

Dogme 95: A Danish Avant-Garde Film Movement

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The definition of what a film is and how it can be made is something that is becoming more and more diverse today. A film no longer has to be made using only professional cameras or be backed by large studios: even anyone with a smartphone can create a film nowadays. Although these films might not receive as much traction or publicity as those with big names on the credits, their mere presence points to the increasing independence available to those who want to create films. While this may be seen as something ordinary and quite natural in the contemporary digital era, a key contributor to this 'film freedom' is a nineties Danish filmmaking movement dubbed Dogme 95.



Lars Von Trier at Cannes 2011

Source: Georges Biard, Wikimedia Commons



Described as “the Last Great Filmmaking Movement” (Kohn, 2022), this avant-garde movement was spurred into motion by the ‘Dogme 95 Manifesto’ penned by popular Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. They wrote a detailed ‘Vow of Chastity’ that all Dogme 95 aspirants had to swear to follow if they wanted their films to be classified under the Dogme movement and its focus on ‘cinematic purity’. They intended to “strip cinema down to its bare essentials” (Crawford, 2024) and thus “combat the generic shift to films made for the sole purpose of making money” (Ghuraya, 2015). Their focus was more on the story and acting than technology and special effects, even stripping away too much emphasis on settings, scenery, and properties. ‘Dogme’ is Danish for dogma, and ‘95’ refers to the signing of the manifesto on March 13, 1995, although the movement is also widely referred to as just Dogme. Von Trier and Vinterberg were soon joined by their contemporaries, Kristian Levring and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, who collaborated to form the Dogme 95 Collective.



Thomas Vinterberg at Berlinale 2010

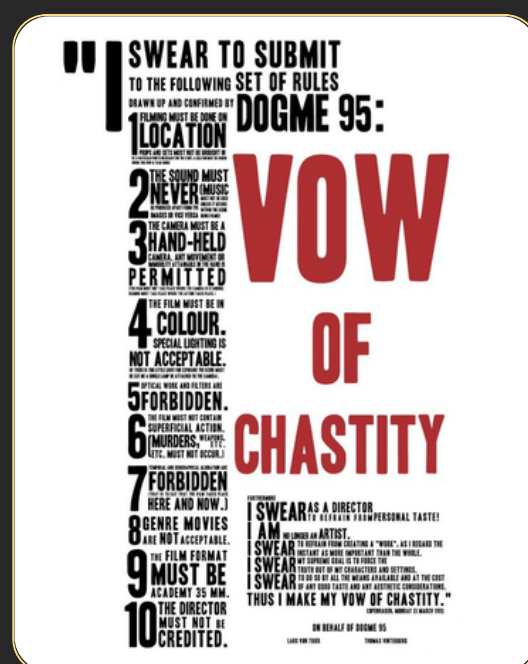
Source: Siebbi, Wikimedia Commons

The Dogme 95 Manifesto listed ten strict rules that must be followed by Dogme creators.

1. "Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found).
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)
3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted.
4. The film must be in color. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
8. Genre movies are not acceptable.
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.
10. The director must not be credited."

(von Trier & Vinterberg, 1995)

Furthermore, Vinterberg and Von Trier also added a note after the Vow of Chastity in the Manifesto: "I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work", as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations" (von Trier & Vinterberg, 1995).



The Vow of Chastity under the Dogme 95 Manifesto
Source: The Ministry of Motion Pictures (Image for Reference)





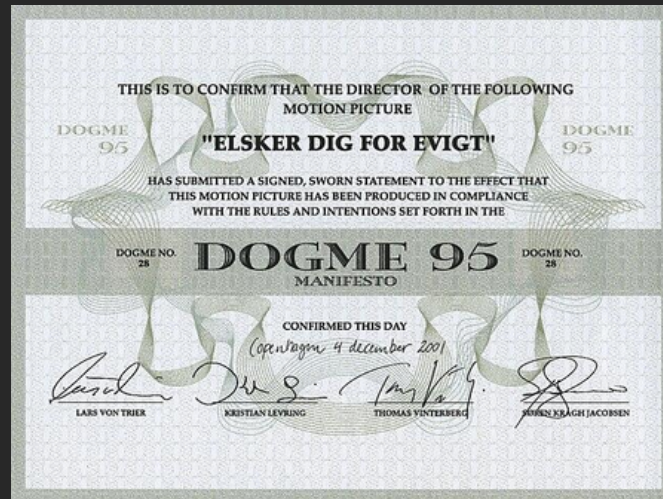
A Dogme-style Family Dinner Scene in *Festen* and a Dinner Scene from *Knives Out* - Notable Differences in Lighting and Rich Settings
 Source: WordPress and India Today (Images for Reference)

Interestingly, they announced the movement and passed out pamphlets regarding it at a conference in Paris celebrating the completion of the first century of motion pictures. It was branded as a 'rescue bid' aiming to "counteract 'certain tendencies' in modern film" (Schepelern). A quite fascinating description of this moment reads: "Part-gimmick and part-sincere, Dogme raged against the unrealistic plotlines and overwrought visuals of mainstream cinema" (Kingsley, 2012). It seems quite befitting that they brought in what they considered to be a radical change to this conference and the future of cinema as well. While some may consider the rules of the Dogme movement to be a kind of backward progression as it calls for returning to the 'elementary' and rejecting new technologies and cinematic techniques, the movement afforded a new kind of independence that was nearly unheard of before. In their attempt to fight back against the increasing power of big studios and colossal budgets, they enabled smaller filmmakers to dream of a brighter future. The movement was also quite liberating for female directors like Susanne Bier and Natasha Arthy, although their films "have been largely overshadowed by the "star power" of von Trier and Vinterberg", despite the Vow's insistence on not crediting the director (Heckmann, 2020).



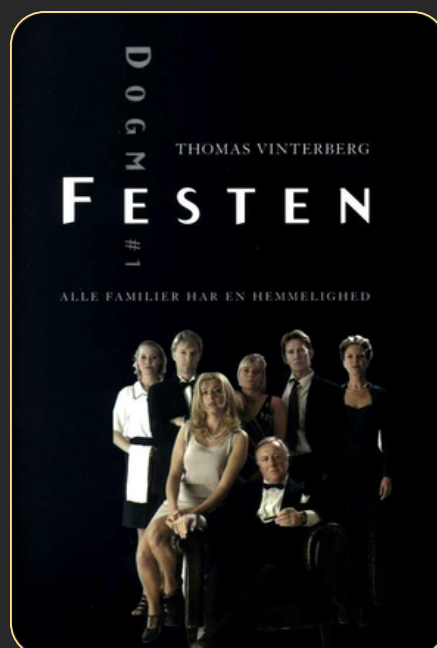
Stills from two films released around the same time - Dogme film *Open Hearts* (2002) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001)
 Source: MAD and Superask (Images for Reference)





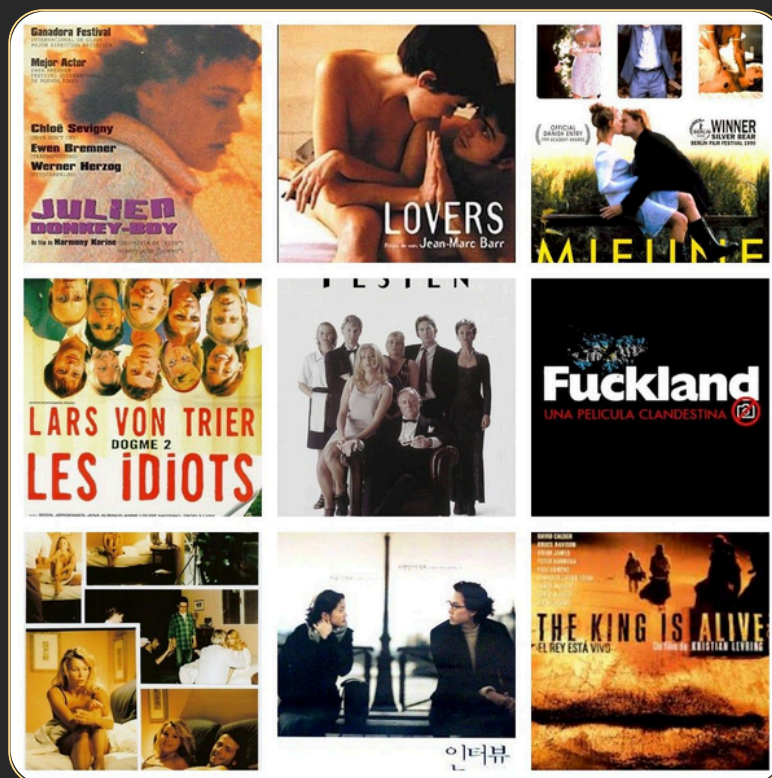
A Dogme 95 Certificate for Susanne Bier's *Open Hearts*
 Source: Dogma 95, Wikimedia Commons

All Dogme films had to be officially recognized by the Dogme collective, which would grant “certificates of authenticity” (Gray, 2023). A total of thirty-five films have been officially considered Dogme films, made between 1998 and 2005. The first of these (Dogme #1) was Vinterberg’s dark comedy *Festen*, about a family gathered to celebrate their patriarch’s sixtieth birthday. *Festen* won several awards, including the Jury Prize at Cannes, Bodil Awards, European Film Awards, Guldbagge Award, and Robert Awards. It was also received well by the public and paved the way for the larger public popularity of the Dogme movement. Some other notable Dogme films include *The Idiots*, *Mifune’s Last Song*, *The King is Alive*, *Italian for Beginners*, and *Open Hearts*. The movement wasn’t confined to Denmark (unlike its specification on forbidding geographical displacement), and many filmmakers outside the country began to create Dogme films, like the French film *Lovers*, American *Julien Donkey-Boy*, South Korean *Interview*, and Argentinian *Fuckland*.



Poster of *Festen*
 Source: FilmAffinity (Image for Reference)

Despite attempts by Von Trier to make a Dogme trilogy, only one of his films was considered a Dogme film (*The Idiots*), leaving Juan Pinzás as the only filmmaker with more than one recognized Dogme film with his trilogy *Once Upon Another Time*, *Wedding Days*, and *The Outcome*. Interestingly, another of von Trier's films, *Breaking the Waves*, is often considered by many as a prime example of the Dogme movement's principles despite flouting many of the rules under the Vow, like using non-diegetic music, computer graphics, and built sets. Released in 1996, this film was heavily influenced by the Dogme movement as it was von Trier's first film after signing the Manifesto. Many Dogme and Dogme-adjacent films received mixed reviews from the public but managed to garner much critical acclaim. However, the movement began to lose ground quickly, with many viewing it as "great in theory but lacking severely in execution" (Hope, 2015). Filmmakers were finding it quite difficult to stringently adhere to the rules in the Vow, with even von Trier, Vinterberg, and their frequent collaborators breaking the rules often in their films. The advent of newer technologies and the development of more advanced cameras and recording capabilities further contributed to the downfall of the movement and the 'puristic simplicity' it demanded. However, the movement is still considered an "essential challenge to commercial cinema" (Kohn, 2022), and the importance of how it "gave validity to low-budget filmmaking" cannot be negated (Chiappe, 2020).



A Collage of Dogme 95 Films
Source: Medium (Image for Reference)



The tenets of the Dogme 95 movement continue to inspire many filmmakers even after the movement's dissolution in 2005. Vinterberg's later films *Jagten (The Hunt)* and *Melancholia* are reminiscent of Dogme principles. Numerous independent and experimental films included aspects of the Dogme 95 movement, including *Gypo*, *Ma' Rosa*, *Tirador*, *Serbis*, and *Hotel* (the latter is even called a 'Dogme film-within-a-film'). *Interview*, the only certified Asian Dogme film, inspired the creation of South Korean films like *This Charming Girl*, *Secret Sunshine*, and *The Housemaid*, which are heavily influenced by Dogme 95 rules. The Museum of Art and Design held a retrospective commemorating twenty years of the movement in 2015, where several Dogme films were screened. Jake Yuzna, MAD's Director of Public Programs, even described Dogme 95 as "one of the most important cinematic movements since the French New Wave" (MAD, 2015). Kehr also shares how its "natural sense of regimentation and restraint will serve us all well in the coming digital cinema" (Kehr, 2004).



Interview Poster

Source: IMDb (Image for Reference)



The legacy of the Dogme 95 movement wasn't restricted just to the cinema industry. The series premiere of the sci-fi television series *Black Mirror* titled 'The National Anthem' features a scene where the use of Dogme 95-style filming is listed as a demand in a hostage negotiation. American musician Money Mark shared that he was inspired by Dogme principles and used them while creating his 1995 album 'Mark's Keyboard Repair'. Russian-origin violinist Mikhail Gurewtisch even named his orchestra the Dogma Chamber Orchestra, inspired by the movement. Such is the far-reaching legacy of this considerably short-lived movement that continues to remain a popular and relevant point of discussion among filmmaking communities even today. Its essence needs to remain in public memory due to its capability to "inspire a dialogue about the essence of filmmaking in an era where technological advancements are ever-present" (Crawford, 2024). With the prevalence of contemporary hybrid genres and fusion of styles, perhaps one might not be all that wrong in saying that Dogme 95 didn't fully vanish: its concepts are often blended with current trends, thus providing the movement with a new perspective and fluidity, and keeping its legacy alive.



A Scene from *Black Mirror* referring to Dogme 95
Source: Yarn (Image for Reference)

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