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Poetics by Aristotle versus Dogme 95, that is What Aristotle Has in Common with Contemporary Film-Making

Abstract: *Poetics* by Aristotle, and particularly its part devoted to tragedy, set out this genre framework for over 2,000 years. It might seem that breaking with the ancient convention in the 19th century would be of a lasting nature. However, not only theatre but also film willingly come back to the proven, although difficult convention. In the mid-1990s, as it was done by the Stagirite, programme manifestos of the contemporary cinema were created. A group of Scandinavian filmmakers made a point of breaking with widely understood film showiness having nothing in common with art, in order to maintain genre integrity. There can be observed a return to Aristotle's *mimesis*. Although the formerly mentioned group probably does it intuitively, with no reference to the Greek philosopher's work, the similarity is striking. The best example of it is *The Kingdom* by Lars von Trier.

Key words: Aristotle, Lars von Trier, *Poetics*, Dogme 95, *The Kingdom*

Introduction

Taking a closer look at the modern cinema and its different variations, it can be concluded that in fact it is nothing new. This statement not only refers to the content, which is quite obvious to most people, but also to the form. The newest scientific publications have made it pretty clear.¹ Less and less fre-

¹ J. Paul: *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition*. Oxford 2013; P. Michelakis: *Greek Tragedy on Screen*. Oxford 2013.

quently can we watch pictures that change film reality and build its new quality. It seems that director's imagination reaches absolute limit, but in fact it is assisted by techniques, technology and special effects connected with them. That is why most films become similar to one another and thus, viewers find it more and more difficult to distinguish them.

Perhaps due to that fact, in 1995 a group of young independent film directors decided to remain in strong opposition to showiness, again making film directing and dramaturgy a kind of art, also intellectual one, in this way coming back to the tradition described by Aristotle in *Poetics* in 4th century BC (the issue will be enlarged on further in the text).

The above-mentioned group created a manifesto called Dogme 95, expressing a rebellion against popular tendencies in the development of film art. In the document – proceeding Dogme 95 – published on 3rd May 1984 in Copenhagen on the premiere of *The Element of Crime* – Lars von Trier's programme declaration – we can read:

[...] we want to have more – real creativity, fascination, experience – films for children and as pure as real art can be. We want to come back in time when love between a film-maker and a film was young, when a joy of creation was seen in each shot [...] we want to see religion on the screen. We want to see 'films – the lovers'². It is supposed to evoke viewers' strong excitement, emotions and passions. They are supposed to be shocked and somehow 'purified'. They are supposed to experience '*catharsis*'.³

After a few such minor manifestos, the most important one, additionally containing so-called vow is published. The document published on 13th of March 1995 in Copenhagen was double-signed by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. In the introduction to the manifesto Dogme 95 we can read:

Dogme 95 is a group of filmmakers set up in Copenhagen in the spring of 1995. The goal of Dogme 95 is fighting 'certain tendencies' in the contemporary film. Dogme 95 is a rescue action! With the passing of time slogans of individualism and liberty led to the appearance of new creations, but they failed to bring about a real change. The New Wave was becoming smoother and smoother, similar to its directors. The New Wave never became stronger than the people connected with it. An antibourgeois film became a bourgeois film, if their theories were based on a bourgeois conception of art. From the very beginning the idea of an author was a bourgeois romantic notion, that is... false!

For Dogme 95 a film is of no individual character!

Today we are flooded with technology which means a final democratization of media. For the first time it is possible for everybody to make a film.

² L. von Trier: *Spowiedź dogmatyka*. Trans. T. Szczepański. Kraków 2000, p. 86.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 196–197.

But the more accessible the media is, the more important avant-garde turns out to be. It is not a coincidence that the word 'avant-garde' possesses military connotations. The answer is a discipline... We have to uniform our films because an individual movie is of decadent character by definition!

Dogme 95 remains in opposition towards an individual film owing to a strict collection of rules, which we called VOWS OF CHASTITY.

In 1960 viewers had enough of exaggeration! In general opinion the film glossed itself to death, but later this *make-up* was smudged with explosive abundance. 'The main task' of a decadent filmmaker consists in deluding the audience. Can we be proud of that? Did the hundred years of film creativity lead us to that? On what conditions can illusions communicate? Is it thanks to a free choice of magical tricks that an artist can make? Predictability (dramaturgy) became a gold calf we dance around. But allowing the inner life of imaginary characters to motivate the action is too complicated and not 'cool' enough. Presently, as it was practiced never before, a superficial action and shallow film are cultivated. The result is meagre. Illusion of pathos and illusion of love.

For Dogme 95 the film is not an illusion!

Today a technological flood dominates, in which a gloss is perceived as a godsend. With the help of new technologies anybody at any time can remove the last remains of truth in a choking grip of sensation. Illusion is something the film can hide behind.

Dogme 95 fights with an illusion-creating film with the help of strict principles which constitute VOWS OF CHASTITY.⁴

Although the Dogme 95 manifesto is not the only or especially popular document in the film world, it undoubtedly strongly affected the film art of the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. Similar documents, including programme manifesto, were published before (during over one hundred-year history of the European cinema over forty such manifestos appeared, among others those of futurism, dada, French New Wave, and also individual outstanding cinema filmmakers⁵), but, observing its authors' professional careers, as well as their successes, it seems to be an extremely effective *know how* in the world of show-business.

Reading the above, one cannot miss the similarities to another "programme manifesto," which, although from our (contemporary) point of view is of rather descriptive and not normative nature, it described the rules of poetic art, shaping its image for over 2,000 years. This document is of course *Poetics* by Aristotle. These lecture notes created over the years by the philosopher of Stagira became the grounds for dramatic writings – especially tragedies – and epic writings. As it was 2,500 years ago, literary rules and their application described by Aris-

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ A. Gwóździ: *Europejskie Manifesty Kina. Antologia*. Warszawa 2006, p. 422.

tole determined the value of tragedy, whether it was “good” or not, contemporary authors, perhaps not consciously, created a programme of the similar content. Nevertheless, the difference concerned the matter. As it was already mentioned, the ancient treatise concerns dramatic writings, understood as a theatrical play, especially tragedy, whereas Dogme 95 refers to a film. Von Trier and Vinterberg most probably unconsciously and intuitively refer to the values described by Aristotle.

In the vow below, echoes of an ancient art tradition can be easily noticed:

I swear to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by Dogme 95:

1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in. (If special props are necessary for the story, the choice of a shooting scene must depend on the place where such props are found.)
2. The sound must never be produced apart from the image or vice-versa. (Thus music should not be used in other cases than such when it really sounds in the film space.)
3. The camera must be handheld. Any movement or mobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The action should not take place where a camera is located, but the camera ought to follow the action of the film.)
4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If the light is too dim for the exposition, the given scene should be removed or a special lamp can be installed on the camera.)
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden.
6. The film must not contain superficial action. (It cannot show murder, weapon and so on.)
7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (It means that the action 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.

Furthermore 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. Hereby I make a vow of chastity.⁶

⁶ L. von Trier: *Spowiedź...*, pp. 197–198.

Aristotle and *The Kingdom*

Except the reference to the cinema and terminology characteristic for it, we can easily observe similarities to the descriptions of literary rules included in *Poetics*.

In a non-uniform and incomplete work by Stagirite, the basic feature of the art of poetry is *mimesis*: epic, tragic and also comic and dithyrambic writings, and to a large extent auletic and kitharistic music have a common feature – they are mimetic arts.⁷ It is imitation and plausibility (also an essential element both in *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*) that almost all points of Vows of chastity of Dogme 95 are devoted to.

One of the best movies by von Trier – miniseries *The Kingdom* – shows in a most explicit and convincing way the application of artistic means described by Aristotle. The Kingdom is the name of a hospital in Copenhagen which was built on the site of swamps where canvas were bleached. Later bleachers were replaced by doctors. However, they committed a sin of pride (*hybris*), taking too much confidence in science and neglecting spiritual matters, that is why the kingdom gate is opened again. Each episode of the series starts with such a poetic introduction. According to its authors' original assumption, it was supposed to consist of three seasons four episodes each. Thus, its action is complete, with a clear plot, which should have, as Aristotle wishes, "a length which can be easily embraced by the memory."⁸ It tells a story of a girl murdered by her father. Being the hospital director, pretending to treat tuberculosis, he was giving poisonous chlorine to the unwanted child, which was a direct cause of little Mary Jansen's death. Her spirit comes from Svanson's zone (between a real world and the world of the dead), asking for help. The whole action concentrates on this plot and its construction and uniformity refer to the one of *Poetics*: "[...] imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole."⁹ That is what the action in *The Kingdom* by von Trier looks like. Not a single episode or a character appear accidentally. The director elaborately and extremely precisely combines all elements and a viewer must be really careful, because the slightest distraction will make the whole image obscure. All elements: episodes, development of the plot and action, result from one another and mutually

⁷ Arystoteles: *Poetyka*. In: Idem: *Retoryka. Retoryka dla Aleksandra. Poetyka*. Translation, introduction and comments by H. Podbielski. Warszawa 2009, p. 316.

⁸ L. von Trier: *Spowiedź...*, p. 328.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 329.

intermingle creating a perfect and integral whole, as the Stagirite wishes. In his opinion, the worst plot is the one in which “episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence. Bad poets compose such pieces by their own fault, good poets, to please the players; for, as they write show pieces for competition, they stretch the plot beyond its capacity, and are often forced to break the natural continuity. But again, tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect. [...] Plots, therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best.”¹⁰

Exactly the same opinion we can encounter in the TV series in question. Perfectly combined elements of plot, action and protagonists’ characters (understood as those of Aristotle nature) not only evoke pity and fear, but also shock a viewer who has a chance to experience specific *catharsis*. The brightest protagonist of spotless character, although with life “entanglements” is doctor Judith Petersen. Deserted by a man who was the love of her life, she discovers that she is pregnant. The initial happiness is diminished by an abnormal growth of the fetus, which causes premature birth of a large, deformed body of a man. After leaving his mother’s womb, he grows too quickly and is endangered with quick death. Not knowing what is going on, the frightened doctor, asks Mrs Drusse¹¹ for help. The psychic explains that the man she loves is the spirit of doctor Aage Kruger, who, some years ago, murdered his daughter – Mary, and the boy that was born is her brother. Judith, who being still pregnant, decided on an injection fatal for the fetus, thinks the world of her born child. She does not mind that the child, whom she calls Little Brother, is the demon’s son and bears both good and evil in himself. She struggles for every moment of her son’s life. Soon after his birth he grows enormously, his bones break and his skin is torn. Realizing that he is going to die soon, the boy asks his mother to start a game which is to consist in telling each other the subsequent years of his life. He knows that only in this way he will manage to “live” his first day at school and play with his peers. Only in this game he has a chance to be a “normal” child. Nevertheless, Little Brother realizes that he will die soon, and being unable to bear suffering, he asks his mother to shorten his tortures. The spirits, so far inhabiting the Kingdom together with him, disappear, because they anticipate a great evil, a demon approaching. Aage Kruger enters the room and offers Judith an agreement: The boy’s soul in return for his health. As each mother, doctor Petersen decides to make a pact with a devil in order to save the child’s life, however Little Brother fails to agree. He knows that the price is a victory over the evil, and he, as his mother, wants to be good. Seeing the boy’s

¹⁰ Arystoteles: *Poetyka...*, p. 331.

¹¹ Already in the first episode Mrs Drusse plays the role of Cassandra and says: “He is very close, a little, hairy... dreadful man.” It is crucial that at the moment those words are uttered, only doctor Petersen knows she is pregnant.

heroism, Judith complies with his request and unties his overgrown body from a special construction. Not only do the boy's bones break and crack, but also the tormented mother's heart is broken and it bleeds as does his body.

Watching these incredible scenes, a viewer, identifies himself both with the child and mother and feels a fear mixed with compassion and emotion. Von Trier also applies other measures meant to arouse pity and fear, following the Stagirite's concept. Aristotle mentions two such ways: scenery or a sequence of events arousing the mentioned emotions, when the first measure is less artistic and requires additional expenses and the other one "is the better way, and indicates a superior poet."¹²

Another feature of the plot which characterizes *The Kingdom* by von Trier, and which was also described in *Poetics*, is its complexity. According to Aristotle "a complex action" is one in which the change is accompanied by such reversal, or by recognition, or by both. Change of fortune and recognition should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action.¹³

An example of a complex plot in the series may be the described above scene of the tormented mother and suffering son. According to Aristotle's definition of change of fortune, that is a reversal of a situation,¹⁴ is the change of mother's feeling towards her son: from aversion and hatred to absolute love. Recognition, that is a change from ignorance to knowledge¹⁵ is understanding who her son is and why it all happens. In his whole work von Trier oscillates between two types of recognition mentioned by Aristotle: (1) recognition based on syllogistic understanding: if Mary was Aage Kruger's daughter in 1919, Little Brother is now Aaga's son, than Mary and Little Brother are siblings but in another dimension and space, and not time, and (2) recognition resulting from the situation itself, "because the startling discovery is made by natural means" (*Poetyka* 1455a): Judith learns that Aage Kruger is Mary's father and murderer, she recognizes in the picture that it is the same man she has the child with, or rather his demon, thus, her son will also be half demonic. This type of recognition was considered superior by Aristotle.

The scene described above does not lack pathos understood by Aristotle as "painful or pernicious event, such as directly presented murder, suffering, injuries and other things of this nature."¹⁶ Summing up as the philosopher of Stagira claims: "A perfect tragedy should be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan, it should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear."¹⁷

¹² Arystoteles: *Poetyka...*, pp. 336–337.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 332.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 333.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 331.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 334–335.

The scene in question also confirms another rule described by Aristotle, that is the rule of tragedy and tragic character: “such character is a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty.”¹⁸ In *The Kingdom* it is doctor Petersen. A doctor with no distinguishing features, of average appearance, seeking acceptance in a man’s arms, petrified with the awareness of the child she is going to have and trying to kill, she makes a mistake. She enters into a relationship with an unsuitable man. A seemingly banal situation, it can be said that even quite common, and perfect for Aristotle.

Other issues of extreme importance, as far as tragedy is concerned, is – in the Philosopher from Stagira’s opinion – the way of starting and finishing action and the types of tragedy. While the first part is obvious for *The Kingdom*, it is worth devoting some time to a question which of the four types of tragedy the Danish director’s work belongs to. According to Aristotle, the types of tragedy depend on the number of its main components (*Poetyka* 1455b–1456a):

1. Complex tragedy – its characteristic features are reversal of the situation and recognition.
2. Pathetic tragedy – based on exposition of the third component, i.e. pathos, directly shown suffering.
3. Ethical tragedy – tragedy of a double solution – happy ending for the good and miserable for the evil.
4. Spectacular tragedy – tragedies whose plot is set in Hades could have been frightening due to masks and costumes of the underground world.¹⁹

The work by von Trier combines three of those components: complex, pathetic and spectacular one.

While the mentioned means, analogies and similarities to Aristotle’s concept of tragedy might be found in other trends of film school – the whole performance art, also films, took a lot from the antique examples – one element is definitely in favour of *The Kingdom*. It is the chorus. Just like it distinguished tragedy from dialogues or mimes, it distinguishes the Danish director’s series from other films, even those based on the Dogme 95 manifesto. Aristotle wanted a poet to regard chorus as one of the actors. “It should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action” (*Poetyka* 1456a). Similarly to the work by von Trier, the chorus consisting of two washers working in a hospital kitchen appears on average three times during each episode. They are teenagers with the Down syndrome who metaphorically comment the events. Their appearance, similarly to a change in time signature in a tragedy, is accompanied by change in music and atmosphere. The viewer is introduced to another reality and has an impression of participating in something really significant and eventful.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 335.

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 346–347.

The whole von Trier's series is based on the play of strong contrasts: polar juxtaposition of the protagonists' characters (good or evil), "ordinary" atmosphere of the plot and pathetic role of the chorus, beauty and ugliness, funny and shocking situations, peaceful and disturbing events. This juxtaposition evokes such extremely strong emotions in a viewer (among others due to the fact that they are so probable – based on *mimesis*), that he easily identifies with them. Viewers have an opportunity to experience unique *catharsis*, in spite of the fact that *The Kingdom* is "merely" a TV series. A low form of art, nevertheless, it becomes compelling and acquires new quality due to application of "classic" (so-called antique) means of expression.

Also other films by the Danish director refer to the formula of an ancient tragedy and the means applied by this genre, among others *Dogville* or *Medea*, which also refers to an ancient myth as far as the content is concerned.

Although almost thirty years have passed since the Dogme 95 manifesto was published, it seems that its authors comprised universal content in it. Rebellious against showiness, negligence, sloppiness and gloss, they suggested coming back to something that is most crucial in art – its original beauty that can be achieved by following nature, that is *mimesis*. The former master – Aristotle and his "manifesto" – *Poetics* lost none of their relevance. A return to his rules of a "standard" tragedy and their application also in other forms of performance art always guaranteed a success of an artist who referred to them. A viewer, tired and fed up with extravagant special effects and all their variations of the same highest degree of intensity, gladly returns to films which compel him to a reflection, which make him notice that silence is also a means of expression, sometimes "louder" than rumble, scream, flash and uninterrupted flow of words.