

The Five Obstructions: Experiencing the human side of enterprise

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Today, too, I experienced something
I hope to understand in a few days
Leth: *The Perfect Human* and *The Five Obstructions*

Released in 2003 by internationally renowned Danish directors Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth, *The Five Obstructions* is a short film, 88 minutes long. As will be evident in this section of the special issue, however, this ‘minor’ work is also a unique, dense, multi-layered, and intriguing piece of art, with a wide range of implications.

A film-experiment that permits us to follow its own genesis in the making, *The Five Obstructions* presents itself both as a documentary and a feature production, as it renders the construction of a previously inexistent fictitious work. Being the result of a contest between two auteurs, the work permits us to follow a power game in detail as it develops. In addition, the film may be viewed as a collaborative cinematic experiment, concerning, experimenting with and challenging, not only received rules of film making, but also our conception of rules and creativity in a broader sense.

More than art and the rules of creation are at stake, however. As soon as one begins to study the film more closely from the vantage point of the management of self-management, it appears that the film also explores conditions of human existence, characterizing modern work life, modern social life and modern society. By depicting the possibilities and challenges of the modern human condition, rendering them in an especially pointed, provocative and seductive, way, Trier’s and Leth’s creation raises, explores and addresses the following questions/difficulties: (How) is it possible to manage not only your own self but also that of your fellow human beings in ways which promote productivity and facilitate creativity, given that an essential prerequisite or condition for true human and social existence, in the work place as well as elsewhere, has become the ability to cope with and overcome limitations on our existence imposed by our surroundings? Are there ways to manage yourself and others that are beneficial to furthering the creation of novelty, in a social setting where self-management (and thus freedom as the ability to become major by going beyond and overcoming what we are confronted with) is constantly presupposed, demanded of you and exacted from

you? How is it possible to manage yourself and others productively if freedom and the transcendence of limitations and rules have become the rule? Finally, how is the fundamental mode or plane of existence, which enables us to relate creatively to ourselves and to others, to be conceived of and constructed?

In the following section of the current special issue devoted to *The Five Obstructions*, these issues will be further developed. The essay by Mary-Jo Hatch (Copenhagen Business School & Gothenburg University) entitled ‘Organizing Obstructions to Manage Organizations Creatively: Reflecting *The Five Obstructions*’ shows how Trier employs the method of obstructive limitation to break Leth out of his filmmaking habits. By obstructing Leth’s immediate path to success, Trier is able to manage his creative output in ways that further creativity. Hatch rightly describes *The Five Obstructions* as ‘a wonderful tutorial on creativity that weaves in and around management’ (204). The article is followed by a dialogue between Leth and Raffnsøe entitled ‘Tripping Up the Perfect’. Here the interlocutors examine and discuss various aspects of *The Five Obstructions*, e.g. the fierce power game between Leth and Trier, the film’s analysis of modern work life and self-management, its relationship to rules and creativity, to sports, to welfare, purity and impurity.

In order to facilitate a more elaborate discussion and interpretation of the film, however, the present introduction aims to introduce the setting of the film, its basic elements and course of events.

The draughtsman’s contract

The Five Obstructions begins by showing how Leth, in an interview with Trier, is given and accepts the assignment of producing five new versions of his own short film *The Perfect Human*, originally released in 1967/68. The new versions are to be made according to strict rules laid out by Trier (Leth, 2008a).

The making of the contract and the co-operation dates further back in history, of course, since in the first instance it goes back at least three years before the release of the film. After having invited his former teacher to contribute to formulating an analogy to the famous *Dogma 95 Manifesto*, in the form of statements drawing an outline of the rules of documentary film making, Trier suggested that he and Leth should make a film together. In an ensuing exchange of e-mails the proposal is launched in the following terms:

Dear Jørgen, The challenge/The Film you are supposed to solve/make is called: The five obstructions.

As a starting point I would like you to show me a 10-minute film, you have made – *The Perfect Human*.

We will watch the movie together and talk about it – then I will set up limitations, commands or prohibitions, which means you have to do the film all over again. This we will do five times – of this the title. I would find it natural if our conversations became a part of the final movie – with the six small films, of course. [...]

Let me know how you feel about this. Please write.

Best regards,

Lars. (Hjort, 2008: xv-xvi; Leth, 2009: 259-260)

The suggestion seems to turn Leth on immediately:

Dear Lars, I find the assignment tempting. I can see an interesting development between film one and six, the route around the obstacles, the conversations. I'm sure we'll get a lot out of this. It is exciting. I look forward to your obstructions.

I really like the idea of having to change, adjust, and reduce according to given conditions in the process. Best regards, Jørgen. (Hjort, 2008: xv-xvi; Leth, 2009: 259-260)

In accordance with the established agreement, the five sequences in the film follow a regular pattern. Each opens with a discussion between the two directors during which the rules to follow are laid out. Subsequently, we follow Leth closely through a demanding creative process in which the filmmaker strives to surmount the obstructions created by Trier, or other external impediments, in order to arrive at a satisfactory product. This having in turn been shown to the audience and shared by the two filmmakers, they join forces to evaluate the merits and the shortcomings of the work of art presented. In immediate continuation, they move on to stipulate the rules to be followed in the ensuing sequence.

Initially, then, one party (Trier) stipulates the conditions of the contract, stepping forward as the active part, the man in control. His opponent is first and foremost supposed to follow the designs given by the original draughtsman. On the other hand, his contender (Leth) is also supposed to have a will of his own and to act accordingly; and as the film progresses, the roles are reversed to an increasing extent, as is the case in Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract*. In the present *Filmmaker's Contract*, the slave becomes master; and the master becomes dependent. The predator becomes the victim; and the victim asserts sovereignty.

The formation of the self-managing creative di-vidual

On closer inspection, then, the interaction between Leth and Trier rendered in the film mirrors a familiar pattern in modern work life. The film's narrative takes on the form of and is parsed by a series of equivalents to Performance and Development Reviews (PDR), or PDR-meetings in which managers and employees meet in order to evaluate previous performance and negotiate the rules and the goals for performance in the future. In between these divisions, the co-workers carry out their work according to their interpretation of the rules agreed upon. To what extent this is the case will be evaluated during the next PDR-meeting in which future goals and rules will be negotiated.

In unison with a number of other contemporary management technologies, such as coaching, performance management, auditing, lean and bench-marking, PDR-meetings presuppose that employees are capable of managing themselves. It is impossible to

imagine PDR-reviews in which employees refuse to develop or keep tabs on themselves and their assignments. The present management technologies all presuppose an employee capable of relating to him or herself independently, while, at the same time, even promoting and empowering him or her. Thus, self-management has become ubiquitous and all pervasive, not only as the latest management fad, be it theory or technology, but also as an unavoidable condition for management (Raffnsøe, 2010).

Self-management effectively affects the identity of the employee. When managing yourself along the lines stipulated, you are supposed to establish a split relationship with yourself in which you do not take yourself and your situation for granted. You do not just do as you are told or carry out orders, you also reflect upon yourself, your condition, and the conditions and rules given. A split relationship to your self implies that you are no longer presumed to be an individual, an indivisible unit or 'atom'. Instead you are presupposed to become a 'di-vidual' (Bäckius, 2002), a divided self, constantly distinguishing itself from itself, relating to and reflecting upon itself.

Furthermore, self-management implies that you become a self that assumes responsibility for itself and its activities in various ways (Manz and Sims, 1980; Manz and Sims, 1989). With self-management a responsabilization of the self becomes crucial for management, the employee and the organization. As a self-managing employee you have to assume and display responsibility for yourself, for your various tasks, for management and for productivity, and maybe most importantly, for relating reflexively to yourself and for transgressing yourself and the conditions and rules given.

A number of the characteristics of the self-managing, dependent and self-dependent, di-vidual are put on display in Leth's character in *The Five Obstructions*. As rendered in the film, Leth's very existence, in its own pointed or acute way, appears as a showcase of the possibilities, challenges, the obstructions, and the pitfalls of self-management.

Perfecting human perfection

When inserted in a context it itself indicates, the film throws light on a further challenging aspect of the self-managing existence. As hinted at in the opening dialogue of *The Five Obstructions*, the origins of the film date back even further, even beyond the 'original' mutual draughtsman's contract between Leth and Trier, established in the email exchange three years earlier and re-confirmed in the film. By confessing to have studied Leth's earlier work *The Perfect Human* at least '20 times' since his formative years as a student at the Danish Film Academy where Leth was part of the teaching staff (Leth, 2008a), Trier traces the link between Leth and Trier back to the 1980s and the prehistory of the film back to Leth's short film released in 1967.

Leth's own synopsis to the film formulates the crucial subject of investigation. With 'a beautiful young couple' as 'demonstration models' it exhibits 'how a human being becomes more proficient at living' (Leth, 2009: 17).

Everything is shown without irony, it is not a satiric movie; on the contrary, it is an instructional movie; we are to see how the perfect human is created and lives. [...] The cinematography is to be a hybridization of the vibrant vital extraversion of screen advertisement and the matter-of-factness

of instructional film. In this film we are to observe the dream of flawless modern day existence, as expressed in a sort of picture postcard whose beauty is undisturbed by officious views or postulates. It is not to serve as the gofer of some ideology. [...] The film will document Life in Denmark in the year 1967. *The Perfect Human* shall be on display, created by our wishful thinking as it is expressed in various ways in our daily life, especially in advertisement. (Leth, 2009: 106-107)

Thus, by presenting a fictional(ized) study or documentary of *The Perfect Human* in a cleansed empty space, Leth cultivates and illustrates deeply-rooted human urges for human perfectibility. The film displays, in a state of pure cultivation, the possible results of a drive for perfecting the human which is not only 'the driving inner force' (Leth & Raffnsøe, 2011: 196) and the charm of advertising, but also, informs our daily lives (Leth, 2009: 17). According to Leth's voice over, the film examines 'the perfect human in a room without any limits, without any-thing(s)' (Leth, 2008a).

This drive for human perfection operates as a major motivating force in modern work life and modern organizational life, especially as it is based on self-management as an inherent condition of possibility for productivity. As self-managing employees we are not only given new importance, freedom, and power; we are also allocated greater responsibility – namely, to continue to develop ourselves and our work assignments. At the same time we have to be innovative and figure out how we can contribute to the greater whole of the organization, not only as it already exists, but as we imagine it could be. When going to work, we must now constantly consider the extent to which we can and are willing to enter into a process where we always find ourselves 'at our limit', or on the verge of becoming ourselves. We need not, perhaps, go beyond ourselves, but, rather, constantly expand our potential human capacity. To be able to perform optimally, we have to be on the tip of our toes.

As human beings, consequently, we have to become 'trans-human'. We have to dedicate ourselves to human amelioration and to amelioration of the human (Leth and Raffnsøe, 2011), to modulating our selves in order to transgress the hitherto unsurpassed maximum of human existence - be it that of our individual personal past and present way of life, or that of the human species in general.

The human stain: Unveiling human imperfection and imperfectibility

Because the film explores the perfect human, what appears striking is the way in which its opposite, namely the imperfect human, human imperfection and imperfectibility, enters.

As the perfect human strives to do everything perfectly, the viewer cannot help noticing that the film documents precisely how he or she (the actor, the person or the human being as a human being?) does everything imperfectly. Trying to uncork his Chablis, 'he' fails to do so (accidentally or by design? thereby going wrong or succeeding at another level?); and accordingly, he appears clumsy as he has to take refuge to using his teeth. Slowly and sensually 'she' strips off her nylon stockings, apparently flirting with the camera and the spectator, until one of her stockings suddenly gets stuck, if only for a

second. As 'he' rubs his nose with his pipe in the opening shots of the film, he happens to skew it, making himself appear just a bit silly.

'We observe the surface, the skin, the simple actions, and discover the cracks and the minor defects on the surface. The human in pseudo-anthropological circumstances' (Leth, 2009: 17). By taking the 'wish', the obligation and the challenge 'to become an accomplice in living, to be a perfect human' (Leth, 2009: 17) to its extremity, *The Perfect Human* stages a subdued documentary of human perfectibility and with it a documentary of human imperfection. The film unveils the human stain surfacing, unavoidably and seemingly contra-intentionally, amidst the drive for perfection, thereby also making a case for human imperfectability (Leth, 2008a).



As is the case in modern work life, however, these minor incidents do not take place at the centre of attention in *The Perfect Human*. Human imperfection becomes noticeable at the fringes of our perception, ephemerally and not to be retained as a productive contribution, appearing only for an instance, just to disappear again.

All this changes radically in *The Five Obstructions*, however, as the approach and the perspective is reversed. When stating in the opening sequence that *The Perfect Human* is 'a little gem that we have to ruin', Trier indicates an important motive on his part for inviting Leth to reiterate his original work. Trier wants to coerce Leth into shooting the film in a radically different way. This becomes even more conspicuous, as Trier's immediate suggestions all seem to be the exact reversal of Leth's original approach. Since Leth's original voice-over contained a number of questions, Trier demands that they should be answered. As Leth preferred and generally prefers few or no cuts, Trier demanded that no single edit should be longer than 14 frames. Since Leth admits that he

has never visited Cuba and that he would prefer shooting with a screen, Trier demands that he should shoot the film on location in Cuba, without using a set.

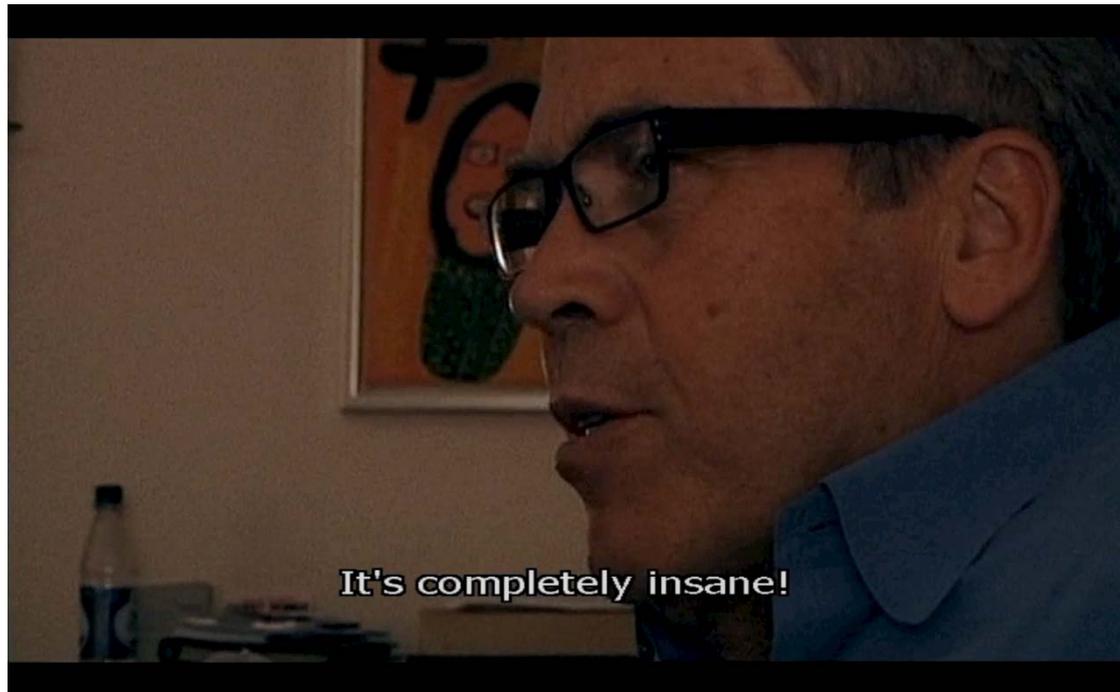
By forcing Leth to cover new territory in all these ways, Trier also follows a settled determination to free Leth from the aesthetico-anthropological detachment from reality that made *The Perfect Human* possible. At once pushing Leth and tripping him up, Trier urges the former to leave the position of an anthropological observer behind and abandon the search for aesthetic perfection in order to permit himself to 'fuck up', thereby becoming part of the surrounding world of ordinary human beings. In *The Five Obstructions* human imperfection and imperfectability is no longer waiting in the wings, but begins to take center stage. The human stain becomes the centre of attention and the chief concern.

The human side of enterprise: Rules as measures

The inversion is achieved through the introduction of strict rules. To a large extent these rules are set by Trier and acquire the status of severe regulations to be followed and carried out by Leth, thus giving Trier the status of the ruler or the director in command and control.

On the other hand, the rules set by Trier evolve out of and respond to the interaction between the two film directors; and Leth is expected to relate to the dictates in an independent or self-dependent way, thus being able to create a unique and hitherto unseen work of art that Trier would be unable to predict. Thus, the rules in the end acquire the status of measures. At first, a rule set is a measure taken to fashion Leth as a self-managing unit, relating independently not only to himself and his own previous work, but also to the dictates voiced by Trier. Subsequently, the rule functions as a gauge constantly referred to by the parties concerned, as they try to assess the value of the somewhat intangible product created by the self-managing individual.

The rules are intended to place obstacles in the way of the director, thereby pestering him and making him lose control. As he leaves to carry out the assignment, Leth's logical immediate retort is: 'It's completely insane! It's totally destructive!' and he seems on the verge of giving up (Leth, 2008b).



By inhibiting a director who is presumed to know where he is going, making him trip and lose his balance, however, the strict rules also force Leth to find his balance anew, taking refuge in what he cannot control. Laying bare his vulnerability and humanity, the rules compel him to relate to and reflect independently upon his given self, its workings and products, while ensuring that it cannot be handled as an isolated unity. The rules not only expose the self-managing di-vidual to but also force him or her to rely on chance.

The obstructions laid out in *The Five Obstructions* can be summarized as follows:

1. In the first sequence, *The Perfect Human, Cuba*, no single edit may be longer than 12 frames, and the questions in Leth's narration in the original film should be replaced by answers. Leth is to re-do the film in Cuba, but without using a set.
2. In the following sequence, *The Perfect Human, Bombay*, Leth is to re-make the film in the most miserable place possible, but without actually showing the misery in question. Leth is to re-do the sequence in the original film in which the actor Claus Nissen is a man eating a gourmet meal, while himself playing the role of the man.
3. In the third sequence, *The Perfect Human, Brussels*, Trier imposes a choice on Leth in order to punish him for having allegedly failed to meet the requirements imposed upon him in the previous obstruction: Leth is either to go back to Bombay to re-do the obstruction or make a free-style film with no limitations. Considering that he cannot go back to Bombay, Leth chooses the free-style option, even though he reckons the imposed choice between impossible alternatives to be a severe punishment.
4. In the fourth sequence, *The Perfect Human, Cartoon*, Trier requires the re-making of *The Perfect Human* as an animated film.
5. In the fifth session, *The Perfect Human, Avedøre, Denmark*, finally, Trier stipulates that he himself is to make the last obstruction, but that Leth will be credited as director and will read a text written by Trier as director's voice over.

In this way, the resort to rules forces the participants to give up control and acknowledge a human side of enterprise. Still, the approach differs from the

augmentative approach to management voiced in McGregor's classic book from 1960, which urges us to make room for the human and assume the best about people, as it is likely to increase creativeness and productivity (McGregor, 2006). The crucial point in the film is no longer to acknowledge the human factor in order to empower it and promote its perfection. Here, instead, constraints impose an awareness of an all too human side of enterprise upon us, a recognition of human limitations, of human finitude and frailty, which alleviates us, as it liberates us from the augmentative approach and makes room for the imperfect.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, the agreement on strict rules establishes a mutual contract between Leth and Trier that forces both contenders to surrender to overarching external forces beyond their control. This diabolical contract neither forces them to commemorate the place of the human within the confines of the given world, nor does it satisfy a limitless desire for knowledge and power. Instead, by engaging in this modern Faustian bargain, they impose limits on their limited human selves that force them to surrender to forces they cannot control, be it in the outside world or in the Other.

Rules trip you up and force you to transcend your own subjectivity and rely on chance, which is, according to Leth, a 'good friend'. It is not a friend, however, who 'hands out presents haphazardly. There must be room for them and humility to receive them. The key word: openness' (Leth, 2009: 15). In a short text stating his documentary poetics, written as he was getting ready to work on *The Five Obstructions*, Leth stressed:

We are just as clever and as stupid as fishermen. We can go out when we like [...] and sometimes we stumble over a magic moment. That is what we are searching for, but we must not be too eager or too sure of it. Experience tells us that it exists. (Leth, 2000: 31)

And then, *mirabile dictu*, it so happens that, in all likelihood due to their very selfless submission to rules and their willingness to abandon their selves in their immediately given form, Leth and Trier both manage to reappear and assert themselves in a fresh and even more lucid form. As the film progresses, Leth not only manages to stand forth as an auteur or as a distinctive aesthetic signature in the works of art that he is able to produce despite the obstacles he has to overcome. He also confronts and reasserts himself in the face of Trier as a distinct self, committed to the world exactly by his insistence on maintaining an aesthetic distance to the world in order to avoid producing garbage. Likewise his 'opponent', Trier, stands forth as who he is by virtue of the fact that he differs from Leth in a various respects and by virtue of the fact that he increasingly acknowledges the dissimilarities.

The process culminates in the final remake of *The Perfect Human*. Here Trier instructs Leth to refrain from directing, except for reading a script written by Trier as director's voice over and being credited as the director of the fifth film. The script is an imagined letter from Leth to Trier in which the former reflects upon the project, the process, the results and the development of their relationship so far, accompanied by a mix of images collected by Trier from Leth's own filmmaking and his own filming of Leth (Hatch, 2011):. The voice over spoken by Leth but written by Trier begins with the sentence: 'Dear stupid Lars'.



Where does Trier end and Leth begin? It is impossible to establish a definite boundary, enabling us to discern the two as separate from one another. Still, nowhere else do they and their work stand out more clearly and distinctively than in this final section where they are able to establish and maintain a close togetherness, not by blending but by relating to one another. Establishing a close togetherness in the form of an interdependence that recognizes and makes room for their differences, they appear differentiated and capable of establishing a sense of self at a heightened level of awareness. Challenging each other and thereby pointing out their mutual differences, strengths and limitations, they both appear as very distinct, challenging and generous human beings. This is a particularly graceful moment in the film. As the interaction in this scene begins to light up the route followed, however, one may in retrospect begin to find similar moments throughout the film.

The ontology of self-management and self-creation

When taking refuge to strict rules in order to experiment with creating a new genre between documentary and fictional drama, however, we seem to be breaking new ground. As we follow the documentation a midland between fact and fiction in the creation and as it develops, we might begin to enter a new plane of existence. Trier touches on this point in a short text formulating his documentary ‘poetics’:

We are searching for something between fiction and fact. Fiction is limited by our imagination and facts by our insight and the part of the world that we are seeking cannot be encompassed by a ‘story’ or embraced from an ‘angle’. [...] The ultimate challenge of the future – to see without looking: to defocus! In a world where the media kneel before the altar of sharpness, draining life out of life in the process, the DEFOCUSIST will be the communicators of our era – nothing more, nothing less! (Trier, 2000: 31)

Dissatisfied with the factual world that confronts us, as we perceive it through our senses and apprehend it through reason, we may want to set our hopes on another world yet to come, that of fiction. We may become inclined to leave the given world and its limitations behind us in order to be moved and led by the seemingly unlimited and free creative powers of our imagination, inviting us to enter the promised land of the fictitious, of a not yet existing place that we bring about, even as we conceive of it.

In modern work life with its focus on self-management, we tend to follow this inclination to the bitter end. As self-management is gaining acceptance, we establish a collective agreement that what we expect of each other and what generally binds us together is a human obligation (to each other) to overcome what we are confronted with immediately, by relating to it freely, seizing power courageously through an independent and imaginative recreation (Raffnsøe, 2010: 61).

What we run the risk of stumbling upon, however, when we follow the seductive, transcending powers of imagination as they lure us into uncharted potential worlds, is less a chimera, a fanciful creation that vanishes into thin air, or an elf that faces us and incites us to follow her in various European folktales until all of a sudden she proves to have a hollow back as she turns away from us. What we are all too liable to face, when we enter this plane of potentiality is, to our own astonishment, our all too human selves as we go along on our way to perfection. Undisturbed, we encounter the stories that our egos would like to tell at the expense of all decency in order to maintain decency. Untroubled, we tend to reiterate 'the worship of pattern, the one and only, at the expense of the subject matter from which it comes' (Trier, 2000: 31), the given ways in which we tend to visualize the world and in which we would like to go on imagining the world.

Imposing restrictions on ourselves and others may assist us in the endeavor to reach the intermediate plane between the factual and fictitious. By disturbing not only what is, but also what we already deem to be possible and try to realize, through the establishment of binding rules, it is possible to be humbler and more ambitious, to dislocate our repetitive aspirations for perfectibility and enter the plane of the factitious.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Marcel Proust discovered a children's game, a questionnaire concerning one's personality, originally in the English language, and answered it several times, always with great commitment and enthusiasm. To the question: 'Your main fault (French *défaut*)?', he responded at the age of twenty: 'Ne pas savoir, ne pas pouvoir "vouloir"' (Proust, 1889/1999). Thus, he deemed his own deficiency to be 'not knowing, not being able, not being able to 'want' and to 'will'.

In this way, inadvertently, he pointed towards a very significant truth, which has since then been fully revealed. We may have entered the knowledge society in which your main fault is not knowing. More importantly, however, and partly by way of the knowledge society, we have entered a 'society of volition.' We, the willing selves, have bound each other to a 'purposiveness without purpose' (Kant, 2009), an ever ongoing perfectibility, a society in which the main fault becomes the inability to will or to be able, especially the lacking ability to will. We seem to have committed ourselves to the

metaphysics of the will that Heidegger diagnosed as the last, maybe terminal phase of metaphysics (Heidegger, 1991).

By forcing us ahead, strict rules shake up the subject and support the willing self, while, at the very same time presenting a certain relief. Challenged and inhibited in this way, it may not be entirely your fault if you fail to produce or create the perfect. You may feel liberated from being obliged to liberate yourself from mutual dependency in order to realize your own full potential, and, consequently, be able to create a space in which the unexpected may be disclosed and discovered.

It may well be that true filmmaking, like true writing, and even creation in general, in the studio or at work, is all about seeing, not in the sense of focusing or representing, but in the sense of discovering, being impressed by what may occur and what we cannot predict: the wisdom, the detachment from *and* the involvement in the world, in non-intentional seeing, in experiencing what we may hope to understand sometime later. In that sense, the incapacity that Proust felt to be his own, could also be regarded as a virtue, and understood as part of his aptitude as a creative writer. The poet and film director Leth may be read as suggesting this at the very beginning of his own 'autobiography', *The imperfect human. Scenes from my life* (Leth, 2005: 5). At any rate, his 'film memoir in words' opens with the following short allegoric exemplum:

Seeing. Before his son leaves on his first journey abroad, his father tells him: 'Remember to use your eyes, son.' [...] The son goes abroad and gets around. He does as he is told by his father. [...] He forms his perception. [...] He tries to understand what he sees. [...] He decides that he shall go on keeping his eyes open throughout his life.

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