

THE CELEBRATION (FESTEN)

by

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The Celebration. Directed (without credit) by Thomas Vinterberg. Screenplay by Thomas Vinterberg and Mogens Rukov, Cinematography by Anthony Dod Mantle. A Nimbus Films production, released by October Films, 1998. (In Danish with English subtitles.)

On his sixtieth birthday, Helge (Henning Moritzen) invites his large family to a celebration dinner. The two primary guests are his sons Christian (Ulrich Thomsen) and younger Michael (Thomas Bo Larsen). Instead of a toast, Christian accuses his father of sexually abusing both him and his sister when they were young, which led directly to his sister's suicide. The dinner guests try desperately to maintain decorum. Christian's relatives try to deny his accusations while knowing full well they are true. Michael beats him and ties him to a tree, but he returns for more. The family members, most of whom have various psychological problems, are revealed as hypocrites, protecting the father while singing racist songs into the face of the one black guest. Next morning at breakfast, Helge apologizes and leaves. (Rated R)

To be able to sit through this year's most painful film, one must know the nature of "Dogme 95," a Danish film movement energized by a collective of film directors advocating a self-styled "rescue" of contemporary filmmaking. Their seal of approval opens the film like a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. *The Celebration* is one of the first films to conform to the new party line: hand-held camera, no music, no special effects, no sets, all locations and natural light (though Vinterberg "confesses" to have covered up a window once . . . oh, horror) – all in an effort to illuminate the characters' inner lives. Obeying the new rules, a so-called "Vow of Chastity," 29-year-old director Thomas Vinterberg takes no screen credit.

Another idiosyncrasy of Dogme 95 is to shoot on video and then transfer to film. Fellow Dogme signatory Lars von Trier used this to good effect (or

affect) in *Breaking the Waves*. While in *The Celebration* the Hi-8 video effect is at first striking, it quickly wears thin, especially given the subject matter of the film. The “home movie” feel can make us feel familiar with the characters and bring us directly into the chaos of the moment . . . or it can be terribly off-putting. After a while, we seem to be watching a very large TV screen with a very large TV family drama. The major difference is the eccentric camera angles, the frenetic camera swoops, the brain-jarring crosscutting, and the odd use of in- and out-of-focus imagery. All this is necessary because of the rather hackneyed story and characters. It would be easy to see *The Celebration* as merely a self-congratulatory stunt were it not for the disturbing power invested in the characters (often in spite of the techniques).

Dogme 95’s self-imposed structures are, of course, quite arbitrary. Rather than demand a hand-held camera, for instance, they could just as easily demanded cameras placed on tripods and no movement at all, no pans, no dollies, no cranes. Instead of Hi-8 Video, they could have insisted on black-and-white film. The resulting cinema would be no more or less “pure” no matter what arbitrary strictures had been imposed. Talented filmmakers have always been able to express emotional strength no matter how restricted or varied the techniques. This is why we still find many films from the silent era - when the breadth of the technical vocabulary was quite limited - so captivating. Dogme 95 confuses technique with expression in an inverted way, presuming that varied technique somehow restricts expression. (How this would occur is not at all clear.)

Fortunately, Vinterberg is a strong enough director to make an expressive and, in this case, riveting film, no matter what the technique. He has taken advantage of the restrictions, often pushing the camera into the faces of the screaming participants. But another aspect begins to grate on our nerves. While taking advantage of a limited cinematic vocabulary is a very clever game, it is a game nonetheless. It often chafes on the audience and eventually becomes repetitive.

The strength of the film is not in the technique (or lack thereof), nor in the subject matter, but in the social critique of the patriarchal family (this would probably have been so with or without techniques prohibited by the manifesto). The revelations of sexual abuse and incest do not disturb the party greatly; they pause for a minute, recover and go on talking about nothing - as all good dinner guests do. As things take on a progressively nastier feel, the guests simply deny everything by concentrating even more intently on nothing. Or they display feelings that a family should be the last hold out of feudal power or, in contrast to what we usually think of racial politics in Scandinavia, sing racist songs.

There is also a strong class critique. The kitchen staff willingly aids Christian in the destruction of the ruling class within the family. To assure he has a captive audience, they steal all the guests' car keys. They even lock one man in the wine cellar so he won't interfere with Christian's vendetta.

Unfortunately, the film is not too inventive beyond its (lack of) technique. We've seen it all before. Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* took society apart decades ago. And having people locked in an emotional pressure cooker by restricting them to a small space (as many of Ingemar Bergman's films do), we are reminded of Luis Bunuel's 1962 masterpiece, *The Exterminating Angel* where the layers of civility are progressively stripped from an upper class gathering.

And there have been so many recent films about the revelation of incest and abuse that we are little shocked. Dysfunctional families have become the norm. Add to Vinterberg's contingent of wife beaters, philanderers, child molesters, and racists, a smattering of neurotics and psychotics and a suicide or two, and you have a whole month of TV movies rolled into two hours.

The Celebration is a schizophrenic film. It is at once affecting and boring. Its technique is minimalist and very flashy. The bravura camerawork distracts from the story it is telling while at the same time emoting the story. While it is a fascinating aberration, it hardly signals the coming of the third Golden Age of Scandinavian Cinema. However, *The Celebration*, while intellectually weak, is undeniably an emotionally almost overpowering film.

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