



The Commune

Director: Thomas Vinterberg
Country: Denmark
Date: 2016

An interview with the director by Emma Myers for *Film Comment*:

There's a painful scene in *The Commune*, the latest feature from Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg, in which Anna suggests that her husband's new (and much younger) lover, Emma, should move into the oversized house the two share with their fellow commune members. "Bring her, we'll work something out," she says at the dinner table with a smile that's clearly killing her. Reuniting with co-writer Tobias Lindholm, who also helped write the scripts for *Submarino* (10) and *The Hunt* (12), Vinterberg draws from his own experience growing up on a commune in the 1970s to expose the way group dynamics can so easily destroy the individual.



Erik (Ulrich Thomsen) and Anna (Trine Dyrholm) are both respected professionals. When they inherit a giant house in Copenhagen, Anna encourages her husband to fill its echoing chambers with a selection of friends and strays who share their intellectual inclinations. All decisions are made through group consensus, and rent is paid according to income. The arrangement certainly seems ideal, and the film opens under the guise of a light-hearted period piece, unfolding amidst a decade-appropriate color palette of burnt umbers and eggshell blues, with plenty of boozy dinners to keep everyone happy.

Like *The Hunt*, this movie deals with group dynamics, specifically the dark side of communal thinking. You grew up on a commune much like the one you portray here.

And I loved it! Which may not be the thing that radiates from this film—but I loved it and I miss it dearly. Obviously this is a drama, and to create drama you need conflict.

There are so many different dynamics that play out within the household here—between women and men, children and adults, single people and couples. I'm curious what specifically you saw change and unfold that you were able to draw from.

Well, there was a child that died. There were big fights and people who moved out. There were children that were treated as adults and given way too big choices to make, but not as big as the one Freja suffers from. To be clear, this is fiction: it's based on a true feeling, but not based on a true story. It was [first] dramatized by some actors on stage, actually, in Vienna. There were things in my life that happen in the film—there *was* a dude who would burn our stuff if things got messy, which was quite funny actually. There was a divorce, which was pretty different to [the one in the film] but had some similarities. The young actress in this film is my wife [Helene Reingaard Neumann]. The whole theme of replacing, which I find really brutal, is to some extent to solve my own problems—and my dad's. My parents got divorced and continued to live together, but my mom never fell apart as Anna in the film does.

That very painful dynamic of people being replaced is expressed visually through the doubling of the actresses. I'm assuming you picked two women who look incredibly similar on purpose? Emma looks exactly like a younger version of Anna. A few scenes and shots felt reminiscent of *Persona*.

I guess Danes look pretty similar [*laughs*]. No, of course. I've always been fascinated by—and horrified by—the impermanence of things. In this film it's the impermanence of life, which is represented through the little boy, and the impermanence of love. Erik and Anna fall out of love, and he falls in love with someone else. But it's also the impermanence of flesh and the body, and that's why I wanted to create this mirror. There's this young skin and then there's the older skin. I'm looking at myself everyday in the morning with horror and thinking, "we're going to die!" That's definitely an important theme in this movie. But it's also about the impermanence of this thing that I really loved, which was the house. I just met the people [from the commune I lived in] two months ago and I hadn't seen them for many, many years. It shocked me so hard that this time will never come back, and I miss it dearly.

The impermanence of things is also very much tied to the unsustainable founding ideals of the commune, and of these characters. And those ideals, in turn, are inextricably linked to the ethos of the time.

Yeah, which was then replaced with another time, but it was over. It's not that I'm saying this time was better, it's just different. And I do miss it, the togetherness. I lived in a house where there was a guy who would say, let's pay rent based on income—and he was the guy making the most money, meaning his own rent was highest. That just doesn't exist anymore.

It was an image from New York that made me realize another time was coming. It was somewhere at the beginning of the '80s, I saw this yuppie—a broker—on his way to work on Wall Street, or somewhere in the Financial District. He was on a skateboard and I thought that was amazing, that this was the ultimate freedom. He was on a skateboard, he was rich, he could do whatever the fuck he wants. He's not a part of a consensus; he's an individual and he can fly. And that was the new time. But obviously I'm born and raised red and I believe in togetherness.

As we've already touched upon, the main dramatic thread certainly belongs to the wife, but the film is also very much an ensemble piece. How did you get your actors to achieve the kind of intimacy that comes through communal life—did you trap them all in a house together beforehand?



Yeah, we did that. I brought them all to a summer restaurant type of place that had been shut down and we moved in there. First we did a lot of rehearsals, and then we did a lot of drinking, naked swimming, and ended up at a dinner that was three or four hours long, in character, in costume. So the commune was brought together in this way, with the actors improvising their own characters together for three or four hours. It was a magnetic moment. In that

moment I felt so pulled back into my childhood. I wasn't part of it anymore—I was filming it, which to some extent I also did as a child. Nothing really happened, they just sat there and ate, there was no drama. But sometimes there's even more truth when there's no drama. I always do rehearsals and sometimes they're fruitful and sometimes they're not. I'm always trying to create a very solid platform for the actors so that they can let go in front of the camera.

