

The Privileged Human: Jørgen Leth and Lars von Trier's *De fem benspænd* ("The Five Obstructions") and Global Inequity

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The Scandinavian countries top international rankings measuring happiness, wealth, gender equality, class equality, social trust, and social mobility.¹ The Nordic welfare model is based on core values of equal opportunity, social solidarity, and security for all.² After the Cold War, the Nordic welfare model appeared to many as the only viable alternative to free market capitalism; *The Economist*, for instance, published a leader in 2013 suggesting that the *New Nordic Model* is the *Next Supermodel* that others need to follow.³ The Scandinavians, then, seem to have succeeded in the proverbial pursuit of happiness that has been the goal of so many Western nations and their citizens.

Yet, at the same time, globalization leads to an increasing awareness of those figuring on the bottom of the same rankings. Through media and immigration, the privileged Scandinavian is confronted with the suffering of others on a daily basis. These global Others suffer through poverty, war, trafficking, labor exploitation, etc. Witnessing this suffering and acknowledging the interconnectedness between one's own privilege and the suffering of others – the child laborer sewing the shirts you buy cheaply, for instance – has brought about a social identity crisis pertaining to what Benedict Anderson calls "the goodness of nations", especially in the Nordic nations.⁴ We find evidence of this crisis in narratives that raise ethical questions and aim at influencing the reader's or viewer's social conscience. In this article I posit the emergence of new, postnational, Scandinavian narratives of privilege and guilt.

These are narratives that are marked by what I call *ScanGuilt*. They are narratives that explore the dark side of privilege and often work rhetorically and aesthetically by engaging and reevaluating cultural heritage – the Nordic classics – in an age of globalization.⁵

From *Perfect* to *Privileged*

A prime *ScanGuilt*-example pointing to a shift in consciousness – within art and politics – is Jørgen Leth and Lars von Trier's documentary *De fem benspænd* (The Five Obstructions, 2003). In this film, Danish film director Jørgen Leth is asked to remake his 1967 film *Det perfekte menneske* (The Perfect Human) five times according to Trier's challenges. *De fem benspænd*, thus, becomes an 87-minute documentary consisting of three major parts: 1) a frame in which Trier and Leth meet at Trier's production company, Zentropa in Avedøre, where Trier sets up rules and obstructions for each film, seemingly inspired by his pseudo-therapeutic conversations with Leth; 2) documentaries showing Leth away from Trier, reacting to the obstructions and producing new versions of his film; and 3) Leth's five art films (the last of which is actually Trier's). Interspersed throughout are clips from the original, *Det perfekte menneske*.

Turning to this original, we find that Leth's 12-minute black-and-white film features a man and a woman (Claus Nissen and Maiken Algren), situated in a white room in which they move around, lie on a bed, get dressed and share a good dinner. The film follows a white-cube-gallery aesthetics, isolating the people from any context. It is a mixture of art film and anthropological study turning poetic not least through Leth's nasal voice-over.

In *Det perfekte menneske*'s opening scene we see a mid shot of the man calmly facing us. The accompanying sound is utter silence, creating a sense of suspense. The man lifts up a pipe and rubs it on both sides of his nose. The gesture strikes us as mechanical and odd. He then turns

to his left, then to his right while lighting the pipe. A sense of symmetry is reinforced, as gestures and movements are carried out on both sides of the body. We hear slight rustling as he stuffs his pipe with tobacco carried in a leather case, then a scratch as he strikes a match. He strikes two matches and is evidently intent on looking straight ahead, not at the tobacco and the matches. Finally he looks down as he inhales a couple of times to light the tobacco. As he begins to smoke his pipe, he exhales deeply, and a melancholy melody played on a clarinet sets in as extradiegetic background music. This melody evolves into the film's auidial leitmotif. The film cuts to the woman. While the man was introduced at eye-level, the woman is introduced from a high angle so that we look slightly down on her. And while the man looked straight at us, we approach the woman from behind in a medium close up as she is absorbed in smoothing, stroking, pulling and throwing back her hair. Slowly she spins around, exposing her face and neck, but never looking straight at the camera. She is clearly presented as a sexual object, a fact reinforced as the film cuts to an extreme close-up of the man's waist as he is now buckling his belt, suggesting a connection between the preening woman and the man having unzipped his pants. At this point Leth's voice-over begins: "Her er mennesket. Her er mennesket. Her er det perfekte menneske. Vi skal se det perfekte menneske i funktion" ("Here is the human. Here is the human. Here is the perfect human. We will see the perfect human functioning").⁶ The camera cuts between the man and the woman; he gets dressed, she continues her preening gestures. A visual rhythm is established as the camera shows medium close ups or close ups of the man and the woman and then zooms in for extreme close ups of various body parts: ears, lips, eyes, feet. Just as some of the verbal sentences are repeated, so too are some of the visual shots. Leth then introduces his white-cube-gallery aesthetics verbally. We see the man in a mid shot walking from our right to left. The shot is looped as Leth narrates:

Det perfekte menneske bevæger sig i et rum. Det perfekte menneske kan bevæge sig i et rum. Rummet er grænseløst og strålende lyst. Det er et tomt rum. Her er ingen grænser. Her er ingen ting.

(Look, the perfect human moving in a room. The perfect human can move in a room. The room is boundless and radiant with light. It is an empty room. Here are no boundaries. Here is nothing.)

The film maintains its erotic (sexist, you could say) gender distinction as the woman, in turn, illustrates moving in the room. Rather than moving right to left, shown from the chest and up, she is shown moving first away from the camera, then towards the camera. Her head and face are left out of the picture; only her body, covered by a light white dress, is shown; the focus is on her hips. One thing the man and the woman have in common according to the voice-over, however, is that they are completely isolated from external circumstances; nothing limits them; everything opens up for their sensual pleasure. They move around, jumping, falling, undressing, dancing, laying down. The man is the main character, carrying out the larger gestures and giving voice to the film's few diegetic monologues. In the end they sit down to share a nice meal accompanied by a good wine. Leth, in voice-over, wonders what the man thinks about:

Tænker det perfekte menneske på det rum det befinder sig i? På den mad det spiser?
På lykken? På kærligheden? På døden? Hvad tænker det perfekte menneske på?

Is the perfect human thinking of the room he is in? The food he eats? Happiness? Love?
Death? What is the perfect human thinking?

Responding to the question, the man recalls a strange vision he has had, he hums a tune over and over, he clicks his fingers while looking straight into the camera and then pronounces:

“Også i dag oplevede jeg noget som jeg håber at kunne forstå om nogle dage” (“Today, too, I

experienced something I hope to understand in a few days”). The film is over, and we as viewers are left with an enigmatic feeling.

The film, as Trier points out, is “en lille perle” (“a little gem”) that leaves us with much to ponder. One may very well start with the title, “Det perfekte menneske” (“the perfect human”). A dictionary definition of perfection suggests something without flaws, lacking nothing, that which is completely satisfying.⁷ The question then becomes: Who is perfect? Are all humans perfect? Are only these two people perfect? Are some people without flaws, lacking nothing and completely satisfying and satisfied? While others are not? Or are some humans even perfect at the expense of other humans?⁸

These are precisely the moral and ethical questions with which Trier confronts Leth 35 years later; they seem to have become more pressing at the turn of the new millennium. He does so in his second obstruction, which is not just any of the five obstructions, but the only one that allegedly trips Leth up – the one that makes him “fall”, the one he fails. Murray Smith describes it as “the bluntest attack of all.”⁹ It is also the main scene of this obstruction that figures on the film/DVD’s cover. As Trier puts it: “Min plan med det her er jo lisom at gå fra det perfekte til mennesket, ikk” (My plan is to proceed from the perfect to the human, right?).¹⁰

Decadently seated at Zentropa studios, drinking vodka and eating caviar, Trier declares:

Jeg kunne også godt tænke mig at sætte din moral lidt på prøve [...] Jeg kunne godt tænke mig at sende dig til det usleste sted på jorden [...] Kunne du forestille dig nogen steder eller nogen temaer man ikke kunne benytte?

(I’d like to put your ethics to the test. I’d like to send you to the most miserable place on earth. Can you think of any places, any themes one cannot exploit?)

Leth's answer is that right off hand he cannot think of any places or themes that cannot be exploited aesthetically. Trier then asks: "Ville du li'som filme et døende barn i en eller anden flygtningelejr og lægge tekst til 'Det perfekte menneske' nedenunder?" ("Would you film a dying child in a refugee camp and add the words from A Perfect Human?") and Leth answers that no, he is not perverse.

Trier, however, insists that it remains a matter of degree. As a distant observer, Leth is in fact somewhat perverse. What he wants to find out is exactly where Leth draws the line between ethics and aesthetics. Trier insists on his basic question: "Hvor langt kan du gå ud i noget virkelighed, du ikke fortæller om?" ("How far are you prepared to go if you're not describing something?"). That is, Leth witnesses the misery, but chooses to disregard it in his art. Obstruction no. 2 then is filmed at what Leth considers to be the most miserable place he can think of, he is not allowed to show the misery, he has to play the part of the man in his own film, and the scene to be filmed is that of the meal.

Leth does as he is told. He defines the Red Light District in Bombay (Mumbai) as the most miserable place on earth and goes there with his film team. Dressed in his tuxedo, he completes the dining scene and in editing adds his voice-over: "Det perfekte menneske skal spise og drikke. Vi vil se et måltid" ("The perfect human has to eat and drink. We are going to watch a meal"). His solution to Trier's obstruction is a transparent screen, allowing us to barely perceive women and children in The Red Light District in the background. (Illustration)

Viewing the result back at Zentropa, Trier is disappointed and does not accept the solution. Leth has not done as he was told – "hele fidusen, det var at vi ikke skulle se dem" ("the whole idea was that we mustn't see them") – and he is threatened with having to go back and redo it, something Leth claims is impossible. Aesthetic obstructions – such as being confined to 12-frame takes in Cuba (Obstruction no. 1), making a free-style film (Obstruction

no. 3), and making an animation film (Obstruction no. 4) – are no problem. As Susan Dwyer puts it, “The remaking of *The Perfect Human* under the first, third and fourth obstructions are, morally speaking, perfectly unproblematic”.¹¹ Leth passes these tests with flying colors, but drawing a line between ethics and aesthetics proves impossible. More specifically in this context, finding a balance between living and aestheticizing one’s privileged life while knowing that others are suffering proves impossible. Instead, Leth makes his next film without any limitations (that being the obstruction) in Brussels.

A ScanGuilt turn

The image of Leth in front of the transparent screen captures an ethical *ScanGuilt* turn in which Scandinavians no longer see themselves – or are able to see themselves – as isolated from the rest of the world. They cannot avoid seeing their privileges in relation to a global Other. They are forced to reconsider the original film’s questions of location, food, happiness, love and death in a globalized context. At the same time, the screen that separates Leth from the local women and children captures an uncertain, resistant, uncomfortable, ambivalent state of mind, pertaining to how we are connected in a globalized world. The transparent screen both unites us with – and shields us from – the suffering Other, in a variety of ways.¹²

What we have is a new *ethical aesthetics* in which it becomes incumbent upon us to face brutality, to realize that our own privileges are attained more or less directly at the expense of others in this world, often in the global South, in post-Soviet states, or in the so-called Third World. Thus, *De fem benspænd* on a whole situates “The Perfect Human” in a geopolitical context, hinting at an imperial past (especially in Obstruction no. 4) as well as a New World Order in which a new Europe emerges with Brussels at its center (Obstruction no. 3).

A Further Questioning of Leth's Remake

In many ways, Leth's "losing" the game in *Obstruction* no. 2 may be regarded as a kind of "winning". He wins as a human being, having not entirely lost his humanity; in Trier's vocabulary, he moves from *perfect* to *human*. Losing means that he is not able to ignore the human misery surrounding his aesthetic project – that he loses his "cool". As Dwyer argues, whatever Leth learns about himself from this episode must be unsettling to him:

For either he learns that he is fully capable of exploiting the suffering of real persons in the service of what he himself says is just a 'game', or he learns that his view of himself as a sublimely cool observer is not in fact correct.¹³

Yet, if we entertain Trier's verdict that Leth has "lost", we still have to wonder: To what degree do we actually "see them", i.e. see misery and the suffering Other, through the screen? It is hardly obvious that what we see behind the screen are the 200 000 prostitutes living in the Red Light District.¹⁴ Rather, what materializes is a colorful constellation of curious women and children who gradually fade out with the background, eventually turning a neutral grey as the focus is on Leth. In the following, I will further explore Leth's attempts at aestheticizing and disregarding the misery of the global Other.

The soundtrack follows the visual track. The original *Perfect-Human* film called the viewer's attention to the sound of trivial human activities such as nail clipping and shaving: "Hør lyden af mennesket, der gør sig i stand" ("Listen to the human getting ready"). It also sought to heighten the viewer's awareness of the sound of Leth's voice, the sound of a clarinet and the sound of silence.¹⁵ In *Obstruction 2* we clearly hear the sounds of the surrounding city – the cacophonous traffic and intermittent human shouting. Yet, these noises, too, are slowly drowned out as Leth starts clicking his fingers, singing "Hvorfor er lykken så lunefuld?"

Hvorfor er glæden så kort?” (“Why is joy so whimsical? Happiness so brief?”) – lyrics that take on a new social meaning in this global context¹⁶ – telling about an enigmatic vision he has had (“Også i dag...”), and finally, in postproduction, applying Verdi’s opera-music as a non-diegetic soundtrack, effectively drowning out all disagreeable sounds from the Red Light District. In fact, the scene becomes a veritable study in how the “perfect” human uses aesthetics to protect his privilege and serenity. The strategies involve anxiety-reducing drugs, from valium (which Leth brings with him but ends up not using) to Chablis; blurring, beautifying and distorting sights of misery, and concentrating on fine objects at hand, such as the beautifully prepared fish and the silver platter. The strategies take place on several levels: in Leth’s real-life preparation for the role, as Leth plays Nissen’s role as the man, and in post-production.

Compared to the original, we see aesthetics and creativity (e.g. dancing, jumping, finger-clicking, and dressing up) at work, not as a response to nothingness – the white room without limits (cf. Leth’s statement that Nissen is an eminent actor because he manages to improvise and play with emptiness, nothing, bits and pieces¹⁷) – but as a response to human misery – a test of the ability to disregard misery. Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) is highly relevant in this context, not only because Freud focuses on individual and cultural guilt in this work, but also because he so aptly describes how individuals seek to experience misery through various forms of intoxication with the purpose of shielding themselves from it. Using Freudian vocabulary, we may say that Leth is the *narcissistic man* who “will seek his main satisfactions in his internal mental processes”, while Trier ensures that this strategy is pushed to an extreme, thus “exposing the individual to the dangers which arise if a technique of living that has been chosen as an exclusive one should prove inadequate”.¹⁸ That Leth is known as an extreme aesthete (having chosen an exclusive “technique of living”), is something that Peter Schepelern also underscores in an article on

Leth's oeuvre in which he refers to his "wholly aestheticized approach to both life and art" and his "strategy of supreme aestheticism".¹⁹ In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud describes three "palliative measures" human beings use to endure misery: deflections, substitutive satisfactions, and intoxicating substances.²⁰ When suffering is caused by human relationships, Freud points out, "the readiest safeguard is voluntary isolation" while a better solution would be "becoming a member of the human community".²¹ Leth clearly opts for isolation and while there are several ways of withdrawing, he makes sure he can resort to what Freud calls the "crudest" and most effective method, intoxication: "For one knows that, with the help of this 'drowner of cares' one can at any time withdraw from the pressure of reality and find refuge in a world of one's own with better conditions of sensibility".²² In Freud's opinion, however, this leads to a waste of energy "which might have been employed for the improvement of the human lot".²³ In the here and now, Leth has to suffer an unbearable situation, but he also knows that this is part of a greater dialogue with Trier and his film team, and thus it does not isolate him from human relationships with his peer group, only from a particular global human relationship. Leth further knows he is in the process of creating art. Hence, relating to an earlier artwork while creating a new one also involves the technique of sublimation.²⁴ The satisfaction, for instance, of an artist seems "finer and higher", and is low in its intensity.²⁵ It is an elitist satisfaction, accessible to the few and gifted; and even to them, "this method cannot give complete protection from suffering. It creates no impenetrable armour against the arrows of fortune".²⁶ Perhaps this is another way of seeing the transparent screen – as an indication and problematization of this notion that there is no means of shielding oneself from misery. As an artist and aesthete, Leth primarily deals with intoxicating means of avoidance, including the enjoyment of art (his own classic film, music, romantic visions), which, according to Freud, induces a "mild narcosis" and the appreciation of beauty (the fish, the plate), which "has a peculiar, mildly intoxicating quality of feeling".²⁷

Freud's main concern in *Civilization and Its Discontents* is how civilization causes a sense of guilt that only intensifies with the widening of the human community, i.e. as humans – as a result of civilization – have to relate to people who are ever further removed from their own families.²⁸ It is easier to love those who are like oneself, while one feels aggression towards those who are different and whose presence is perceived as threatening to one's own pursuit of happiness. According to Freud, ever-present guilt feelings, then, are a result of the super-ego (our conscience) on both an individual and a cultural level. We are caught between altruistic and egoistic drives (Eros and Thanatos), motivated on the one hand to bond with other people – from the family, to the nation, to the unity of mankind²⁹ – and on the other hand to pursue (individual) happiness.³⁰ As Freud puts it, it becomes a matter of ethics, of loving one's neighbor as oneself – in a universal way. This command, however, “is impossible to fulfill”, leaving us in a quandary, the dilemma that Leth faces, and for which the transparent screen again serves as a visual metaphor.³¹ Leth seeks to simultaneously include and exclude the Other, and to the extent that he does include them, he aestheticizes them. While this is true of his art film, it is, of course, less true of the documentary film parts. In the documentary sequences, it becomes clear that the woman in the original film has been replaced by Indian woman beggars and prostitutes, and we see Leth's discomfort when confronted by these women.

Nabucco Read Symptomatically

The choice of selections from Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842) as extradiegetic music further contributes to the interpretation that attempting to use aestheticism as a means of disregarding global inequality and suffering leaves behind a nagging conscience. *Nabucco* may be explored as symptomatic since the opera is about the oppression of a people – the Jews who were

exiled from Babylon by King Nabucco (Nebuchadnezzar II). The aria we hear is Abigaille's – a character who embodies notions and emotions of unstable social hierarchies and identities. Abigaille is supposedly Nabucco's elder daughter, but discovers that she is really the daughter of slaves. Still, she seizes the throne and becomes Queen of Babylon, yet ends up unhappy, poisons herself and dies. The aria thus seems well chosen as it evokes ideas of master-slave relations, exile and homeland, love and aggression, all in an unstable universe where things may tragically be turned upside-down. Given the context of Leth-the-man's situation, the extradiegetic aria comes across primarily as revealing his inner insistence on aestheticizing and withdrawing from his surroundings. He seeks mental escape from misery by evoking beautiful music of high cultural status. Yet, considering the specificity of Abigaille's aria and character, she becomes a somewhat ironic foil to Leth. There is a parallel between the two characters as Leth in the role of "the perfect human" is exiled from his homeland, holds on to what becomes a precarious master identity, and may be holding onto it in a situation that, for ethical reasons, does not ultimately benefit him. There is also a certain irony in the fact that the aria is sung by a woman, and could just as well reflect the voices of the prostitutes, indicating the precariousness and vicissitudes of *their* lives. A greater allegorical reading, in turn, pertains to the viewers of the film as a larger group of privileged Westerners, who are painfully confronted with the suffering of global Others, yet disregard this fact through aestheticization and cultural narcissism. The extradiegetic music thus functions in various emotional and psychological ways, creating cognitive and emotional suspense. First, it constitutes aesthetically beautiful song of high cultural status, drowning out unpleasant impressions from Mumbai (for Leth-the-man as well as the viewers). Second, it invites us – especially through the character of Abigaille – to reevaluate our notions of stable master-slave identities. Third, it functions symptomatically as an indicator of a guilty conscience. It is added in postproduction to emphasize Leth's aestheticizing tendencies (as person, actor and

artist), yet reveals the ethical dilemma in which he finds himself. The sound-track, in a sense, functions as a transparent *audial* screen. As a final sign of Leth's guilty conscience, he refuses to return to Mumbai to remake the remake when Trier asks him to do so. Leth claims that the trip has incited nightmares about entering a Faustian pact. This is a Romantic notion indeed, and it suggests the trope of the artist as a demonic figure, with neither soul nor conscience. This nightmare strongly suggests that Leth is a human being racked by a guilty conscience.

Misery and Global Guilt Today

The fact that Trier initially confronts Leth with the image of children dying in refugee camps indicates that to the late modern imagination, this is an extreme point of vulnerability, the ultimate test of our ethics. After World War II, as Giorgio Agamben, among others, illustrates, the focus was on witnessing the concentration camps³²; in recent times, this focus has shifted to witnessing the refugee camps. It is a question of what Martin Buber calls existential guilt, feelings of guilt arising “when someone injures an order of the human world whose foundations he knows and recognizes as those of his own existence and of all common human existence.”³³ Humans, that is, do not have to be the direct cause of an injury; they may still – as human beings – feel affected, complicit and responsible.

Buber argues that the only way of alleviating existential guilt is through persistent self-illumination, which can lead to reconciliation.³⁴ As several scholars have pointed out in their discussions of *De fem benspænd*, this is the basic *cinéma-vérité* premise of the film. Trevor Ponech points out that the film's “method of extracting illuminating personal truths is the filmmaking itself”.³⁵ Leth learns about himself through filmmaking. Subsequently we, as viewers, are given the opportunity to attain a form of personal illumination by recognizing ourselves in Leth. Susan Dwyer, too, analyzes the film based on the moral philosophical idea

that the Other may provide us with deeper insight into ourselves: “*The Five Obstructions* provides a very powerful example of self-revelation facilitated by another”.³⁶ Both Ponch and Dwyer discuss the truth project as a matter between Trier and Leth. Trier is Leth’s Other. My point, however, is to regard the film – and *Obstruction no. 2* in particular – as an exploration of the relationship between white, privileged westerners and their geopolitical Other. The film, in other words, may be read allegorically as thematizing global relations, not least between the privileged Scandinavians and their less-privileged global Others.

Also relevant to this point is the overall structure and set-up of the film, emphasizing the cultural conditions of aesthetic production. Filmmaking is clearly not a one-person venture, and it involves large budgets allowing, in this case, Leth to travel around the world – to Cuba, India, Belgium, and Denmark – with occasional stop-overs in Haiti. The world, it appears, is Leth’s and Trier’s playground. Both may be extreme artists, not entirely representative of the Danish population as a whole, but the fact that Leth’s aesthetic endeavors are state-financed, contributes to the allegorical potential of reading him as a stand-in for Danes in general, and not just as the unique artist. As Schepelern reminds us, Leth’s oeuvre is supported by a state-funded system, and in 1995 he was granted a lifelong pension, the Danish state’s support for outstanding artists.³⁷

Conclusion

What *Obstruction 2* in *De fem benspænd* demonstrates, then, is how a classic can be reevaluated in a new global context. It shows the guilt and discomfort the privileged Scandinavian feels when confronted with the misery of the global Other. Clearly, Leth seeks to ward off the impressions of misery pertaining to poverty and the sexual exploitation of women and children, a topic that comes across as particularly pertinent since his initial film so

strongly emphasized gender relations and sexuality.³⁸ As this is a self-reflective art film, we discover that the “perfect human” – rather than disregarding human misery *with* pleasure – disregards it *through* pleasure. In other words, it is not entirely pleasurable to ward off the misery of others in one’s pursuit of individual happiness – aesthetization is hard work. In addition, politics and aesthetics are connected. Aesthetic pleasure is not simply an end in itself, but also a means to protect one’s privilege.

Read allegorically, *De fem benspænd* raises important questions about postnational, cultural identities understood in terms of egoism vs. altruism. Rather than providing answers, it ends on an open note. The final, fifth obstruction is entirely ambivalent. Here, Leth, directed by Trier, reads aloud a letter he supposedly has written to Trier. The letter, ironically, is written by Trier himself. Leth’s voice-over is accompanied by illustrative black-white footage added by film editor Camilla Skousen. Once again, we see a tuxedo-clad Leth standing in front of the transparent screen in The Red Light District. In voice-over he thanks Trier for the obstructions which have taught him to see that he is really “et usselst menneskeligt menneske” (“an abject human human”), yet he insists that the person who has really exposed himself is Trier. The visual and verbal equivocations continue as the focus remains on the two narcissistic men. Meanwhile, Skousen’s footage from Mumbai invites the viewer to reconsider the ethical implications of filmmaking and aestheticization from a global perspective.

The final scene shows Leth’s rehearsing the act of falling in his Mumbai hotel room. The voice-over relates the fall to Leth’s and Trier’s battle. The viewer is, however, left with the option of disregarding the battle, realizing that in the grand scheme of things, Trier and Leth are two of a kind. They make and discuss art, illustrating how much effort privileged human beings put into shielding themselves from human misery. In the end, it is up to the viewers to recognize themselves in this situation and then find inspiration to relate not just

aesthetically, but also ethically to “the most miserable place on earth”. They may, as Freud suggested nearly a century ago, decide that ultimately, their energy – or at least some of it – is better spent “becoming a member of the human community”.³⁹

Notes

¹ E.g. in the UN's first *World Happiness Report*, Denmark was ranked the happiest country in the world. Finland was no. 2, Norway no. 3, Sweden no. 7, and Iceland no. 20. John Helliwell, Richard Layard and Jeffrey Sachs (eds), *World Happiness Report* (New York: The Earth Institute, Columbia University, 2012).

² Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

³ “The Next Supermodel: Politicians from both Right and Left Could Learn from the Nordic Countries”. *The Economist*. 2 Feb. 2013. Online:
<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21571136-politicians-both-right-and-left-could-learn-nordic-countries-next-supermodel>

⁴ Benedict Anderson, “The Goodness of Nations”, in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁵ For more information on this project, see our website:
<http://www.hf.uio.no/english/research/theme/scandinavian-narratives-of-guilt-and-privilege/>

⁶ Translations are from the English voice-over applied to *The Perfect Human* (1967). This version is included as extra material on the English-language DVD of *The Five Obstructions*, manufactured and distributed by Koch Vision 2004.

⁷ *Den danske Ordbog* defines “perfekt” as “uden fejl eller mangler; fuldstændig tilfredsstillende”. www.ordnet.dk (accessed Sept. 2, 2015).

⁸ The film has been remade numerous times framing these questions in new and surprising ways. One example is Jakob Nasser and Casper Søgaaard Christensen's *Det defekte menneske* ("The Defect Human" 2007). In this film, an impaired person in a wheelchair (Casper Søgaaard Christensen) does his best to follow the original script, moving (in a wheel chair), eating (being fed), lying down (being laid down), etc. Nora Simonhjell, in her analysis of the film, points out how Leth with his choice of his title and two beautiful, healthy, able-bodied actors posits a norm that is excluding and stigmatizing. Ultimately, *Det defekte menneske* constitutes a form of visual activism, urging the viewer to debate human compassion, human rights and human worth. Nora Simonhjell, "Det perfekte defekte mennesket: Kroppslig sårbarhet som visuell aktivisme – en analyse av kortfilmen *Det defekte mennesket* (2007)", *Lambda Nordica*, 1–2 (2012), 144– 67 (p. 155–56 and 163).

⁹ Murray Smith, "Funny Games", *Dekalog. On the Five Obstructions* ed. by Mette Hjort (London: Wallflower, 2008), 117–40 (p. 119). Rather than emphasizing the privileged vs. global unprivileged contrast, however, Smith emphasizes the contrast between Nissen's young body and Leth's aged body.

¹⁰ For English translations I use the subtitles added to the English-language version of *The Five Obstructions*. Subtitling by JR Media Services, Inc © 2004 Koch Vision LLC.

¹¹ Susan Dwyer, "Romancing the Dane: Ethics and Observation", *Dekalog. On the Five Obstructions* ed. by Mette Hjort (London: Wallflower, 2008), 1–14 (p. 8).

¹² As Smith puts it, the screen at once separates and connects the reality of the Red Light District "with the artificial bubble created by Leth in its midst" (p. 126–27). My emphasis in an allegorical reading, however, pertains to the bubble created by the privileged not only in the midst of misery, but also at a geographical distance from it.

¹³ Dwyer, p. 10–11.

¹⁴ According to Dwyer, that is the number of prostitutes that live in this area (Dwyer, p. 9).

¹⁵ “Hør musikken. Hør klarinettens ejendommelige lyd”, “Nu er musikken borte. Ingen musik mere”, “Og en stemme som siger nogle ord. Denne stemme som siger disse ord”, “Hør så musikken” (“Now the music is gone. No music anymore... And a voice saying a few words. This voice saying a few words”). The English-version voice-over does not mention the clarinet.

¹⁶ The song was originally composed and sung by Danish Karen Jønsson (1909–1942). It has been covered many times since, e.g. by Lars H.U.G. in 1997.

¹⁷ Leth: “Han er den eminente skuespiller, Claus Nissen, for mig. Fordi han altså leger med tomheden, leger med ingenting, leger med de stumper og smuler, der er” (“That’s why I regard Claus Nissen as such an eminent actor. He plays with emptiness, plays with nothing. He plays with the fragments and crumbs he can find”).

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton), p. 35. Striving for, and attaining, happiness while avoiding misery, as Freud sees it, is a problem of “the economics of the individual’s libido,” and “every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved” (p. 34). Freud, then, outlines three available choices: that of the erotic man, that of the narcissistic man, and that of the man of action (p. 35). While Leth has portrayed himself as an erotic man in other parts of his oeuvre, he becomes the narcissistic man in this particular situation.

¹⁹ Schepelern writes of Leth : “His general project, it seems, is a fusion of life and work, a wholly aestheticized approach to both life and art”, and that as a filmmaker he is to be regarded as “a consummately artistic persona who gazes with unflinching fascination at a world for which he deftly manages to take no responsibility as a result of a strategy of supreme aestheticism”. Peter Schepelern, “To Calculate the Moment: Leth’s Life as Art”, *Dekalog. On the Five Obstructions* ed. by Mette Hjort (London: Wallflower, 2008), 95–116 (p. 96).

²⁰ Freud specifies that deflections “cause us to make light of our misery”, substitutive satisfactions “diminish it”, and intoxicating substances “make us insensitive to it” (p. 23–24).

²¹ Ibid., p. 27.

²² Ibid., p. 28.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 31, p. 33.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 95–96.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 105.

³¹ Ibid., p. 109.

³² Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

³³ Martin Buber, “Guilt and Guilt Feelings”, in: *Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy: Essays, Letters, and Dialogue*, ed. by Judith Buber Agassi (Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 116.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 123.

³⁵ Trevor Ponech, “Work and Play: The 5-0 Game”, *Dekalog. On the Five Obstructions* ed. by Mette Hjort (London: Wallflower, 2008), 76–94 (p. 87). In his analysis of the film as a contemporary example of *cinéma vérité*, Ponech compares it to Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960).

³⁶ Dwyer, p. 2.

³⁷ Schepeleern, p. 96.

³⁸ Smith, too, sees a connection between the female roles in these two films. In his view, Obstruction no. 2 proceeds “to dwell upon and make explicit the erotic potential of the original – a potential which, if anything, is deliberately neutralised in the original film” (Smith 130). As my description of the original film indicates, I do not see the erotic merely as a neutralized potential in *Det perfekte menneske*, and in Obstruction no. 2 I hardly see the erotic at all, but rather sexually exploited women who act towards Leth mainly with kindness and curiosity.

³⁹ Freud, p. 27.