follow the rules and act in accordance with them. Rather, the rules have the character of being interim instructions. Something to which you are supposed to relate independently, so you can go beyond yourself and what already exists. At the same time, it implies a risk that you might lose your way and come home to be punished by your – today, most often – absent father. Or von Trier.

It expresses exactly the attraction and curse of freedom. It is hard always to act independently and to go beyond yourself, and that is why you also need to help each other. It is clearly shown in the film how pushing the envelope contains a fascination, a freedom and an enormous burden. An aversion and a distaste, because the task and the constant self-overcoming that is required are almost too much. And, at the same time, there is a great desire and a joy at overcoming and realizing yourself in a new form.

**Leth:** If this is the model, or the idea, and I'm sure that von Trier – as opposed to me – grasped all the nuances of his vision for the film from the start, then I must say that one of my own inventions was brilliant, because I came up with the idea of describing the work process as well. And this actually fits in quite well as an extension of what you are saying: the strictness, the process of suffering and my struggle to get a grip on things should also be described as a part of the process.

**Raffnsøe:** So, apparently, where there looks to be a very free space in which the autonomous individual can develop his or her freedom, it turns out that there is actually a great need for management. There is always someone who is supposed to get involved or intervene to help the individual to realize this freedom.

**Holm-Pedersen:** In this connection, it seems obvious to touch on von Trier's more personal project with you. The therapeutic aspect. I don't know whether you could exactly call it helping you; but like some sort of coach, at least, he would like to set Jørgen Leth free through this exercise of going down into the muck and coming out again cleansed and liberated from yourself.

**Leth:** Yeah, what would you call it? Does he want to make me more like himself, replace my conscience with his? Or is it a political agenda? It is, at any rate, a very ambitious agenda.

**Raffnsøe:** I don't quite know, but he undoubtedly wants you to be someone other than who you are. He wants to set you free from your limitations, which are the viewer's. He

wants to do his bit, all that's necessary for you to be reborn and rededicated to life. He wants to interfere in this 'fine art of surfacing' that you practice, so you can move on. You have to engage with life and get down into the dirt, so it rubs off on you. Maybe, his intentions are for the best or, maybe, he's being diabolical; it's hard to say.

**Leth:** It's clearly on his agenda to get me to move from being an observer to being a participant. But that is a petty project. And utterly reprehensible from my point of view. He says he wants to help me attain a new dimension.

But I will claim my right to be an observer to my dying day! Also as an artistic principle. I have no desire suddenly to become a political activist or religious. That is a long way away from me. I don't want to see the light. Absolutely not. I don't need it!

If I can just understand a little more about life and myself through what I'm doing, then I'm satisfied. That's what it's all about. And in this project, there is no hope of a quick conversion. That is completely outside my horizon. It just is. Perhaps a slow conversion, but that has more to do with insight and understanding. Being able to hold out and stay alive. That's the most succinct way to put it.

There is also a colossal hubris on his side. A hubris I can never accept. Who is he to think he can expand my boundaries?

**Raffnsøe:** It's also a hubris that is quite ordinary in most couples.

**Leth:** I know it well.

**Raffnsøe:** In relationships, it is often done for the sake of the other partner. And it is probably also the case here with von Trier's project of being your coach.

**Leth:** I could imagine Lars von Trier as my personal coach.

**Raffnsøe:** That's something else I'd thought of asking you. Whether von Trier was a good coach?

**Leth:** In his own diabolical way.

**Raffnsøe:** In a certain sense, he's a good coach, because he helps you realize yourself and reach new places. On another level, he's a bad coach, because he thinks he can tell you who you are.

**Leth:** Nevertheless, I take it as a wonderful working model, because it can take me new places. But I get there on my own terms, not his.

**Raffnsøe:** And that is crucial. It is only because you're capable of handling him, taking up the challenge and, in a certain sense, working against him. So, on one side, we can see that a cogent chain of command and clear management are necessary to take you new places. At the same time, it is also necessary to be able to turn the tables on this chain of command if anything is to come out of it. Otherwise, it won't be you going new places, just von Trier, who imposes his own will and tells you who you are.

This also points toward the shift I mentioned earlier in the way power functions, which I believe takes place in the film. It's not just von Trier who decides everything. There is to a great degree a mutual influence of power, which also becomes a mutual liberation.

Therefore, ultimately, it all becomes quite intermingled. On one hand, you each step very much into character as who you are. Your differences become very distinct. But you emerge through and by means of each other. Of course, it culminates in the last film in which your differences come forth most clearly through the very personal and self-revealing text that von Trier wrote in your name and has you deliver as a speech to and about him.

**Leth:** The genius in this film didn't hit me all at once. But, gradually, as I was making it, I thought: This is really trippy. And powerful.

I realized that, in reality, he was exposing himself to a degree. In a very subtle way. I'm still very moved when I see it. It's an act of love on von Trier's part. You have never seen him so emotionally committed as in that line. At screenings of the film around the world, I have heard people say many times that they can understand von Trier now; he is completely human.

So, he also acquired some new facets to his own work. Through his project with me.

**Raffnsøe:** By letting things emerge, he reconciles you both in your own right. Von Trier is in a way very naked and graceful. He gives a lot of himself, at the same time that he gives you permission to be: I had my project with Leth, but it was my project. It doesn't have anything to do with him.

There is also a kind of freedom in that. All that about us being different, but we can be here beside each other. And by virtue of this difference, we can create this thing that has come into existence.

**Holm-Pedersen:** I want to return to the concept of freedom, that is, freedom as something that comes into being through our self-overcoming and as a freedom to which we are committed in a mutual social contract that applies to our society. But there doesn't seem to be any definitive end to this project?

**Raffnsøe:** There is something to that. We do not, as before, have any clear conception of the goal of these projects. In ancient Greece, they operated with a substantive concept of the good life as a fundamental and obligatory guideline for the individual and society. It had to do with living and creating the conditions for the good life. We have a hard time making substantial and coherent sense of such a conception of the good life today. Yet, I still believe that there is a form of coherent normative guideline that is applicable to these projects today. A common ethos that is binding on our form of life; and I call it welfare (or improving welfare. At least, it is the touchstone to which we as a society and as individuals relate.

Welfare actually just means to fare well in life, i.e., to improve one's condition in order to approach well-being. Consequently, you could also call it perfectibility, understood as being on the way toward the perfect, toward *The Perfect Human*.

But since these concepts of welfare and the perfect have become insubstantial for us today, it also means that we never reach our goal. There is only infinite improvement left. Therefore, the problem of assessment emerges. We always have to be evaluated whether we are good enough. In a certain sense, it is a tragic project we are engaged in. To overcome emptiness.

**Leth:** By filling it up with doodling.

Perhaps, that's why it seems to me inevitable that something melancholy seeps into the concept of the perfect human. There is a depressing undercurrent in the very endeavor. Perfection is unachievable in life. You can only achieve happiness in glints when, on the rare occasion, you dance to James Brown, for example.

**Raffnsøe:** Still, we are constantly at work on the case!

**Leth:** Right! Resignation is no help. Just don't screw it up.

But it also has to do with people just wanting to be better at living. That's what I was most interested in back when I made *The Perfect Human*. Certainly, in an ironic way but it was also a very genuine desire. Who wouldn't want to be better at living? I would.

**Raffnsøe:** But there are other concepts of this life that we are supposed to become better at living. It's no longer about life finding its natural form. Today, life is something that is supposed to unfold and set the agenda for its surroundings. A form of heroism and a vitalism in which we live large and push the envelope.

Therefore, the person, who is at the center of these endeavors, is not someone who finds himself and his way home. In a certain sense, it is the transhuman person who is at the center. We must always become other people, better people than we are. Overcome ourselves and our immediately given nature.

**Leth:** So, through this lens, what is it von Trier wants for me when he, as we spoke about earlier, wants to move from the perfect human to the human?

**Raffnsøe:** Perhaps, there are a variety of problems. Because, on one hand, he wants to make you better and, in that sense, perfect you. There is something you're lacking. And, on the other hand, paradoxically enough, what you're lacking is the imperfect. In a sense, he wants to create space for the imperfect in the perfect. In this way, it is reminiscent of what you yourself were getting at in your attempt to cultivate the perfect in *The Perfect Human*, in which the imperfect inevitably emerges and becomes evident.

**Holm-Pedersen:** Apropos of creating space for the imperfect: This obligatory freedom project or welfare project seems to be quite comprehensive. It comprises many aspects of our existence, which become implicated in this optimization movement. There is no room for deviation or jubilant excess. Has it turned into a semi-totalitarian welfare project that leaves no room for the imperfect?

**Raffnsøe:** It is both a very obligatory and an almost all-inclusive project. Everything is directed into this optimization and perfection project. Therefore, the apparently liberal freedom project is also at the same time its own totalitarianism.

The room to maneuver is actually quite limited, because we are so busy realizing the perfect or, at least, the perfectible human. Eventually, there is nothing that cannot be made a little better. And therefore should be made a little better, as it quite naturally comes to be expressed. As a result, there is not much room left over where we can go off the rails, because everything is subordinated to the overall vision that I have just mentioned.

Goethe writes somewhere in a letter, 'I believe that humanity has triumphed; only I fear that simultaneously the world will turn into a vast hospital in which everyone will be the devoted nurse of everyone else.' This demonstrates that these things have been underway for a long time. It is a Faustian contract you enter into with the devil, where everything has to go forward if you don't want to lose it all...

One of the dangers of the project is that there will simply be no room to live. We are familiar with this kind of existence from the classic idea of the artist who burns for his art.

**Leth:** In my time as a jazz critic, I really admired the people who burned themselves on the altar of art and died as a result. Quite unreservedly. I have always admired the people who were the most inflamed. Rimbaud, for example. He is one of my heroes. The same with sports. Michael Rasmussen, Marco Pantani and Fausto Coppi. The most fragile ones. The ones who burn up.

**Raffnsøe:** They are also the ones who take this project to the extreme. There is a clinical purgation present as a possibility in this. All for this. All for the perfect or, at least, for perfectibility. And everything that does not contribute to this project – the offbeat and the messy – must be sacrificed.

**Leth:** Michael Rasmussen is for me the very image of a monk who purges himself by extreme suffering and who speculates in the engine of suffering. It is incredibly ascetic. Therefore, it is also unjust that he got nailed for a violation, because that is not the point in his case. It is his total renunciation of a normal life.

**Raffnsøe:** Our modern fascination with cycling is not accidental. In cycling, we rediscover in an enlarged and condensed form some of these features from our ordinary sociality. The demand to push the envelope, to always overcome yourself, all the while you are on your way toward some vague goal that fades away into the distance. Like a finishing line on a mountain top that remains hidden in the clouds.

**Leth:** Cycling is a fantastic image of this.

**Raffnsøe:** And therefore we also easily fall prey to looking very moralistically at doping. Precisely because it reminds us of and makes clear the downside of the project in which we all, to different degrees, are engaged. The mirroring is difficult to accept. We don't want to know that depression is lurking, that aids like doping might be

necessary. We make use of almost the whole variety of adjustment and optimization techniques offered in this medicated normality we are on the way towards. The medication can be quite concrete, like doping, or less concrete, like mental techniques, coaching in all aspects of life, job satisfaction policy in the workplace, or health policies. But, at bottom, it is the same thing. Thus, we have those moral qualms when doping shows its face and reminds us of the downside of what we ourselves are doing. It wasn't even necessary to prove that Michael Rasmussen had done something wrong in order for him to be judged and condemned.

There is an enormous rule-consciousness and moralization in this movement. Even on a general level. It is very easy to make a slip and be disqualified on this path. Again, it shows that there is no room for deviation or jubilant excess.

In this sense, it comes to contain its own totalitarianism, the fact that everything must be sacrificed for a higher end. If we look at it in an unrelenting light, these were some of things people did in the Third Reich, when they tried to improve mankind.

**Leth:** Some time ago, I was asked to comment on Lene Riefenstahl's Olympia film at an event in connection with the Golden Days festival at the Østerbro Bathing Hall, in itself a splendidly fascistic locale. And Riefenstahl's film is fantastic. But it fills me with disgust. This cultivation of the athlete as a demigod.

**Raffnsøe:** It may be repulsive and extreme, because what's missing is the imperfect, the messy.

**Leth:** We're missing the wonderfully messy. The dirt in sports and the cycle races, which I love, where anything good or bad can happen. The chaos and the mishaps. And doping.

**Raffnsøe:** And that's the way it has to be in this grand project. It is utterly necessary that there be room for the messy, the imperfect, if we are to be able to live in and with the optimization project. If not, our bare existence or life makes itself felt as an obstruction and an opponent. That is what we see in the modern workplace with the increasing incidents of stress and burn-out despite of all our efforts to do good.

#### the authors

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