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# Stupidity in *The Idiots* and *Au Hazard Balthazar*: Derrida on the Limits of Reason

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## 1 Introduction

This chapter explores a reading of Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* alongside Robert Bresson's adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* entitled *Au Hazard Balthazar*. This reading will be mediated via the concept of stupidity as it appears mainly in Derrida's *Beast and the Sovereign* (*La Bête et Le Souverain*) and *Rogues* (*Voyous*). Derrida's contribution is to provide a conceptualization of stupidity that is not simply the negative side of intelligence but a more complex construct. More specifically, the hyperbolic realization of intelligence. In this manner, Derrida demonstrates that one is not stupid when one fails to be intelligent but rather when one succeeds. In both films we find a similar dynamic where the stupidity present in the contents is not easily identifiable. In the films, stupidity hides behind a dynamic more complicated than the explicit demonstration of something that lacks reason.

The text will first explore the way Derrida investigates the entanglement of reason and stupidity. It will highlight the connection between this entanglement and ideas of sovereignty, agency, or power. This investigation will demonstrate that reason and stupidity are inherently connected and metamorphosize into each other: reason always appeals to force (i.e., unreason) as it is fundamentally unsustained. Next, the text will investigate the way von Trier's film explores the socio-political ramification of Derrida's conceptualization of stupidity and then the way Bresson's film explores the possibility of being without reason. The text will conclude by exploring the challenges that such a conceptualization of stupidity poses for us today.

This fundamental question will involve the aporia<sup>1</sup> highlighted by Derrida and present in the films. This aporia concerned the fact that since reason is always considered best, it is also the strongest, creating the scenario where

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<sup>1</sup> By aporia I mean the simultaneous application of two exclusive logics whose tension cannot be conciliated by a synthesis.

it appears as a form of omnipotent sovereignty. On the other hand, this form of omnipotence is one that is unable to be stupid, i.e., to be without reason, hence revealing a fundamental impotence of the best and the strongest. The aporetic element here emerges from this impasse between potency and impotence. The investigation aims to pose this question and highlight the challenge that such configurations offer rather than solve it.

## 2 Derrida on the Limits of Reason

Derrida aims to move away from a perspective that sees reason/sovereignty and stupidity/impotence as opposites into one that accounts for the complex dynamic between those ideas. In his reflections on the notion of stupidity, Derrida argues that stupidity is not an error – a silly deviance from an otherwise intelligent entity that in its lapse, would only reinforce the normality of its reasonability. In contrast, Derrida aims to show that the sovereign potency of reason entails simultaneously the stupidity/impotence of Valéry's Monsieur<sup>2</sup> Teste, who states that 'stupidity is not my forte'. For Derrida the importance of this statement is that even if only unconsciously or indirectly, it marks the admittance by sovereignty that it represents a form of impotent reason – that despite its mightiness, it remains impotent against the triviality of stupidity.

With this, Derrida aims to argue for a change of perspective regarding the dynamic between reason and stupidity to one that sees the possibility of sovereignty (reason) exclusively as one that is mediated by a form impotence (stupidity): the possibility of being capable/controlling/definitive inherently entails/engenders the limitation such sovereignty, i.e., being incapable/out of control/indefinite. The crucial change here is that unlike the intuitive conception that opposes failure to success, what is at stake for Derrida it is not a failure in the sense that that reason/sovereignty is unable to realize its potency but that its full realization reveal that sovereignty is a form of 'incapable capacity' that demonstrates the inherent stupidity of its intelligence. In this sense, Derrida's new perspective can be summarized as an aporia of reason and stupidity.

This aporia that will be developed here via Derrida's assessment, can be introduced via Robert Musil in his definition of stupidity:

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2 I would highlight here the title as a figure of sovereignty: Seigneur is a title of lordship.

This notion of the diminution of achievement, which sticks like a burr, will later reveal itself to be the most universal notion of stupidity that we have.

MUSIL [1995]: 273

In order for the outlines of the notion of stupidity to emerge properly, it is first of all necessary to soften the verdict that stupidity is merely, or particularly, a deficiency of understanding; as has already been stated, the most general notion we have of stupidity, that of failure in the most varied activities seems to be the fundamental notion of physical and mental deficiency in general. [...] *If one were therefore looking for the most general notion of wisdom,<sup>3</sup> these comparisons would yield something like the notion of capability or soundness, and everything that is incapable or unsound might then, on occasion, also be called stupid;* and in reality this is what happens, [...] <sup>4</sup>

MUSIL [1995]: 276; my emphasis

Musil's definition here is abstract but he defines stupidity as a mode of impotence/failure: one whose exclusive defining characteristic is being unable. Still, for Musil this configuration simultaneously allows it one power, that of disrupting intelligence: "[...]the best place might be with the initial difficulty, which is that anyone who wants to talk about stupidity, or profitably participate in a conversation about it, must assume about himself that he is not stupid; and he also makes a show of considering himself clever, although doing so is generally considered a sign of stupidity!" (Musil [1995]: 270).

In Musil's definition, stupidity is unshakably successful in its failing potential: it may not amount to anything as it is defined as the 'diminution of achievement', but it subverts intelligence since one cannot grasp it without falling prey to it. As in Flaubert's account of the defaced column,<sup>5</sup> stupidity appears as a phantasm that haunts intelligence in a manner that defies the natural hierarchy: despite its ridiculousness, it constantly overpowers and corrodes intelligence.

3 The English text has 'stupidity' rather than wisdom. The Portuguese translation has intelligent (Musil [2016]: 36) which is the appropriate translation of the original 'Klugheit'.

4 See also (Musil [1995]: 281–282)

5 For a commentary on Flaubert's account of the vandalized ruin in his travel diaries, see (Breur [2015]; Ronell [2002]). According to him, the idiot who wrote his name on the column, despite his insignificance, ruins the magnificence of the object.

This entangled aporetic dynamic between reason and stupidity, or sovereignty and impotence, is the object of Derrida's reflections on this topic. This is present in the first volume of the *Beast and the Sovereign*, when Derrida returns to the issue he had previously explored in *Rogues*: the force/power of reason as well as its limits, i.e., its lack of force/power. To articulate this question, Derrida employs La Fontaine's fable of the wolf and the lamb where the wolf interpellates the lamb and after a dialogue ends up eating the lamb. Derrida emphasizes that the message of the fable is given in its very beginning: 'the reason of the strongest is always best'.

Derrida explains that this formula aims to establish that the strongest is always right, be it via its physical strength or its rationality. For Derrida this creates the scenario where the legitimacy to exercise power is inherently implied in the power of the strongest (BS1, 79; 208). To demonstrate this issue, Derrida explores the ambiguity of the term 'best'. For him, the term 'best' in the formula creates a circular logic where it prevails because it bests (defeats)<sup>6</sup> other reasons. And in defeating the alternatives, it establishes itself as the best in a qualitative sense hence legitimizing, to a certain extent retroactively, its superiority. Given that it prevails, it consequently is the best, hence it always already held the legitimacy to be upheld as the optimal reason: "the sovereign is one who has his end in himself or is the end of everything" (BS1, 346).

The ambiguous logic where the best is always that which has the power to best all the alternatives, can then be developed into another ambiguous configuration present in the original fable: the realization of such power or, as the fable frames it, the demonstration/exposition of power. The fact that the reason of the strongest is always best is sustained by the best's ability to demonstrate that this is the case. In other words, being the best entails the ability to make known [*faire savoir*] that this is the case (BS1, 34). In this manner, the best is the best because it has the ability to make its superiority known, to demonstrate it, and therefore to realize its power as the best: being the best both requires that one demonstrates one's ability and is legitimized by one's ability to successfully perform such demonstration.

The sovereign is the one who has the ability to make its sovereignty understood, ideally via education and dialogue but by force when the subjects are too stupid to understand and especially when they are too stupid to understand that they can't understand, one might add. As Derrida points out

6 See also Marin (1986: 69) for the same argument where he argues that power is always enacted power, so to be best, in the sense of being the optimal, is always the outcome of besting competing reasons.

(BS2, 47), this is a sovereign without enemy – it does not have opposition, merely a mistaken or wrong alternative which is always already a misunderstanding that *must* be corrected, and more importantly, rightly so since ‘the reason of the strongest is always best’. In other words, the capacity to demonstrate what is best also entails the imperative to implement it.

In this manner, one finds an aporia in the need for the demonstration of power: the supremacy of the best must be self-evident while it must also be made known. On the one hand, the reason of the strongest is always already the best and hence omnipotent; while on the other, it must constantly demonstrate and ensure its supremacy, so it reveals itself to be incapable of fully establishing its supremacy. Derrida explores this in his account of the idea that for a man to be the wolf of men, he must not be seen as a wolf (BS1, page 61):<sup>7</sup> the condition for authority is that it functions automatically, rather than by constant command, brute force, or imposition. Still, as Derrida demonstrates, this structure cannot be self-sustained as it relies on the demonstration of power and hence on its inability to automatically sustain itself. The demonstration of power is then a form of interference into self-government on behalf of self-government.<sup>8</sup> More interestingly, in showing that the full potency of sovereignty entails its invariable impotence, this aporia also reveals the existence of an ungovernable element. Since this ungovernable element appear as the one that ‘needs constant demonstration’, one may call it ‘stupidity’ because it fails understand. If one returns to the formulations by Monsieur Teste and Musil, Derrida supports their account of stupidity by showing how it marks the limit of reason: the place where potency turns into impotence.

Derrida does not connect his account to a meritocratic logic, and hence capitalism, but the logic of the best is structurally equivalent to it: the best win(s) because they deserve to win, and they deserve to win because they win. One could challenge this logic by arguing that the best does not always win because the system is flawed or the starting points unfair. From this account one might even extrapolate that there should not be a single conceptualization of the best or even that the punishment for losing should not be too harsh<sup>9</sup> but those are not the challenges that Derrida invites us to reflect on. To some extent those postures would only reinforce the logic

7 See also the argument about the fox extracted from Machiavelli (BS1: 91)

8 Derrida calls this condition ‘supervised liberty’ (BS1: 311). See also Derrida’s engagement with Tocqueville (2005, 14).

9 In this sense, the idea of ‘the social safety net’ or the liberal slogan that ‘collectively we are only as strong as our weakest’ remain within the meritocratic logic.

that Derrida is inspecting since they remain within the logic that the strongest is the best.<sup>10</sup>

The argument here defends that Derrida's points refer to the problematic logic of the 'reason of the best' in its totality. So, the question one can extrapolate from his assessment is whether the best 'deserves' in the most abstract sense – whether the connection between holding reason (power/strength) and the legitimacy to enact it is valid, hence even if the strongest is the best, why would we inherently desire it and hence consider it legitimate? Why would we accept its demonstration and hence validate that it be upheld in politics and life? Perhaps, a more interesting avenue is revealed by the possible connection to Musil: that despite sovereignty being best and strongest, there is a valuable disruptive power in stupidity that is deserving of investigation.

This logic can be fruitfully connected to Rancière's (1999, 44–46) account of the 'Do you understand?' interpellation in *Disagreement* (*La Mésentente*). According to him, this is not a legitimate question but a rhetorical device of submission where the enunciator assumes the capacity of understanding of the receiver, or else they would not be explaining anything. So, what is made to be understood is the submissive position of the receiver.<sup>11</sup> Or as Derrida puts it: "knowing how to cause fear, knowing how to terrorize by making known" (BS1: 39). In other words, the interpellation 'do you want understand?' cannot be used on objects unable to understand, hence the underlying logic sustaining its imperative role in politics is not whether the content of the order was comprehended since that is always already given within the question. The sole purpose of the questioning is demonstrating the sovereign power by 'checking' whether the sovereignty of enunciator was made known. In this manner the question would be better formulated as 'Do you understand that you *must* understand since it is me who determines what makes sense?'

Hence, considering this configuration, stupidity offers a counter-hegemonic attitude: not understanding. To clarify, the ignorance or the lack of comprehension is irrelevant here. The 'misunderstanding' of stupidity relevant here is the one that does not understand 'that the reason of the

10 In the last case even doubly so since it is once best by strength and also morally best in is gracious mercy.

11 As Derrida (BS1: 57) states: the sovereign does not respond. It has the right of being unquestioned and unquestionable. See also Marin's account of the dialogue between the wolf and the lamb where he finds the same dynamic (1986: 81–82)

strongest is best'. For example, one might perfectly comprehend the explanations for socio-economic policies or policies of an institution or labor agreements, one might even understand the impeccable internal logic under which they operate, and still, nevertheless not understand them as reason – i.e., not accept their demonstration of power. As Derrida puts it, "Bêtise [stupidity] is always a way of not comprehending, not of not explaining to others or oneself, but of not comprehending" (BS1: 149)

### 3 An Ode to Bad Cinema: The Stupidity of *The Idiots*

The genius of Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* emerges precisely from its failure as a film. The first and most obvious limitation is its self-imposed commitment to the *Dogma 95* guidelines which invariably affect its construction resulting in purposely amateurish filming and editing. For example, the film is shaky, we often see equipment and crew members in the frame or scenes that are poorly cut, like the one where Karen's sister is preparing coffee and we see her dismantling the coffee maker only to see it come back to its original state in the next shot. Nevertheless, against this obvious 'attack', one could state that it is part of the artistry and, given that the film is critically acclaimed, it is in that sense, successful.

It is precisely in this sense that the film demonstrates its genius, by failing to make a bad film, von Trier makes the worst possible film about stupidity, a masterpiece of cinema. Intentionally or not, the film attempts and fails, but it is in its failure that it achieves its upmost success: being a stupid film about stupidity. In direct terms, the film extrapolates Musil's and Derrida's aporia by enacting the fact that there is nothing more stupid than failing to fail, that there is no bigger sign of impotence than being incapable to be incompetent.

This metalinguistic element is also the basic logic in the storyline of the film: a group of people attempt to be stupid only to realize that they are unable which essentially sediments their stupidity to the viewers. Their trajectory is clearly one of downfall from a group that attempts to establish an anti-social movement that challenges the established norms of their society to one that submits to the norms unconditionally. This narrative of defeat could be superficially understood as one where the inevitability of conformity is demonstrated. In this reading, the film would be a narrative demonstrating that the aesthetic challenging of bourgeois lifestyle is in fact the upmost bourgeois position since it is only those powerful enough that can ironically forfeit their power and experiment with stupidity. Hence by



adopting such posture, the characters would merely reassert their power. This is not a wrong reading of the film, and it is certainly a clear application of the formula investigated by Derrida that 'the reason of the strongest is always best'.

Perhaps the two scenes where this frame is most evident are the initial restaurant scene and the dinner after Katrine pranks Axel at his job.<sup>12</sup> In the opening scene of the film, Stoffer and Henrik play idiots by disturbing other people in a restaurant. This gets them expelled from the restaurant without paying the bill. In other words, they exemplify the irresponsible enjoyment associated with the high society mode of life: the ironic belonging to a lifestyle marked by high taste (fancy restaurants) while supposedly challenging the norms of such lifestyle via their disregard for its norm. This posture indirectly reinforces the values and subjectivity it aims to challenge, since the power to be indifferent and blasé concerning the mundane is inherently a bourgeois characteristic – only those powerful enough can enjoy an aesthetic existence and 'play' in the world.

This logic is present in an even clearer manner in Katrina's prank on Axel. She arranges a meeting at his marketing office in what is clearly petty vengeance for his poor treatment of their personal relationship. She appears as a supposed client who is offering a large deal only to constantly switch on and off into the stupid character they play at in the experiment. What we see in Katrina's attitude is precisely the option between employing stupidity to either challenge capitalism or to mock Axel. Despite her previous adamant statement of commitment to the experiment and her refusal to admit her feelings to Axel (again a form of bourgeois indifference), her intervention is one of mere playfulness and empty provocation. The scene develops into Axel taking her to a side room and bribing her, at her request, with his credit card. She then goes shopping for extremely high-end products and brings them back to the group. The culmination of the scene is a dinner banquet where the group consumes the products that Katrina purchased with Axel's credit card. The collective shows absolute disdain for everything in a wasteful celebration of the products available to them.

Still, there is a deeper and possibly more interesting dynamic at play. In this reading one sees that the group does not fail to be stupid by reproducing a bourgeois subjectivity. If the goal of the group was to experiment with

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12 It is perhaps interesting to note that both scenes concern instances of consumption. In other words, the group still consumes and carries on the habits of the bourgeois life.

stupidity, the conclusion of the experiment is one where their experiment proves successful. Even if the consequences were not the ones initially desired, one can argue that the obligation to submit to undesirable outcomes, i.e., impotence, is essentially the condition of stupidity and hence, even if indirectly, the result they strived for.

This logic is perhaps most evident in two scenes where the tension between sovereignty and impotence erupts. The first scene is the orgy and the second is their attempt to extrapolate the experiment and turn it into a mode of life. In the second, the characters spin a bottle to decide who is going to make the ultimate sacrifice of acting idiotically in a situation that 'really matters'. The first character selected, Axel, quickly admits to his inability to carry out the experiment. Axel shows throughout the film an ambiguous commitment to the experiment. He is the only character whose life outside the house where the group is living is clearly referenced. This is done mainly in two scenes. Once when he attends a work meeting for which he is completely unprepared. And secondly in his interviews that mimic a documentary reflecting on the experiment where the spectator not only gets a glance of his child, but we also hear a dialogue between him and his wife regarding his relationship to Katrine. In this sense, the film already sets up his refusal to commit to the social-challenging stupid posture. This is an iteration of the first unfolding of their posture: the aesthetic adoption of stupidity which fundamentally reinforces their bourgeois values.

The second unfolding, the one of impotence, is present when the bottle is spun again and falls on Henrik. He agrees to perform it but find himself unable when the moment arrives. One can clearly see his efforts but despite his willingness, he is unable to forfeit his social role as an intellectual (art teacher). In the scene, the whole group attends a lecture he is giving for an audience of old socialites about classic art and its importance. The implicit context one is made to understand is that Henrik is a prominent art historian or theorist who provides invited lectures for members of the higher society. One could assume that he also lectures regular university students or at least works under a more formalized and institutionalized auspice.

The choice of constructing the scene in this manner reveals a deeper point: what is supposed to be an instance of 'speaking truth to power', as in the realization of their agenda of employing stupidity as a challenging force, ends up revealing the impotence of such critical postures. The fact that Henrik is lecturing on art and its power, further emphasizes this limitation since it reveals that even if one tries, one inevitably returns or folds back into one's impotence. As the art that is the topic of the lecture which

supposedly challenges bourgeois values, “Matisse was provocative and full of surprises”,<sup>13</sup> Henrik too is unable to challenge his audience. It is not a question of will but a question of lack of power, he is unable despite his attempt since reason is shown to always be stronger and hence best.

In both instances, what is shown to the viewer is the inability to be stupid – the impossibility of escaping ‘the best’ given that its reason is always strongest. And it is exactly this force of reason that dominates stupidity therefore revealing the underlying impotence of reason, its stupidity. We are shown, under the same movement, both the mightiness of reason, given that its control is proven to be absolute, and its impotence, since it is unable to abstain from control, it is unable to be stupid.

This connects well to the first scene where what is initially a birthday party for one of the characters quickly becomes an orgy. In this scene we encounter the same dynamic of the aesthetic adoption of stupidity and the impossibility of its real adoption. The orgy that is proposed within the logic of the experiment where idiocy is being enacted becomes a reproduction of bourgeois sexual behaviors. On the one hand, some of the characters engage in open sexual acts under an imperative to fully enjoy their sexuality without responsibility. The clear circle back to bourgeois behavior is made evident by the attempt to extrapolate any moralism: their claim to unrestricted power that abolishes and extrapolates all boundaries is a form of imposition in itself – the imperative to be free.<sup>14</sup> In the scene, Susanne is not taking part in the experiment and tries to remove herself from the situation only to find herself pulled into it initially by Stoffer and later by the others. On the other hand, Josephine removes herself from the room and secludes herself in another environment. Jeppe follows her and in their attempt to perform their ‘idiotic’ sexuality, what we see is a reproduction of classic romantic love. The characters begin their interaction under the guise of the experiment but move into a romantic exchange of declarations of love. Once again, in both iterations the stupidity of the characters is not found in their intentional enacting of stupidity but in their inevitable failure to realize it.

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13 The scene also has a reference to an obelisk which, intentionally or not, connects to Flaubert’s comments.

14 The connection to neoliberalism will not be explored here, but one might argue that such ‘imperative to be free’ in one’s lifestyle operates under the same logic as the imperative for a free market and its opposition to any regulation or ‘normativity’.

#### 4 Stupidity Is Always Random

*Au Hazard de Balthazar* is Bresson's adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. The title loosely translates into 'Balthazar at Random' and it follows the life and death of a donkey who is baptized as Balthazar. Despite not following the storyline of the book, tangential references are made to its narrative. The relevancy of those references becomes important because, unlike the book, there is no clear definition of who the idiot is in the film. Obviously, the donkey is the protagonist of the story and the connection between donkeys and stupidity is a well-known trope: donkeys serve as a metaphor for stupidity in several contexts and in some are even synonymous with it. Still, one can hardly point at the donkey as *THE* idiot of the story as there is no single act of stupidity by the donkey or, in fact, by any other character. The film is a tale of jealousy, anger, lust or even cruelty but not one where stupidity is easily identified.

Bresson provides us with a story about nothing in particular and it is in this sense that it is a story of stupidity: it is a story without reason. Unlike the classical conceptualization of idiocy as ignorance or the purposeful enacting of a mistake, Bresson provides an account of stupidity that is characterized by the mere absence of reason. Such absence does not result in chaos or in a form of disorganization but rather in arbitrariness. Bresson shows that stupidity is not the negative side of intelligence or its opposite mirroring image. Instead, the idiocy enacted in the film emerges from the impossibility of any reasonable account for the unfolding of events: they merely happen without reason, hence stupidly.

The film is constructed around a series of events that happen to the donkey without ever being about the donkey or because of the donkey even though his presence is necessary. The donkey is never the center of the events or causes any of them, but his presence is an invariable factor connecting all of them. From the initial scene where Jacques and Marie baptize it, to its final death among the sheep, Balthazar's presence is obviously not contingent on the events around his existence, which never occur in a direct or purposeful manner that would establish a relation of causality and therefore demonstrate reason. The donkey serves merely as an excuse for the inevitable unfolding of circumstances.

For instance, the donkey is given away to the baker and used to make deliveries. The delivery worker, Gerrard, is jealous of Marie's love for the donkey and punishes it. The donkey cannot be considered responsible for ending up at the baker's possession nor for the attachment Marie feels for him. Moreover, this small configuration seems disconnected to the

overarching unfolding of the film. It is true that Gerrard and Marie develop a problematic relationship and the donkey continues in a long trajectory of abuses and exploitation but those are events that line up next to each other rather than form a sequence. It is a narrative where the events add to each other without forming a chronology or order. They co-exist in a coincidental manner rather than form a plot. The events have a cardinal status instead of an ordinal one. Each occurrence in the donkey's life appears as an enclosed 'amount' of components. These particular incidents have a quantity and one can see how they pile up together, but one does not see how the events relate to each other to amount to anything in particular.

If one returns to the donkey as a placeholder for stupidity, one finds that stupidity is both constantly present and irrelevant to the circumstances. The situation is just a random conflation of facts, permeated by an overshadowing triviality that tells no story. One can easily point at the cruelty of Gerrard's abuses or the misconception of blaming the donkey for his unreciprocated love or the misfortune that the donkey would end up at the hands of his 'foe', but it seems stupidity is nowhere to be found on the superficial level. If one were to pose the question 'why are these events stupid?', any valid response would need to over-interpret the significance of the events that unfold. Ultimately, there is no valid reason, and it is in this lack of reason that stupidity is to be found. *Au Hazard Balthazar* is a narrative without sovereign and without enemy. It shows a neutralized stupid sovereign that does not govern since it is merely without reason hence it is a narrative where stupidity enacts the disruption of reason emphasized previously. The donkey that acts as the protagonist of the film embodies this randomness of stupidity that is both ubiquitous and insignificant – it is absolute because of, rather than despite, its triviality. The narrative in Bresson's film makes nothing known, it provides no reason, it merely occurs.

## 5 Stupid Existence

Derrida's formulation of the entanglement between stupidity and reason clarifies the previous logic: "at bottom what is irreducibly *bête*, [...], is life pure and simple, which is both infinitely *bête* and cunning, intelligent, *bête* and anything but *bête*: it is the living in life itself which outplays the opposition between *bêtise* and its supposed contrary," (BS1, 176). For Derrida, life pure and simple is not suspended in a neither/nor relation – it is not infinitely stupid *and* intelligent; it is infinitely stupidly intelligent or

intelligently stupid as it 'outplays the opposition between stupidity and its supposed contrary'.

Read in this light, Derrida is demonstrating the impotence of reason in all its mightiness, or, to rephrase the original formula, the reason of the strongest is always best because it never establishes itself.<sup>15</sup> Derrida shows the sovereignty/control is best understood as the impotence of an ithyphallic erection (BS1, 224) – a permanent standing power that must constantly enact its power since it never fully accomplishes it. An example of this is the idea of a *standing* army ensuring peace. As we see in *The Idiots*, the characters' final stupidity emerges precisely from their inability to be stupid: they are unable to be impotent. Their fundamental weakness is found in their impotence to challenge the logic of sovereignty be it via their reproduction of the sovereign demand for obedience or in their refusal to obey any external norms. Both these postures show that they remain proper bourgeois citizens. Despite their efforts and disagreements, the characters constantly find themselves in positions of control. The prank Stoffer plays on Jeppe, demonstrates this duality of refusing to be controlled while exerting control that characterizes sovereignty. In the scene we are shown a dynamic where one holds power over the other and that when such power is exerted, the subject (who despite voluntarily initiating the situation) is clearly frustrated by the situation in which he ultimately finds himself.

In the mentioned scene, the group is at a bar. Jeppe, who is younger and more fragile, is acting stupid while Stoffer is playing his handler. At one point Jeppe interacts with a group of tattooed motorcyclists who are presented as possibly dangerous characters. Jeppe is flirting with the dangerous encounter but assumes that the idiotic posture shields him from real danger while also carefully keeping his distance from the danger. As a response, Stoffer pushes him to sit with the motorcycle gang and even leaves him there while he supposedly does some errands. This clearly puts Jeppe over the edge, and he becomes immediately uncomfortable. He tries to escape, but the men hold him. Josephine comes to Jeppe's defense by arguing that he might get beaten up, to which Stoffer responds that he just

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15 For example, see Derrida's argument that sovereignty *must* be immortal and indivisible precisely because it is not so (BS1 42). This is further confirmed by his reading of Hobbes' *Leviathan* as a prosthetic/artificial machinery of sovereignty: it functions 'as if it was natural/self-evident/self-governing. It aims to reproduce, without including (BS1: 46–47), the divine creative/administrative logic.

needs to play his part, and it might even be a good thing as he might learn something.

The dynamic highlighted in the previous paragraphs is explicit: Jeppe clearly feels uncomfortable by being put in a situation where he is no longer in control of his stupidity. He appeals to a form of self-sovereignty where reason limits the previous adoption of stupidity, or, in other words, reason limits the abstention from reason. The other side of this coin is found in Stoffer's attitude. His response concerning the lesson immediately connects to the sovereign's ability to demonstrate its reason. In teaching Jeppe a lesson, Stoffer is demonstrating to him 'who knows best' and hence who sets the rules of the game. This arbitrariness of power employed by Stoffer plays out throughout the film, but it is in this scene where it finds its most emblematic enactment: the stupidity of the sovereign appears in the fact that it must simultaneously resort to senseless power while also speaking on behalf of a reasonable posture. It is a voice of reason – Stoffer's attitude is one that cannot escape attempting to be the victor, to best rather than be bested. His response to Karen's accusation that he behaved horribly to Jeppe is that Jeppe is a "wimp" hence leaving no doubts that the supposed aim of the 'lesson' was to teach him about power and the importance of having it or at least understanding who has it.

Or to put it in Derrida's terms, the scene confirms that the reason of the strongest is always best because it demonstrates that even if retroactively one judges reason to be stupid, one can only do so from within the logic that there is a stronger reason under which the past must be judged, and such stupidity administered or, better yet, eliminated on behalf of reason. In the end, despite their attempt to forfeit sovereignty, the characters of the film are constantly pushed back into a form of agency that constitutes a form of self-sovereignty.

Karen's final encounter with her family is an emblematic demonstration of this. While the others have already forfeited their desire to be idiots, Karen volunteers to prove her commitment to the logic of the experiment by visiting her family. At this stage we discover that Karen had disappeared without any trace for two weeks after losing her son, even missing his funeral. Her attempt to act stupidly in front of her family highlights the fundamental aporia of the aesthetic employment of idiocy. When it was employed as merely an aesthetic device of bourgeois escapism by the other members of the group, it proved impotent as it was unable to break with the underlying sovereign power that enables it. In other words, it was successful only within the contained realm of an aesthetic harmless attitude that was unable to affect life. On the other hand, when it was employed as a

proper device of escapism by a subject who was unable to confront reality and attempted to abstain from agency and self-sovereignty, the merely aesthetic was not sufficient. Her husband slaps her in an act that breaks with her posture and demands her to be reasonable.

In other words, while the others can be stupid but are unwilling because they are reasonable, Karen is unable to be stupid despite desiring to be so. In both cases, the final situation is an irrational submission to reason that emerges from an impotence to be otherwise than reasonable. One *must* be sovereign, precisely because one cannot be. One cannot abandon a bourgeois life, one cannot avoid appealing to some form of authority, one cannot cope with the frustrations of life ... One is simultaneously an autonomous agent and without any grasp or control, both the supreme grantor of reason and a submissive powerless idiot. As is the donkey in Bresson's film, one is the central axis for the unfolding of reality while (or better yet, because of) not exerting any power over it.

This failure reproduces the aporetic tension present in Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pecuchet* whose ultimate and supreme encyclopedia would eliminate stupidity (BS1, *passim*). In their failure, the two characters exemplify the 'stupidity' of intelligence in its attempt to become all-engulfing and hence eliminate stupidity. Instead, what becomes evident is the aporia presented by Musil and Derrida: the more one bests stupidity, the stronger it gets.

Unlike Derrida, but nevertheless following him, the argument here does not aim to highlight that what we find in the films is the fact that the sovereign behaves 'stupidly', as in the sense that it is barbarous and arbitrary. This is a problematic configuration, but the thesis here aims to argue that this is not the adequate angle to tackle the issue. Or to put it in another way, as bestial as the sovereign might be, it will always be intelligent since it is infallible: it is the definite and ultimate voice of reason as it is the strongest. It is precisely this infallibility of reason that represents the limitation highlighted here: the fact that it cannot be anything but the best.

The fundamental question that Derrida's theory allows one to extract from the films is 'why can't we be stupid?'. As shown in the films, this impossibility of realizing stupidity is already entrenched in the question itself since to answer such question one would need to provide reasons and hence, not be stupid. One constantly finds oneself circling back to this dynamic where reason is both demanded and never sufficient to satisfy the demand: reason dominates us, but it never responds to the predominance of stupidity.



The films are not representations or demonstrations of this impasse since that would require a sovereign position from where one could observe stupidity and classify it. Such a position of power would inherently be one of reason and hence, following Musil's quote, stupid. The films are themselves impotent against this predominance. They are stupid interventions into stupidity and in this sense a failure to account for it. But more interestingly, in their failure they enact, perhaps by accident, perhaps purposely, the stupidity they cannot demonstrate or comment on. There is no moral lesson or wisdom to be obtained from them but merely a confrontation with this limit of reason.

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