



Organizing obstructions to manage organizations creatively: Reflecting *The Five Obstructions*

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According to Schlegel critique ought to transgress the received Kantian notion of critique. Instead of judging the work of art condescendingly, assessing its pros and cons, telling it what to do and not to do, confining it within certain limits, the true work of the critic consists in helping the work of art realize itself, in helping it become even more 'transparent', in assisting it to transgress itself in order to become more fully what it already strives to be. (Sverre Raffnsøe, 2010, personal correspondence)

The central action of *The Five Obstructions* involves the repeated remaking of a beloved short film *The Perfect Human* whose studied imperfections are painful to watch, yet, in exposing the limitations of humanity, express the beauty of imperfection. We do not live so sublimely in most organizations. We rarely take time to savor the trials, or to nourish our creative power. We are always on our way to the next success, or at least to the next meeting. More wants more. Ironically this film shows us a way we *can* have more – more perfect human imperfection – if we take time to challenge one another from depth to depth and to nurture what is worth repeating so that we can watch it soar to newly imagined heights.

The Five Obstructions is a wonderful tutorial on creativity that weaves in and around management. The film proves the point that limitations can be productive of a creative process, and the method Lars von Trier offers Jorgen Leth is an old one for pushing artists toward mastery by having them 'repeat' a work multiple times (e.g. paint the 'same' subject twenty times). In this film the method von Trier proposes involves Leth remaking *The Perfect Human* five times, each time obstructed in some new way.

Throughout *The Five Obstructions* von Trier employs the method of obstruction to try to break Leth of his filmmaking habits. While von Trier persists in telling Leth that the obstructions will be productive of creativity, Leth successively describes them as 'perverse', 'destructive', 'spastic', 'satanic', 'suicidal', and ultimately 'diabolical'. For example, at one point von Trier tells Leth that by following his direction Leth will probably produce crap, which he assures him will be welcomed, and may even be necessary. Leth perversely responds by producing multiple versions of *The Perfect Human*, each better than the last.

How professional management obstructs creative organizing

What most struck me on reviewing this film comes from my sensitivity to organizing and reflections on the teaching of management. Leth and von Trier made a film about filmmaking without demonstrating much interest in revealing how their filmmaking was organized. We see Leth in one segment crossing off a list of scenes to be shot, and once we overhear von Trier discussing flight bookings. Snippets of conversation, the occasional appearance of an assistant or a camera crewperson, shots of rehearsal, and the list of contributors that scrolls across the screen in the final credits, similarly attest to organizing that remains otherwise unseen.

Still, to make this film required sorting out ambitions, establishing priorities, assembling resources and transforming them into action that could be filmed, edited, presented, and so on. Somebody had to book those tickets, determine the sequence of shots, cast and schedule actors, rehearse and dress them, direct, set up cameras and lighting, shoot and develop the film, edit, get the finished product into distribution, and so on. I am certain that handling details like these constitutes the bulk of everyday professional life for most filmmakers. Yet von Trier and Leth keep silent about such matters, putting the heroics of their creative process on display rather than the banalities of organizing.

What occurred to me while watching *The Five Obstructions* through this lens was how downplaying organization brought creativity forward, which seemed to me a great improvement over the effect most management classes have on their students. Management classes typically foreground the banalities of organizing to the detriment of creativity. While this approach genuflects before the altar of professionalism, it makes a sacrifice. In most business schools, the means of professionalizing management has supplanted the ends of teaching students to organize for a creative purpose with the net effect of transforming banalities into heroic actions and professional managers into heroes. As business schools churn out professionals, this means-ends reversal reveals their heroes performing tragedy because, unfortunately, the successful professionalization of management has left most businesses crying for creativity.

One thing became clear to me as I reviewed *The Five Obstructions*: neither von Trier nor Leth designed the perfect organization to make their films. They organized, if imperfectly, because it was a means to realize creative filmmaking. If creativity is what you are after, then management must organize and then reorganize to serve it, a point repeated five times as I watched von Trier presenting Leth with a series of increasingly challenging obstructions. Von Trier improvised most of the five obstructions by playing off Leth's increasingly sophisticated responses to rising expectations of impending failure. This escalation, alongside the determined engagement of the two men with the task they mutually defined and refined as they proceeded, seemed to unleash creative forces in both.

But what is this odd notion of organizing and how is it to be managed? Is it the goal-driven, pre-planned, buttoned-down version we so often teach in management schools? Or is it meandering and stubbornly inefficient, groping toward an ill-conceived, ever-

shifting and always partially obscured ambition with holes big enough to welcome surprise? Which characteristics – the clear and planful or the fuzzy and improvisational – best match our expectations about management and how do these expectations constrain or even undermine the conditions that inspire creativity?

If you believe we need management and organizing practices that better fit the conditions and spirit of creativity, then what light does *The Five Obstructions* shed in the dark tunnel of current management education? Might we re-enchant organizing or impassion management after the fashion of von Trier urging Leth to produce crap? Are we who are and who teach managers in need of obstruction?

Please, lord, give us constraint

At this point I would like to offer my thesis, which is (at least for now), that in *The Five Obstructions* the more von Trier's efforts to foil Leth's attempts to succeed fail, the more we see into the convoluted process of successfully managing others in service to creative ends.

Management Lesson 1: When you organize through the work of others you may convince yourself that you are in charge, but your exercise of control ultimately leads to its loss.

Some of the parallels between film direction von Trier style and the management of others are clear. For example, observing how von Trier gets Leth to make von Trier's film even as he remakes his own, revealed at least one occurrence of ambiguous and competing ambitions intertwining with decisions and actions to produce creativity. Through Leth's reactions to him, von Trier realizes his initially obscure ambition to enhance Leth's creativity, even as he clarifies what that ambition was/is. For his part Leth uses von Trier's obstructions as a springboard to creativity in the sense that constraints and limitations nearly always provoke the creative force within.

While the multiple remakings of *The Perfect Human* attest to the wonders of obstruction, a related observation is that, in the process of clarifying and realizing von Trier's ambitions those ambitions were also thwarted and profoundly changed by Leth's competing ambitions expressed in his ongoing creative responses to von Trier's efforts to obstruct his success. It may seem outrageous to manage someone's creative output by obstructing their path to success, but such has it ever been with art if not life in general, that the shortest distance between where you are now and where you want to go is rarely a straight line.

Management Lesson 2: There can never be one set of ambitions to tackle or a single vision for the future to consider in the process of managing others.

Received wisdom suggests that managers are supposed to *remove* obstructions, not invent them. Although von Trier's obstructions amount to a reversal of these expectations, in reality most managers create far more obstacles for their subordinates than they remove. But their obstructions are not typically as inspiring of creativity as are von Trier's. Why not? Could teaching managers to present their subordinates with

‘destructive’, ‘spastic’ and ‘diabolical’ obstructions move us toward more creative organizations? Are managers’ control efforts not already ‘destructive’, ‘spastic’ and ‘diabolical’ in the eyes of their subordinates? And are not subordinates’ abilities to thwart management control evidence that they are quite creative already? How shall we work in such a convoluted world?

Management Lesson 3: Learn to use indirection – point away from the desired end in order to help your subordinates more quickly achieve it.

If the value in letting go control is that its loss can produce the very creativity you were hoping your control efforts would bring, and if one’s own ambitions cross those of any others involved, then how does one go about making the necessary sacrifices of each one’s habitual ways of working? Would a closer look at the dance between Leth and von Trier revealed in *The Five Obstructions* give us further insight?

Embracing the destructive power of management

In proposing what the first obstruction should be von Trier took inspiration from the original version of *The Perfect Human*, which of course was also Leth’s starting point. Von Trier asked Leth to limit his first remake of his film to 12 frames per clip and in it to provide answers to all the questions raised by the original film’s narrator (who happens to have been Leth). Von Trier located inspiration for the remaining rules in Leth’s reactions to these first two. As Leth thinks about his challenge he puffs away at a Cuban cigar, and von Trier instructs the cameraperson to keep filming Leth while von Trier engages in some pondering of his own.

Smoking and seemingly deep in thought, Leth slips into a narrative, describing his cigar and mentioning off-handedly that he has never visited Cuba. Like a shot von Trier concludes Cuba must be the place for the first remake of *The Perfect Human*. Leth reacts by starting to organize, musing about building a room or maybe shooting against a screen. Von Trier blocks this urge with the fourth and final requirement of the first obstruction: no set!

As we leave Leth setting off for Cuba, we hear him mutter that he should be careful in future not to reveal his thinking to von Trier lest it be used against him. This remark repeats a common lesson learned by subordinates in many organizations: give your boss as little information as possible lest it be used to control you! However, deviating from the scenario one expects to unfold on such occasions (i.e., employee resistance to management control), Leth permits himself to be filmed close range as he finds ways to thwart von Trier’s first obstruction and make a successful film in spite, if not because of the constraints he accepted from von Trier.

There is another aspect of management to consider here, to do with the shared (or not) vision to produce a creative product. Notice that, as Leth uses his creative powers to undermine von Trier’s efforts to help him, von Trier features Leth’s creativity in outsmarting him in *The Five Obstructions*! How might we teach managers to appreciate, as von Trier does Leth’s abilities, their subordinates’ efforts to thwart management control? Could we reframe them as expressions of creativity rather than as

attempts to circumvent their manager's power? If managers could be taught a course in subordinate appreciation, would they learn to leverage knowledge of the subversive side of creativity and thereby mobilize it? Can von Trier's style of diabolical management be taught?

As the second obstruction is introduced, von Trier replies to Leth's concern not to reveal too much by equating the process of producing *The Five Obstructions* to therapy. He asks Leth: 'How can I help you unless you open up to me?' Von Trier then opens up to Leth by revealing his own ambition to 'banalize' Leth in order to break down his habit of being the detached observer, to force Leth closer to his subject. To do this von Trier presents his second obstruction: Leth must act in his own film and the second remake is to be set in the most miserable place Leth can think of. Von Trier further specifies that Leth not explicitly show the place he has selected and that he include the scene from *The Perfect Human* of the perfect human eating a meal, but this time without the woman.

Leth chooses the red light district of Bombay for his setting, having been 'horrified' by a previous visit to the place. There he remakes selected scenes from *The Perfect Human*, including eating a fine meal, which he performs in front of a semi-transparent screen permitting him to show bystanders who are busy watching his tuxedoed self consume the meal laid out on a gleaming white tablecloth. The inclusion of the partially obscured observers adds irony – one of Leth's trademarks (i.e., now Leth is the observed rather than the observer) – as well as visual commentary about the suffering of the poor to his second remaking of *The Perfect Human*.

While Leth readies himself to star in his meal scene, von Trier's camera catches him in his underwear shaving, thereby assisting in the total remake of *The Perfect Human* by providing a new version of the shaving scene featuring Leth himself. Sweating profusely as some onlookers interact with him, we also see Leth filming two other scenes from the original film, the first involves Leth jumping up and down in full costume and the second taking his jacket off and then putting it back on. In filming these scenes in sequence Leth is able to show us his sweat-drenched shirt when he removes his jacket, thus pointing to the heat permeating the location. This presumably fulfills the requirement of not showing the place chosen, but Leth then includes the bystanders peeking at him through the screen, thus violating that same requirement.

Von Trier rejects Leth's effort in the second obstruction on the basis of the semi-transparent screen. He chastises Leth for breaking the rule about not showing the place and as a consequence instructs Leth to return and remake the second remake. But Leth, in the most genuinely emotional moment we have seen thus far, refuses. It is too much to ask. His ethical limits have been (b)reached by playing it so cool in the heat while eating a rich man's meal in front of some of Bombay's poorest. Leth then describes a nightmare he had two nights after finishing the film and his fear that his fear will turn into madness if he follows any further down this path.

Von Trier, empathizing with Leth, just as he had hoped to force Leth to empathize with his subjects, concedes the point, but says that Leth must then be punished in another way, a way he declares should be of Leth's own choosing. Leth states that he prefers

that von Trier make the decisions, which of course seals his fate. The third obstruction will have no rules for Leth to thwart. He is to remake his own film in his own way. Von Trier calls it free-style filmmaking. Leth appears to suffer extreme chagrin.

The film based on the third obstruction is melancholy and mysterious. It features a man whose face, Leth comments, reveals his deep experience of life, and a woman whose status and relationship to the man is ambiguous. Is she a prostitute? Is she the perfect woman of his dreams? All we see is that she is not the woman he ultimately takes to bed. The film is set in Brussels, in a hotel elevator, in its lobby, and on its roof, on a highway, amid shots of passing trains and an industrial setting with rainy grey weather swallowing it all. There are scenes of shaving and lovemaking in the backseat of a car, and a car parked alone in an empty parking structure. The film ends with a shot from the point of view of someone riding in a boat motoring down a misty river. Unanswered questions ring in my ears, haunting echoes of the original film: Who is in the boat? What is this river? Where is he going? Of course, none will be answered, but now we have traveled well beyond the first three obstructions into uncertain new territory.

Von Trier, upon viewing the third remake of *The Perfect Human* responds to the beauty of the film but pronounces his judgment that the process so far has left not one mark on Leth. He says the latest effort has been like chopping cabbage in the mirror. He states that the greatest gift an actor can give a filmmaker is to screw up and that Leth refuses to give him that gift. He suggests Leth should be a tortoise on its back but instead Leth persists in using his cleverness to avoid what von Trier has asked of him. Leth responds that precise framing (e.g., the unknown occupant of the boat on who knows what river that now seems like Leth telling von Trier how he feels at this stage of the filmmaking process) is his way of examining a theme. He cannot help himself, he says, von Trier must do that for him. Served and volleyed: Leth 3, von Trier 0.

Von Trier, puzzling over what to do now, reflects on his filmmaking saying that often, in spite of himself, in the middle of a film everything turns to crap. Leth then says, somewhat sheepishly and as if to encourage him, 'I love it when something gets out of control' to which Von Trier responds: 'I'd be thrilled if [what you produced] was crap.' Von Trier finds inspiration for the fourth obstruction in his revelation that Leth's refusal to produce crap has landed von Trier in the crap he often finds at the midpoint of his moviemaking. His inspiration for the fourth obstruction is to demand Leth make a cartoon. Leth becomes fully resistant now: he will not learn new technology, he fumes, or spend time at a drawing board. But the obstruction stands as the two men revel in their mutual hatred of cartoons.

Following this exchange we see Leth on the phone discussing what must be done about the next obstruction with an unseen unnamed other. He says that because von Trier hates cartoons as much as he does, Leth can see the logic of remaking *The Perfect Human* as a cartoon. He says that nothing new will be filmed for this remake, but rather they will reuse film already shot, recycle it but use it differently, in a new context bringing freshness to it. Von Trier may want it to be sloppy or stupid but, Leth announces, he cannot do that.

Next we hear Leth talk about 'him' to whom clips were sent and now we see Leth on his way to meet this person. We have the feeling it is someone who makes cartoons. Leth reveals that people in his organization selected this person on the basis of his reputation and that he has been sent a selection of clips. Leth pulls up in front of a house where a man greets him. They enter and Leth begins looking at computer-animated images based on stills from his various versions of *The Perfect Human*. We see Leth flipping through many stylistically different animations of still shots we recognize from the earlier versions and the original film. He responds to them as he goes, some he immediately says he wants to keep but then, responding similarly to other images, expresses an inability to decide which he wants to use. He appears to want them all, 'This should be in the film,' he says. And then, 'This is possible too. This one is good too. I don't know what to do.' We leave Leth sitting in front of hundreds of stills, but there does now seem to be something like an ordering of images that stand more or less one after the other. Is a fourth version of *The Perfect Human* emerging from Leth's indecision?

We cut to Leth walking in Haiti, buying food in an open market and talking about the new film, anticipating von Trier's reaction. He says he is afraid it won't be a load of crap. Next we see him sitting in a Haitian garden talking to von Trier who we learn is back in Denmark. The two immediately and simultaneously watch the film. Nice touch having technology mediate discussion of a film that has been similarly produced through the mediation of technology the product of which is the fourth remaking of *The Perfect Human*, now animated.

With no further explanation we see a brilliant cartoon of surprising beauty based on images transformed from cuts taken from earlier versions, including the original. Maybe nobody knows how it happened. All the viewer witnesses is that out of mutual hatred evolved a creative product that, upon viewing throws Von Trier into a frenzy, inspired by realizing he has and probably will not succeed in his ambition to thwart Leth's ambition to produce great work.

Having been unable to force Leth to produce crap, Von Trier decides to make the fifth and final remake of *The Perfect Human* himself. For the last obstruction he orders Leth to do nothing. Nothing apart from allowing von Trier to give Leth's name as director and also to narrate from a script to be provided by von Trier. Von Trier's script is an imagined letter from Leth to von Trier. In it Leth reflects on what von Trier has been up to in making *The Five Obstructions*. Leth speaks von Trier's words over a mix of images von Trier gathered from Leth's earlier filmmaking combined with his own filming of Leth.

Who is in or out of control here? Do we care any longer once we reach this point? Von Trier was drawn to Leth by the influence the older man's work had on him as a young filmmaker. He clearly desired to repay that gift by inspiring Leth. But instead of reciprocating Leth, he received another of Leth's gifts. Leth gave von Trier his full commitment to being directed by accepting his obstructions and the critique that followed his efforts to make good films. What followed this strange gift to von Trier was another. By volleying von Trier's intended gift for him, Leth gives von Trier a moment of self-realization caught in the instant of hearing Leth read von Trier's words.

The way Leth throws himself to von Trier's wolves makes a subtle point about following another's lead that could easily be lost in the fray of these two artists butting heads, or alternatively as I see it now, dancing to unheard music (the one scene neither Leth nor von Tier remade until now, where it appears in my mind). To be led effectively means to follow artfully. To relish what seems an obstruction for the creativity it can bring is to love the source as well as the obstruction. When the obstructor's act of love is repaid in kind, creativity is the reward. It is a shared act in which leader and follower blend into one artistic whole in a joyful encounter with creation – every distance collapsed. Could this, in fact, be organization out in the open, missed by my first reactions to the film because they lay on a different plane of consciousness than the one on which I arrived?

I have gained tremendous value from watching and re-watching this film about remaking a film already made yet made anew with each (re)viewing. It has made me wonder if we might yet invent a way of organizing, managing and teaching management that is equally layered and, similar to *The Five Obstructions*, filled with inspiration, despair, hope, irritation and the realization of less than perfection – but so much more than crap.

the author

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