

The Five Obstructions—Revisited

BY TOM WHITE AND EDDIE SCHMIDT

In the 2004 film *The Five Obstructions*, by Jorgen Leth and Lars von Trier, von Trier challenges his mentor Leth to remake his 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* five times—each according to von Trier's cerebrally wacky (wackily cerebral?) rules, or obstructions.

We decided to take our cues from the Danish duo and challenge some of the leading lights in the documentary community to contort their sensibilities and aesthetics in absurd, demeaning and ultimately pointless ways...All in good fun!

Obstruction #1—to Ken Burns

- I Make a 12-minute nature documentary.
- I Ninety percent of it must be set underwater.
- I Ron Jeremy must be in the documentary, either as narrator or as on-camera host.
- I It must be shot on 70mm, but available only on cell phones.
- I It must bear the title *My Friend, The Puffer Fish*.
- I The narration cannot be written; it must be improvised.
- I The music must also be improvised, and the musicians must be on camera at all times, and although they don't have to be underwater, lest their instruments get damaged, their feet must be underwater. Also, it's OK if Ron Jeremy plays an instrument, but it must be the baritone saxophone.
- I Ken Burns must appear on camera, but for no longer than one second (24 frames).



Courtesy of Florentine Films

Obstruction #2—to Michael Moore

- I Cannot feature himself as an on-camera interviewer/provocateur. May employ Patton Oswalt, if necessary.
- I Must not make ironic use of pop music, unless it's a non-parody original song by "Weird Al" Yankovic, such as his loving ode to the pancreas, recorded in the style of *Pet Sounds*-era Brian Wilson, or his all-palindrome homage to Bob Dylan.
- I Can, and should, use unwitting people to make salient points, although all must wear traffic cones on their heads that say, "Walking Contradiction," or "I Sort of Understand Everything I Say."
- I Is free to lure old Hollywood legends out to ridicule their politics, although they must be dead and under five feet tall. Billy Barty and Dudley Moore, both available, are excellent choices.
- I Forbidden to utter or display the word "Michigan" at any point in the film. However, each of the following locations must be referenced at least twice: Bozeman, Montana; Grand Island, Nebraska; Knott's Berry Farm.
- I Titles are important, and for that reason must be barred from anything catchy, clever or newsworthy. May we suggest the following: *An Entertaining and Thoroughly Valid Gripe, Laughs, Socio-Political Analysis, But No Nudity, or Please Come Spend 90 Minutes Thinking, Instead of Watching Stuff Blow Up and Guys Get Kicked in the Nuts.*



Courtesy of Dog Eat Dog Films

Obstruction #3—to Werner Herzog

- Must make a documentary about children's birthday parties.
- Must dress up as a clown or as a magician (preferably Doug Henning, complete with '70s pre-Rafaelite hair and striped spandex bell-bottoms).
- Must open the film by saying, "I decided to make this film in order to save children from the festering cesspool known as humanity."
- Must perform at least one magic trick that makes the children cry.
- In order to capture the essential animal nature of children, must start a food fight.
- Music must be composed and performed on camera by Karlheinz Stockhausen, who must wear a clown suit.
- Klaus Kinski, though dead, must nonetheless appear in hologram form, and scare the kids by performing something from *Aguirre: Wrath of God*.
- The final sentence of the narration—which, incidentally, must be delivered after inhaling an entire tank of nitrous oxide—must be the following: "After spending nearly 100 hours documenting these ludicrous and existentially pointless events, I can conclude that mankind is not only doomed, but should be obliterated immediately. I have seen the future in these urchins, and I am deeply frightened."

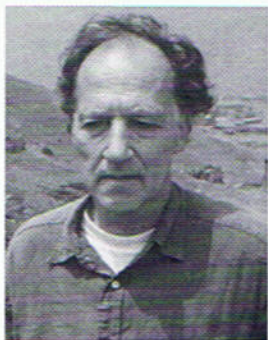


Photo: Werner Herzog

Obstruction #4—to Sir David Attenborough

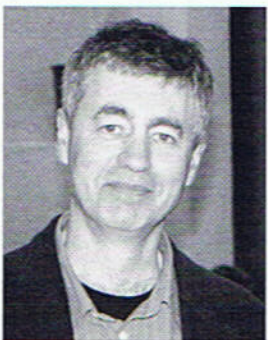
- Must make a film about the mating habits of the meercat.
- Must appear on camera with the following individuals: Fred Flintstone (animated, of course), Katie Couric (assuming that CBS will eventually re-assign her to a guest spot on *The View*), and John Madden (whether or not it's football season).
- Soundtrack must be the music from *Deep Throat*.
- Since there will be a lot of waiting time for mating time, the four on-camera hosts/narrators must set up a table and chairs on location and play a game of bridge.
- Sir David must get a signed release on camera from both the meercat and his conquest (pawprints are OK).
- Although there will be four on-camera hosts, the narrator (a choice between Ann Coulter and Shaquille O'Neil—but possibly both in unison) must be off-camera. The narrator may tell jokes and sing in addition to talking about the mating habits of the meercat, but cannot inject politics into the process. Narration must be written by Garrison Keillor.
- The film must be shot with a security camera, stolen from a 7-11, and must have its first screening on an Edison Kinetoscope.



Courtesy of Discovery Communications

Obstruction # 5—to Steve James

- Can focus on socially redeeming messages; however, he must choose from the following: (a) heartbreak of psoriasis; (b) importance of punctuality; (c) the quaintly enduring power of postage stamps; (d) gross misuse of the phrase "I could care less."
- Main character must overcome heroic obstacles, but must possess at least a seven-figure net worth and have recently married a swimsuit model.
- During film's most emotionally involving scenes, must jump-cut to crass animated cartoon narrated by Gilbert Gottfried.
- Final film must be under six minutes or over 12 hours.
- Shall sing film's title song on-screen, accompanied by *Goldfinger*-like silhouettes and the disembodied head of Olivia Newton-John.



Courtesy of CCS

The Sixth Obstruction—to anyone willing to make an *E!* *True Hollywood Story* or *VH1 Behind the Music* episode

- Narration shall be provided solely by voiceover actors who are young and/or high-pitched. A good example would be Jaleel White, in character as "Urkel," or Joey Lauren Adams.
- The same still images can only be re-used five times, and employing motion effects does not count as a separate shot. For motion effects, slo-mo must not be used; only fast-mo, to give it the Buster Keaton effect.
- Episode can focus on someone from any aspect of culture, but must kick off an entire week of themed programming from the following list: (a) Dramatic Actors with Dramatic Overbites; (b) Goody Bag Whores; (c) I Can't Believe They're Still Alive!; (d) Sports Figures Who Abuse Their Wives; (e) Short, Talented Musicians Who Dress In Purple; (f) Artists Who Found Jesus...Then Lost Him Again; (g) Recluses; (h) Heroin Actually Saved My Life!; (i) Finally! Artists Who Left Us Way Too Late...
- Cannot purport to contain interview footage with the subject by re-use of old press junket footage. If the subject is unavailable and press junket footage must be used, it must be spoken backwards phonetically by Michael Anderson, the dwarf used frequently in David Lynch films.
- Life depicted can neither be a "comeback" nor a revealing cautionary morality tale. Randomness is the order of the day. A long slow spiral, without respite, followed by a freak inheritance and then a bus accident is fine. Think of life as if written by Samuel Beckett and directed by Robert Wilson.
- For talking head interviews, subjects must be doing their favorite hobby—bowling, cooking, gardening, working on their car, etc...The voiceover for those interviews shall be executed off-camera—by someone else, whose first language is not English and who will be reading from the transcriptions phonetically. □

Eddie Schmidt has made some serious films. Tom White hasn't; his doppelganger, Thomas White, is editor of *Documentary* magazine.