Organising the illumination of the filmmaking process: The experimental contribution of *The Five Obstructions*.

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Abstract

The paper analyses *The Five Obstructions* (Von Trier, Leth, 2003), a productionist metafilm that illuminates the film production organisational process. A productionist metafilm is a reflexive work that expands on filmmaking's processual dimension to the extent that the frontstage of production might be said to coincide, or tend to coincide, with its backstage. In such a way, it provides a favourable observation spot of the filmmaking process over some of its material components of production and the role of authors and practitioners. Specifically, *The Five Obstructions* provides an organisational model of filmmaking which exceeds the canonical representations of mainstream cinema – but also differs from other metacinematic examples - for its unique capability to frame the exhibition of the productive process as the primary agent of the representation in its constitutive material aspects. Drawing on scholarship focusing on organisational performance, critical management studies and film studies, this article attempts to investigate the extent to which this audiovisual product can provide a contribution that exceeds the limits established by the domain of filmmaking. It is questioned whether it can also generate a deeper understanding of diverse work environment dynamics and promote organisational change. *The Five Obstructions* operates in this direction by inviting the participants to role-play, to exhibit their own role within the filmmaking process. In particular, this film focuses on issues related to co-performed production, leadership, self-management, and disorganisation issues. Finally, it critically problematises the tension between the backstage and frontstage of performances in organisational life.

Keywords: metacinema, film production, backstage, organisational performance, role-play, co-performed production

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Metafilm: a space of investigation for organisational inquiry

This article proposes investigating a productionist metafilm that exposes its own organisational processes: *The Five Obstructions* (Von Trier, Leth, 2003). I label productionist metafilms the reflexive works that expand on filmmaking's processual dimension to the extent that the frontstage of production might be said to coincide, or tend to coincide, with their backstage (Ciccognani, 2018). Productionist metafilms dwell on the particular form of metacinema (Fredericksen, 1979; Siska, 1979), in which authors expound and display their presence as the primary agents of production from a linguistic, technical, and organisational standpoint. However, this category even more decisively addresses reflexive filmmaking patterns (Polan, 1974; Stam, 1992; Ruby, 2005) in which the presence of directors/authors dissolves within the complex folds of the filmmaking process. This occurs on behalf of the crucial emergence of other material aspects of the production process, such as those evidenced by the members and the size of the film crew, the means of production, the budget, the environmental conditions, and the narrative constraints of the screenplay. In fact, it is proposed that productionist metafilms serve to reveal and construct a self-reflexive form of directorial subjectivity by acknowledging some specific strategic choices operated on the set. However, the emergence of these subjectivities is crucially influenced by the production's material conditions, which shed light on various organisational aspects of filmmaking. It is important to remember that the emergence of such performative and organisational interactions is usually concealed from the façade of mainstream, illusionistic, fictional narration. Yet, it is also essential to distinguish *The Five Obstructions* from other productionist metafilms such as *8½* (Fellini, 1963) and *Le Mépris* (Godard, 1963), which expose the phases of filmmaking production within the narrative construction of fiction stories and therefore provide a less reliable reconstruction of real organisational scenarios.

By contrast, it must be highlighted that many other forms of metafilms do not necessarily expose any organisational pattern, but only linguistic and technical references to the camera's presence or other cinematic artifices without engaging with an in-depth depiction of the various production phases. The reader might be familiar with the constant references to other films made by Tarantino's works: *Django Unchained* (2012), *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019), products exalting the mere presence of the camera within a fictional story or alluding to cinematic voyeurism: *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), *Sex Lies and Videotapes* (Soderbergh, 1989); POV mockumentaries: *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick, Sànchez, 1999), *Cloverfield* (2008); films surrealistically including some metacinematic inserts: *Monthy Python and the Holy Grail* (Gilliam and Jones, 1975) and other manifold metacinematic examples which play with the breaking of the fourth wall and the suspension of disbelief.

All these examples differ from *The Five Obstructions* for Trier and Leth's movie expounds an interplay between the artist commissioned to create a piece of art and the person who has commissioned it and therefore exalts the material and processual context in which the actual movie is made. So, the film has the advantage of bringing this relationship to life and allows the observer an engaging experience with scenarios that convey clear managerial and organisational aspects. Indeed, this is precisely the connection that makes this product invaluable for organisational inquiry. Namely, it provides an in-depth self-representation of how a communicative and creative interaction between co-workers occurs, along with their preliminary agreements and the phases of achieving different tasks. One can agree that these elements are transversal to many work environments. Indeed, these scenarios can mirror other professional collaborations in which they entail a specific exchange based on a commission of

a product or artwork or wherever there is an interaction based on the agreement, development and achievement of a task. An attentive viewing of this film could benefit app programmers and the people commissioning apps, teachers and students, architects and people commissioning houses, or even research and development departments and the upper-level executives of a firm.

Specifically, *The Five Obstructions* operates in this direction by inviting the participants to role-play, to exhibit their own role within the filmmaking process. It reveals the "behind the scenes" of film organisation, displaying aspects of co-performed production, leadership, self-management, disorganisation, and the overall coordination of human resources and production. This privileged access can thus allow researchers, film producers, practitioners, even University lecturers and students, managers or human resource development (HRD) professionals and employees to watch how filmmaking practice observes its workplace logistics and funnel these insights back to their organisational realms. Therefore, I argue that an analysis of reflexive performances in *The Five Obstructions* not only expounds details of unorthodox filmmaking practices but can also generate a deeper understanding of the internal dynamics of diverse work environments and promote organisational change. Thus, this article investigates how this audiovisual product can provide a model for film and other working sector practitioners to reflect upon their performative roles and reorient them towards creating a productive climate of mutual collaboration based on effective communication and creative inspiration.

Organisational performances in narratives and films

There is a clear-cut benefit for organisational analysis in migrating film studies and utilising productionist metafilms showing practitioners' performances as valuable sources of critical knowledge. Following Mangham and Overington (1987), recognising oneself as an actor in a drama allows the emergence of narrative forms that regulate intersubjective interactions and therefore enables the possibility of rethinking them. They crucially highlight: 'A theatrical event is a communication between actors and audience in the context of a meta-communication about the framing of this event as a theatrical staging of action' (Ibid.: 209). Indeed, the invitation to role-play engenders a different exhibition of work performances, opening up possibilities for people to reflexively observe themselves and each other in a new light. In the same way, practitioners from and beyond the filmmaking industry can watch in a film like *The Five Obstructions* the performances of two people dramatising their roles. Viewers can thus reflexively identify with them and rethink their strategies of communication and task assignment. These assumptions feed into the conception of the workplace as a living system, an arena of conflict that urges the employment of theatre and performative art as a means to reflect upon the various models of organisational life (Khandwalla, 1988).

The accounts presented in the last section draw on the centrality of the notion of performance, impression management, and the crucial distinction between frontstage and backstage in organisational life, inaugurated by Goffman (1990). 'We often find a division into back region, where the performance of a routine is prepared, and front region, where the performance is presented' (Ibid.:152). This division highlights a tension between backstage and frontstage in performances that becomes more visible where practice-led experimentation and role-play enhance individual and group strategic gestures, words, and actions in a given work environment. Goffman's philosophical framework benefits from the insights raised by the concept of dramatism in Burke's work (1969), where individuals are observed as actors in order to dig out their motivation in action, discourse and relations. Many authors have delved into this field, attaching different theoretical nuances to the core of the discussion. By way of example, drawing on Austin's speech act theory, Haseman (2006) has framed the increasing importance of practice-led research as a valuable methodological tool for experimentation across the arts, humanities, and social sciences within the newly coined research paradigm of

performative research. Within the array of perspectives falling into the "Performance turn" label, Peterson and Langellier (2006) have maintained that performances resituate narratives as an object of study through a critical problematisation of their entanglement with discursive, communicative, and material contexts. Interestingly, their critique of the socio-cultural and economic field in which these narratives circulate draws on the philosophical insights of Merleau-Ponty, (1964) around bodily mechanisms of self-recognition through senses, Benjamin (2006), concerning the experience of the storyteller as conditioned by the material conditions of contemporary times and Foucault (1972), focusing on the analysis of the ordering of discourses. Peterson and Langellier's study considers narrative as "a multilevel system of strategies and tactics" (2006: 211) and thus frames the complex role of performance analysis. The authors maintain that the analysed narratives and their showcased performances are always caught in the power relations and are constrained by the situational and material conditions in which they arise.

This crucially affects the way we present ourselves. The higher the hiatus between the back stage and front stage of our performance, the higher the pressures exerted by the formalism of the external environment, the hierarchical structure, and the behavioural protocols affecting our gestures, words and actions. These philosophical and analytical considerations have crucially influenced my critical understanding of reflexive performances in *The Five Obstructions* and underpinned how its self-reflexive narratives can illuminate the otherwise concealed interactions and material conditions of film production on the movie set.

The way this film subverts and diverts the classical linguistic, technical, and organisational patterns opens up the emergence of unpredictable, innovative solutions and critical reflections, which focus on cinema as a form of organised work and provide insights into the ways in which organisations work. Hill and Lloyd (2018) have problematised the usage of "provenance", typically used to describe the history and ownership of a particular artefact by re-employing it as a methodological tool useful to support practitioners' investigation of their own practice. Likewise, reflexive performances in productionist metafilms affirm and encourage the practitioner/inquirer's understanding and knowledge of their practice. Hence, this article suggests a similar form of migration of an established analytical tool for film analysis into a new realm of organisational inquiry in which the film, as an artefact, can display the traces of its making of.

The attribution of meaningful value to artworks and films in describing real organisational scenarios owes a debt to the epistemological rethinking operated by many authors in Critical Management Studies. Of great influence to this field has been the idea that a postmodern approach to organisational reflexivity should recognise the primacy of an ontology of *becoming* (Chia, 1996), which acknowledges a reality in constant flux and transformation. Following this, it has been discussed how various texts and narratives can provide meaningful accounts for organisational inquiry as reflective of societies and working environment dynamics subject to continuous mutation. Some of these studies focus on how narrative knowledge in general (Czarniawska, 1995; 1998) but also fictional stories from literature (De Cock, 2000), cinema and other products of popular culture (Hassard and Holliday, 1998; Rhodes and Westwood, 2007; Rehn, 2008; Rhodes and Lilley, 2013) can enhance our understanding of work-life and offer insights into the way the image of institutions, organisations and the functioning of workplace dynamics have been conceptualised and critiqued. Other scholars have explored some theoretical and methodological reasons for using narrative approaches and storytelling to reflect upon the implementation of management practices within workplaces (Rhodes, 2001). These examples highlight how the cinematic medium can be a privileged means to access the processual and performative dimension of filmmaking practice, and they form a theoretical and epistemological foundation for the present analysis. However, they primarily focus on broader aspects of organisational activity and rarely provide an in-depth dissection of particular

organisational aspects in specific films, with a few exceptions, which have influenced the current analysis. These exceptions approach leadership and masculinity, evil corporate bosses (Rhodes and Westwood, 2007; Edwards et al. 2015), leadership and trade unionism or the representation of management gurus (Hassard and Holliday, 1998) within audiovisual products such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* (Mamet, 1992), *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), *The Angry Silence* (Green, 1960) *Batman The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) and others.

Many researchers argue for the significance of film as an important source of knowledge about organisational life regarding some specific themes. Some of these studies particularly explore the various depictions of the military subject within popular culture (Godfrey, 2009) or investigate the figure of the manager within cultural representations through questions of power and gender (Czarniawska and Gustavsson, 2008; Panayiotou, 2010; 2011). Indeed, it has been suggested that popular culture texts are actually more critical and questioning than management textbooks and often produce a critique or counter-cultural vision of organisations (Parker, 2006). This last point feeds the idea that films and TV series can truly shed light on the dark side of organisations and infuse an alternative understanding of managerial practices and professional contexts. Finally, akin to these investigations are other examples of research focusing on how management topics resonate through film industry products (Sloane, 2003; Bell, 2008) or proposing an overarching compendium of studies on visual organisation (Bell et al., 2014). These researches demonstrate how the high correspondence between management and audiovisual products provides a conceptual and practical basis for films to be potentially useful to practitioners to better understand and criticise their own roles within their work environment. In this sense, these studies have provided invaluable thematic analysis models that have inspired the current investigation. But they also outline a gap in the knowledge concerning the individuation within films of particular aspects such as the tension between front stage and back stage, role-play, self-management and disorganisation; themes towards which this analysis is oriented.

However, Wood (2015) has extensively advocated the importance of filmmaking as a valuable tool for organisational research by opening a "space of praxis" which bridges the separation between academic study and artistic practice. In addition, he has highlighted how audiovisual products evoke aesthetic qualities that provide evidence to researchers of the wide breadth of bodily, affective, and cognitive aspects circulating in a given organisational space (Wood et al., 2018). Elsewhere, it has been pointed out how Art Movies create shocks to the spectators' perception via their estranging affects, and hence, they infuse the complexity and diversity of organisational contexts (Letiche et al., 2019). I argue that no product is more estranging and unsettling than a metafilm like *The Five Obstructions,* with its utter subversion of the ordinary canons of representation and its provocations questioning the taken-for-granted reception of filmmaking practice and organisational praxis.

All these examples have employed a post-structuralist or postmodern framework and, thus, add to the level of organisational inquiry the contribution of critical approaches such as discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972) and deconstruction (Derrida, 1978), which pay particular attention to how knowledge is produced within the discrepancy between the signifier and the signified (Butler, 1990) in the context of textual and filmic analysis. In other words, these philosophical approaches attempt to illuminate meaningful processual aspects usually kept obscure or made less visible within cultural representations. These arguments provide legitimacy to how reflexive films like *The Five Obstructions*, with their tendency to expose the making of, can be read as spaces of organisational praxis and, on account of this analytical precondition, can shed light upon practitioners' performances and the commonly hidden material conditions of production.

To conclude, the theoretical contribution of the literature criticised in this whole section situates the researcher's position in the spot that points to how narratives, texts and films incorporate management themes. I argue that the original contribution of this analysis is to relocate the role of the critic to the position of scrutinising how cinema observes itself as a form of organised work and, therefore, generating insights that can exceed its specific domain. Observed through this light, productionist metafilms stimulate theoretical and practical reflections upon cinema as a form of organised work and generate insights into how organisational life experiments with innovative solutions and promotes change.

De Fem Benspænd (The Five Obstructions): Denmark, 2003, 90 min.
Directors: Lars von Trier, Jørgen Leth

Synopsis

The *Five Obstructions* is the first documentary approach undertaken by Lars von Trier. This film has provenance in an earlier short film by Jørgen Leth (*The Perfect Human*, 1967), which Trier admires and is keen to attempt a remake. Together with Leth, Trier takes on the task of challenging conventional ways of documentary and film production. Trier's idea is to authoritatively challenge Leth to devise five remakes of this film. Still, each time, Trier will put forward obstructions, constraining Leth to rethink the original film's story and characters. Leth must deal with his colleague's limitations, commands and prohibitions in an atmosphere of role-play and co-performed production. In the final output, we see edited together the spaces in which the behind-the-scenes took place, Leth's execution of the 'obstructions' commanded by Trier, and the final cut of the actual remakes.

Re-approaching the human between freedom and constraints

The Five Obstructions takes shape from a precise theoretical formulation. It expounds a set of linguistic, technical, and organisational rules deriving from the renowned Dogma 95 Manifesto. Dogma 95 was intended as a "Vow of Chastity", a guidebook for filmmakers containing a series of restricting practical rules, e.g., "shooting must be done on location" or "the camera must be hand-held" etc. (Von Trier & Vinterberg, 2000). Along similar lines, in 2000, Trier launched the "Dogumentary Manifesto", which prescribed some additional norms for documentaries, among which: 'all the locations in the film must be revealed' and 'the beginning of the film must outline the goals and ideas of the director' (Stevenson, 2002: 199). This last point is definitely the central constructive tenet of "Dogumentary", moulding the aesthetic form of *The Five Obstructions* as a "Help Jørgen Leth project". From the beginning, Trier points at this target by exerting a very authoritative attitude, which sparks an atmosphere of instability and eventually surfaces a set of intimate revelations about both participants (Perkins, 2010). So, the main objective, or the core of Trier's intentions, is made clear in the movie.

Trier's overlapping leadership styles

From a behavioural perspective, Leth's laissez-faire managerial approach (Eagly et al., 2003) is bluntly contrasted by Trier's more convoluted, "diabolical" approach (Willerslev et al., 2017), which presents evident authoritarian features. Since the film's beginning, the imposition of tight organisational and technical obstructions introduces a regime within which Leth's insubordination under Trier's authoritarian stance manifests. More specifically, Trier's authoritarian attitude presents transactional and transformational leadership characteristics akin to Bernard Bass' theorisation (2009). Indeed, in the scene where Trier evaluates the results of the first remake in Cuba, he operates a performative approach strictly connected to the practice and rhetoric of punishment and reward, which is operationally typical of transactional leadership. This is exemplified when Trier rewards his follower with a carrot: "Well, Jørgen, so

far you have passed the test. I'm pleased to hear it. So, I've made us a little snack and a little vodka".

Conversely, the transactional character emerges when a disappointed Trier announces the imminent punishment for violating one of his obstructions during the production of the second remake in Bombay, even on account of casual, moody reasons. "We haven't achieved what I wanted. So, I have to punish you somehow". This is the particular moment in which Trier establishes his arbitrary authority towards Leth (*Figure 1*). In relation to transactional leadership, I argue that he also appears to perform the characteristics outlined within the idea of "Management by Exception" (Ibid.: 624). The particular form of Management by Exception has to be intended here as a "corrective transaction" directed to punish or discipline a subordinate's behaviour or operation. The main strategy exerted by Trier consists of using such rationale as a subtle weapon to disturb Leth's incipient creative initiatives during the discussions prior to the beginning of each remake production. By way of example, when they are discussing the first remake to shoot in Cuba, Leth starts to disclose how he intends to operate. He proposes to construct a set, perhaps using panels and other props. At this precise moment, Trier abruptly irrupts and denies it by imposing the last technical hindrance, "NO SET", along with other obstructing rules. These segments highlight the importance of this productionist metafilm in highlighting the authoritarian atmosphere in which certain transactional traits of leadership can be identified. In particular, Trier's authoritative style instils an atmosphere of instability and unpredictability, which eventually provides a set of intimate revelations about both participants and provide insights into how the organisation of the filmmaking process works.

From another point of view, it has been clarified elsewhere that the compliant reception of the subordinate Leth minimises the charge of exploitation. It depicts Trier's image in a more sarcastic guise and, consequently, smooths his initial arrogance (Dwyer, 2008). This mitigating aspect has also been noted by Perkins (2010), who highlighted how Trier posed himself as a deliberate auteur in the attempt to break Leth's minimalist or mannerist style of *The Perfect Human* by allowing the emergence of his inner truth.

Figure 1: This is how a tyrannical commissioner looks like

In fact, Leth's hands-off, observational methodology, so evident in *The Perfect Human*, is contrasted by Trier's manipulative, hyper-controlling approach (Ibid.: 153). In that, Trier appears to embrace also some aspects related to transformational leadership. A clearly defined objective of the movie can be summarised with the "Help Jørgen Leth project", or like Trier announces right after watching the result of the first remake in Cuba: "My plan is to proceed from the perfect to the human". This represents the "higher purpose" for the project or the attempt by Trier as a transformational leader to set challenging expectations and address his follower's sense of self-worth (Bass, 2009). But the overall atmosphere is also tinged with mischievous sarcasm, for Trier declares his hope that Leth will eventually produce "crap" with his attempted remakes. However, it is crucial to highlight that Trier performs the role of the charismatic leader who should inspire the right motivation by producing a noteworthy

intellectual stimulation that broadly reflects the characteristics of Bass' idea of transformational leadership (Perkins, 2010). But even more interesting is how these transformational features are entangled with equally evident "transactional" qualities – if not authoritarian - having Bass (2009) originally distinguished these two categories in an entirely separated manner. This aspect depicts a more complex, multifaceted performance of leadership within the film and further contributes to illuminating the existing hierarchical roles occurring during the cinematic organisation.

The interaction Trier/Leth: a gateway to the process of production

On a different note, Hatch has argued that Trier and Leth's efforts only apparently focus on exposing organisational performance. On the contrary, the film restrictively, yet brilliantly, explores how the managerial obstructions and a general downplay of organisation would spring up creativity (Hatch, 2011). Although in the film, we mainly observe the heated debates between Leth and Trier: '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' (Ibid.:205). None of these people is apparently shown in *The Five Obstructions*. However, I partially comply with this overall interpretation. In fact, I observe that there is a higher focus on organisational performance than can be admitted at first glance.

One can agree with the fact that the lack of details about the logistics and minute technical aspects of the remakes does not pay the promise of rendering an overarching exposure of the productive machinery. Nevertheless, the focus on the directors' interplay is straightforward, and it essentially allows the emergence of an authorial dialogue over filmmaking, which shows an unprecedented form of performative interaction. How else would we 'see' work happening without the impressions of the bodies performing it? (*Figure 2*). My argument is that the exposure of the ways in which filmmakers operate provides both an insight into filmic organisational life and has the potential to contribute to broader agendas of organisational inquiry because these examples illuminate the complex, overlapped forms of material production performed and endured on the scene. In addition, *The Five Obstructions* opens up an intertextual dialogue between different films about the nature of remakes as aesthetic extensions, or the existence of productionist lines of flight deriving from a matrix/film. This aspect would already reveal more details about filmmaking organisation than some critics are prone to acknowledge.

Intriguingly, Ponech (2008) already underpinned some features shared by *The Five Obstructions* and *Chronique d'un Été* (Morin and Rouch, 1961). The author underscored how the pairs Morin/Rouch and Trier/Leth similarly aimed to conduct an experiment that brought them to "mingle with subjects". In this sense, the collaborative interaction exposed throughout the film, between the actual preparation and the material production of each remake, becomes precisely the primary source of insights for our investigation of organisational performance. Even though the main effect produced by Trier's constraints is that of interrupting Leth's artistic pace and his stylistic mannerism, the obstructing process gradually reveals that the actual project is to refocus on Leth's human side and to revamp his intellectual and artistic crisis. This aspect links the "higher purpose" set by Trier as a transformational leader with a subtle psychotherapeutic intent. Yet, this sophisticated operation functions only inasmuch as co-performatively produced with Leth.

Figure 2: The steady confrontation between Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth

Leth's way: the quest for self-management and disorganisation

Indeed, Leth's supposed creative problems could be addressed 'through a therapeutic process aimed at bringing some of the tacit or unconscious dimensions of individual style to conscious awareness' (Hjort, 2008b: 24). Yet, the emergence of this therapeutic domain is also clearly highlighted by Trier: "It's similar to therapy…Why go, if you don't give the therapist the cards? My plan is to proceed from the perfect to the human. That's my agenda. I wish to 'banalise' you. By finding things that hurt. The soft spots". Therefore, it is crucial to underscore how the path from the general austerity and composure of *The Perfect Human* towards a barer form of cinematic expression is for Trier parallel to the process of Leth's humanisation. However, in an interview, Leth expressed his aversion to the word "therapy" during the process (Lin, 2010). He claimed it was rather an issue to put oneself at risk, take chances, and try to explore the possibilities within the question. Leth has also clarified in what terms this refocus on his human side has been precisely engendered by the interactive process with Trier. 'He knows that I like to work in a place that lies somewhere in between constraint and freedom. He knows that I often wish to let go and lose control in the middle of a film shoot. That is part of my practice. I like to see what happens when I do that sort of thing, when I invite chance to play a role in the process' (Hjort, 2008a: 142).

Beyond therapy, Leth's words rather reveal a genuine resistance to Trier's imposition and the implicit demand of a more unleashed form of self-management. Plus, he doesn't conceal how disorganisation has been the main driver guiding the intense role-play and co-performed production experimented during the shooting. Or, better, the role-play and co-performed production are precisely the expedients that open up a breach and allow the emergence of multifaceted forms of leadership - authoritarian, transactional and transformational - but also the substantial degree of leeway to reclaim the right to self-manage in a less regulated way during the unfolding of this *sui generis* professional interaction. This is one of the primary effects through which *The Five Obstructions* contributes to illuminating film production and broad organisational inquiry.

Unfolding the obstructions

According to Leth, his original short film represents a critique of traditional Danish social documentaries (Lie, 2008). In that, *The Perfect Human* would recall the TV commercials of the time, which conveyed the injunction towards perfectionism or the adherence to the standardised idea of the perfect consumer. Trier's intent to set technical obstructions, as a producer or a manager would perhaps do, implicitly aims at uncovering the sterile mannerism of the original work. In the first obstruction, Leth must deal with some very unusual requests: no shot has to last more than twelve frames, the questions posed by the voice-over in *The Perfect Human* have to be answered, and the remake must take place in Cuba with no artificial set apart from the original environment. As already said, during the setting of the obstructions for the first

remake, I pinpointed how every attempt by Leth to establish a friendly and constructive dialogue ends up with Trier imposing an obstruction, which takes direct inspiration from Leth's disclosures. Here, the hidden message is: "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law." As suggested by Raffnsøe (2011), Trier's obstructions represent a *unicum*, for they display the possibilities, challenges, obstructions, and pitfalls of self-management. In point of fact, the performance of self-management here unfurls through a painful, struggling experience.

Performing the role of a collaborative film director

The hardest challenge faced by Leth was during the shooting of the first remake in Cuba, where no shot should have been longer than twelve frames. Leth declared that he had plenty of time before the shooting, half-year to prepare it but only one week to shoot it. There were 1200 cuts at the end of the working days (Kaufman, 2004). The combination of the exotic location and the injunction for the voice-over to provide answers to the questions posed in *The Perfect Human* results in a frantic but well-paced exposition of some themes of the original film transposed in the Cuban atmosphere. In the first preparing scenes, we attest to the selection of the actors: a local dancer, a "true Cuban man", and another woman. The location is an antique building, which shows the signs of time and provides a textural grain coherent with the rest of the images (*Figure 3*).

Figure 3: The "perfect humans" transfiguration in the Cuban remake

It has been argued that the first remake instils reflections on the gendered issues involved in the filmmaking choices and reflects upon the contaminating intrusion of a European authorial stance during the investigation of the particular geographical context of Cuba (Koutsourakis, 2015). However, I believe that Leth's cameo within this first short movie is more playfully performative than meta-critical of the abovementioned themes. This is due to the evidence of preparatory scenes regarding the location scouting and actors' recruitment when we observe Leth informally jesting with his collaborators. That is probably why he self-ironically included himself next to the Cuban dancer within some of the 12 frame shots. So, Leth's self-inclusion within the first remake in Cuba should instead be read in the context of performative role-play, which highlights an empathic or highly collaborative directorial subjectivity. However, the sequences showing the preparation before the shooting should be read dialectically with the corpus of images explicitly pertaining to the first remake. The organisational, propaedeutic scenes, namely location scouting and actors' recruitment, are not only present in the final editing of *The Five Obstructions* (*Figures 4, 5*) but also resonate within the short film shot in Cuba. All these self-reflexive elements of cinematic construction appear to disclose a significant

aspect of the production process and strictly, almost redundantly, refer to the utterance: "This is how we made the first remake based in Cuba". In these scenes, we observe how the director truly "mingles with subjects" in an atmosphere of co-performed production, which offers a close insight into how the coordination of human resources and production occurs on the film set.

Figures 4 & 5: Some organisational details of the Cuban remake offered by the final editing of *The Five Obstructions*

An empathic, transformational "semi-follower"

The Cuban episode is definitely the remake preferred by Trier: "It was like watching an old Leth's film," he confesses. However, his swift endorsement fades out with the proposal of the second obstruction. Leth will have to shoot a remake in the "most miserable place on earth". So, the process of his "humanisation", or Trier's high purpose as a transformational leader, continues by commanding him to shoot a perfect human gourmet meal in Bombay. This time, Leth will be the performing actor, the suited-up man eating his sumptuous dinner in the midst of poverty. The central obstruction consists of not showing it, so Trier's suggestion is to provoke an emotional reaction without really seeing what caused it. As Leth declares in the film: "We wanted to minimize the distance between the perfect and the human". For this purpose, Leth ideates the expedient of locating a transparent screen behind the meal scene in order to partially show the people's poor conditions by contrast (*Figures 6, 7*).
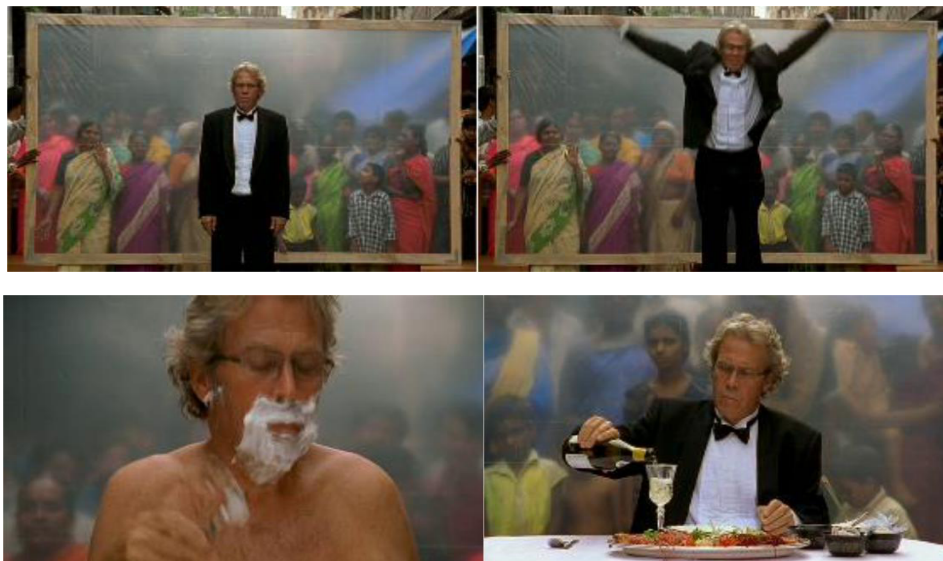
Figures 6 & 7: Leth acts, jumps, shaves and consumes his sumptuous meal while observed by casual bystanders

In the final effect, the transparent screen mainly functions as a diaphragm between Leth's elegance and the overwhelming, spectral misery. What is striking about the short film in Bombay is Leth's emotional reaction prior to the actual shooting. In the location-scouting scene, we see a woman with her baby approaching Leth's car to ask for money (*Figure 8*). The camera

lingers on Leth for a long time, highlighting the sense of distress generated by the woman's demands and the sense of guilt supposedly experienced by a wealthy white European man before the blunt appearance of poverty. The very act of handing a few rupiahs to the woman, who asks for more while Leth replies, "I don't have", is counterweighted by the actual remake, which displays him standing in an aseptic yet wealthy atmosphere, opaquely divided by the screen from the poverty of Bombay. On this matter, it has been commented that the Bombay obstruction gets at the heart of postcolonial observation models and winks at the most urgent ethical tasks for documentaries. The focus on ethics is here intended in relation to the responsibility of both practitioners and spectators towards the contents of the products being shot or watched (Lynes, 2010).

But what these scenes mainly account for is how the short film in Bombay echoes an inner turmoil provoked by the overall situation, replete with contradictions and empathic moments promptly recorded by the camera (*Figure 9*). In the following scene, we observe Leth unwinding his feelings, the tears falling from his eyes in the middle of a discussion with a collaborator. The cluster of sequences related to the Bombay remake highlights the tension between the backstage and frontstage of the performance (Goffman, 1990), which emerges where practice-led experimentation and role-play are displayed during the preparation and the actual shooting operated by Leth and his collaborators. Here, the co-performed production is enriched by the interaction with local people, which displays a therapeutic function and therefore aspires to fulfil the higher purpose set by the authoritative-transformational leader of this "Help Jørgen Leth's project". These aspects reveal how, although reluctant to accept Trier's authority, Leth is starting to experience the therapeutic influx and the creative inspiration of Trier's transformational leadership side. But this is only made possible by Leth's partial achievement of Trier's task.

Figures 8 & 9: A woman begging for money and another one sympathising with Leth

Transactional punishments and the ideology of self-management

Once back at Trier's studio to show him this new gem, Leth is severely rebuked for having overlooked one of the obstructions: "Don't show it". When Trier views the result of the experiment abruptly bursts out: "You always try to be too good! This is therapy, not a film competition with yourself". Indeed, he was bound to the strict condition of not displaying anything of that miserable place. Trier wanted to see only the visible effects of Leth's awareness but not the cause that had generated them. Thus, the following command is mischievously transactional, as the punishment consists of shooting a new version of *The Perfect Human* in 2002 without obstructions, with no constraints binding Leth this time. Here, we recognise the quintessence of the hegemonic ideology underlying self-management and horizontal hierarchy with their focus on subordinate empowerment. Around these topics, many scholars have highlighted the relationship between self-management, disciplinary power, and panoptical modes of surveillance (Jackson et al., 2006; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998). The internalisation of control is instilled by overloading subordinates with ethical and practical responsibilities

translated into exploitative forms of empowerment, which are subtly occulted behind a permissive, fair approach put forward as a front.

Namely, as argued elsewhere: 'How is it possible to manage yourself and others productively if freedom and the transcendence of limitations and rules have become the rule?' (Raffnsøe 2011: 177). However, if *The Five Obstructions* contributes to displaying a critique of the implications of self-management, it also winks at a critique of the discourses around film ethics and social responsibility in the work environment. With the process of making Leth hyper-responsible for both the creative solutions and his inner psychological quagmire, we encounter a fertile ground that opens up an authentic, albeit performatively contrasting exchange between individuals who genuinely discuss the responsibilities involving the work ethics of filmmakers' activity and creative cooperation. Because of these aspects, the film provides an experimental contribution that promotes organisational change in the eyes of researchers, film producers, practitioners, and even mainstream managers.

The bottom line is that the transactional punishment, conflicting with the follower's partial "refusal" to accept the limitations, opens up a critique of the exploitative mechanisms of the ideology of self-management. This combination neutralises the subjugating, sterile empowerment of the subordinate and reenables the possibility to perform a more independent form of self-management, allowing the emergence of a disorganised unpredictability and, infusing creative inspiration. This culminates in making an obstruction-free remake in which the ensuing, free-flowing creativity allows Leth to concoct an entirely convincing noir/thriller spin-off of *The Perfect Human*.

Unpredictability, an inspiring value for self-management

Even the technical and visual results of the devious obstructions-free remake are so original that Trier must applaud his pupil. "The trouble is you're so clever that whatever I say inspires you". Then he restates his real diabolical objective: "I'd like to achieve that feeling of a tortoise on its back". That is to say, Trier seeks to reach the point of Leth's maximum destabilisation, to immobilise him and make him unable to develop the instructions of the following brief. Indeed, Trier is rather facetiously disturbed by the fact that the experience of *The Five Obstructions* has gradually modified Leth's thoughts and decisions to the extent of radically changing his own directorial praxis for the better. That would validate *The Five Obstructions* as a convincing didactic instrument operated through a self-reflexive performative process even beyond Trier's therapeutic intent. The achievement of the obstruction-free remake attests to the efficacy of Trier's multi-layered forms of leadership in producing a genuine, straightforward agenda which, in the co-presence of Leth's refusal to entirely subject himself to these limitations, orients his self-management towards a constructive direction.

With the last brief, Trier makes his desperate attempt to induce Leth to create an awful product. "I hope this will be crap". Indeed, the fourth obstruction will be the production of a cartoon of *The Perfect Human.* In the preliminary phases, they both agree about their complete disinterest in this visual solution. Being completely unprepared to face such a peculiar technique, Leth resorts to Bob Sabiston, a cartoon specialist. He visits him, and together, they start to make a selection of plausible visual solutions for the animated film (*Figure 10*). As a result, this fourth movie, shot with the rotoscoping animation technique, combines Leth's first three remakes and the original film.

Figure 10: **Leth examining pictures for the preparation of the animated film**

The themes recall parts of the conversations before the actual production. For instance, Trier's provocation: "I'd like to achieve that feeling of a tortoise on its back". Leth punctually answers this provocation with a sequence showing himself shaving with a turtle slowly getting into the frame (*Figure 11*). Here, Leth seems to ironically allude to the fact that the obstructions have not been pervasive enough to knock him over and leave him unarmed.
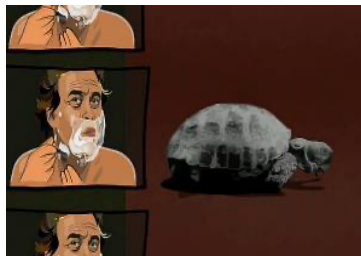

Figure 11: Leth and the turtle

The result is an aesthetic product dense with poetic connotations, which unfolds all the multiple layers of signification underlying the aseptic atmosphere of the original movie. It erupts like a combination of stylistic and thematic patterns that have been willingly or casually employed by Leth in the previous remakes, along with allusions to the conversations between him and Trier. In this sense, the animated cartoon functions as a meta-commentary of the overall film and stresses the importance of how the combination of performative solutions is mainly the result of unpredictable emergencies. In a nutshell, the fourth remake portrays an apology of disorganisation and stresses how practitioners are often subjected to unintentional inputs, mainly generated by the contingent material conditions of production.

Co-performing role-reversal

After the cartoon screening, Trier can only certify the success of the project and proceed to the formulation of the last obstruction. In the last run, Leth will do absolutely nothing apart from being credited as the director while reading, as voice-over, a script written by Trier but enunciated in first-person by Leth himself. The visual materials will be taken from the backstage of *The Five Obstructions*, through which Trier hopefully "captured something human". Trier's script is a final compound of considerations around the philosophical and therapeutic outcomes of the project. With this hazardous role-reversal, 'the last obstruction really scrambles the rules governing the experiment and subverts the metaphor of therapy with all its attendant notions of dependency and hierarchy' (Hjort 2008: 35). The text ironically emphasises that Trier's attempt to psychoanalyse Leth just failed and that nothing emerged from the obsessed investigation of his private sphere. However, while hearing these words, we observe a series of images that contradict the voice-over. They show Leth struggling with the deep emotions experienced during the shooting of the five remakes. We see his tears dropping on the sidewalks of Bombay, his intense satisfaction with the success of the animated movie, all his falls and resurgences. So, the contents expressed by the voice-over result at odds with the displayed

images, generating a contrast that uncloses the ultimate poetic statement of the movie. The last controversial obstruction illustrates once and for all how the whole project is eventually a sheer re-configuration of the ideological, moral and practical presuppositions of *The Perfect Human* operated through a sophisticated form of co-performed production. Here, the contribution to organisational praxis lies in inviting people not to be stubbornly fixated on their individual position when communicating or receiving tasks but to be prone to wear each other's shoes and establish a more genuine form of collaborative partnership.

Concluding remarks

In cinema history, only a few examples accurately display the relationship between the commissioner of a specific product (a painting, photo-reportage, novel, opera, documentary, or film) and the artist asked to create it by following the prescribed rules. Those that might immediately spring to mind are *8½* (Fellini, 1963), *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (Reed, 1965), *Day for Night* (Truffaut, 1973), *Passion* (Godard 1982), *The Draughtsman's Contract* (Greenaway, 1982), *Amadeus* (Forman, 1984), and *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden, 1998). These movies employ the theme of the professional interplay between commissioners and artists as a secondary story plot without engaging in a serious dissection of the performative relationships emerging during the filmmaking process. From a slightly different perspective, other works have attempted to highlight the primary importance of close, nearly symbiotic relationships on the film set. Valuable examples are *Voyage in Time* (Guerra, Tarkovskij 1983), *My Best Fiend* (Herzog, 1999), and the inspiring *Hitchcock/Truffaut* (Jones, 2015), which reports on and expands from the thought-provoking interview by Truffaut to his cinematic idol. However, the main point is that documentaries like *Hitchcock/Truffaut* situate the brainstorming sessions or interviews as separated from the performance of the filmmaking process.

Conversely, at the core of the exposure of the modes of production of *The Five Obstructions* lies the emergence of a revolutionary organisational model of filmmaking, which situates the critical focus of the analysed findings within a well-delimited system of signification. The film overlaps the theme of commissioner/artist dialectics by exposing a series of performative interactions that give access to the various production phases. I have labelled it as a productionist metafilm for it expands and reflects on the processual dimension of filmmaking to the extent that the frontstage of production can be said to coincide, or tend to coincide, with its backstage (Ciccognani, 2018). Drawing on the discussed scholarship, my investigation has demonstrated how reflexive performances in a metafilm like *The Five Obstructions* can illuminate the otherwise concealed interactions and material conditions influencing the film production on the movie set. In this sense, this experiment encourages the practitioner/inquirer's understanding and knowledge of their practice. With this, I do not intend to claim the film's superiority over other texts or sources of knowledge in illuminating organisational inquiry, but that it valuably contains some unique constitutive aspects which evoke elements of organisational performance that are transversal to many working environments.

I have observed how *The Five Obstructions* orients its focus on the directors' interplay, which is essential to allow the emergence of an authorial dialogue over filmmaking. The dialectics of freedom/constraints operating around Leth's figure triggers further reflections upon the overlapping leadership roles performed by Trier, which push Leth to implicitly reclaim a freer self-management and disorganisation. It seems clear that the complex entanglement of authoritative, transactional, and transformational leadership, together with Leth's refusal to accept the therapy and the partial execution of the commands imparted by Trier, generates a positive evolution in the collaboration and inspires Leth's creativity. The actual preparation and shooting of the remakes generate unpredictable connections between the organisation of production, the narratives of psychological turmoil, and the tension between the backstage and

the frontstage of these performances (Goffman, 1990). This operational and psychoanalytical trademark of the "Help Jørgen Leth's project" is directed to unfold the implicit creative insights of a reticent director. Hence, the self-exposure of Leth's performances is exclusively possible through the employment of these mechanisms of self-reflexive, metacinematic productivity.

I have claimed how the film suggests valuable strategies of communication, task assignment, and organisation of co-performed production, which can inspire other professional collaborations that entail an exchange based on the commission of products or artworks, or whoever experiences an interaction based on the agreement, development and achievement of a task. This could be potentially beneficial to many practitioners: app programmers and the people commissioning apps, teachers and students, architects and people commissioning houses or research and development departments and the upper-level executives of a firm. Researchers, film producers and practitioners, and even human resource development (HRD) professionals can watch how filmmaking practice observes its own workplace logistics and funnel these insights back to their organisational realms. They can apprehend the showcased organisational elements and re-employ them to form a productive climate of mutual collaboration based on effective communication and creative inspiration.

To conclude, this metafilm organises the exhibition of the filmmaking process in such an unorthodox way that it inspires a rethinking and, therefore, a transformation of organisational performance operated through co-performed production and role-play. *The Five Obstructions* can, therefore, guide many practitioners to open up unpredictable scenarios of experimentation and scrutiny where unimaginable creative and organisational horizons are yet to emerge.

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