The Hunt

Director: Thomas Vinterberg
Country: Denmark
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A review by Philip French for *The Observer:*

The Danish film-maker Thomas Vinterberg made his name in 1998 with Festen (aka The Celebration), one of those family reunion dramas that culminate in savage blood-letting. In that case, an embittered son reveals that he and his twin sister were abused by his wealthy, overbearing father whose 60th birthday the dysfunctional clan has gathered to celebrate. The movie was made in that deliberately ugly style embraced by Dogme 95, the self-publicising faction formed by Vinterberg and Lars von Trier to purify a corrupt cinema and committed to eschewing special effects, artificial lighting, makeup, incidental music, cutting within a sequence, specially built sets and tripods.

The group's creators have moved on from the austere conditions they originally proposed, Vinterberg to traditional realism, von Trier to increased stylisation. But in his outstanding new film, The Hunt, Vinterberg has chosen to revisit Festen. Back in 1999, a Danish child psychologist visited him with a proposal for a movie taking a radically different approach to the problems at the centre of the film. But Vinterberg was apparently attempting to escape the oppressive corner he'd driven himself into and set aside the material his visitor had given him. A decade later a depressed Vinterberg had cause to consult this same psychologist and before doing so took a look at the file he'd left. So impressed was he that he decided to make this his next project.

Like Festen, The Hunt (scripted by Vinterberg and Tobias Lindholm) is set in idyllic rural Denmark, in a small tight-knit, lower middle-class community, rather than a haut-bourgeois family, but child abuse and the effect of its revelation is still the key issue. But in this case the alleged perpetrator is shown from the start to be innocent. In John Patrick Shanley's marvellous 2008 film Doubt, we are never absolutely certain whether Philip Seymour Hoffman's popular, humane New York priest is a paedophile or Meryl Streep's vindictive nun is merely motivated by envy. This creates suspense by inviting observers to examine the evidence drawn on by the accuser and the accused's defenders. Vinterberg eschews such ambiguity. His embattled hero, Lucas (Mads Mikkelsen), is a victim both of something awry in complacent Danish society (in this it resembles and echoes Michael Haneke's The White Ribbon) and the dangerous little lies told by an innocent child.

As superbly registered by Charlotte Bruus Christensen's excellent photography, the time is late autumn, the nights are drawing in, there are both falling leaves and a few odd snowflakes in the air. Lucas is going cheerfully about his temporary job at a small nursery school, despite having lost his proper teaching post as a result of economy measures and fighting a bitter battle with his ex-wife over the custody of their teenage son. Things seem to be looking up when he acquires as a lover a well-educated woman from eastern Europe doing domestic work locally. But then a little girl, Klara, daughter of Lucas's best friend Theo, misconstrues Lucas's refusal of a gift, and seeks a little revenge by putting together some clues randomly and persuasively snatched from the air. Seemingly rationalising her peevishness, Klara tells the middle-aged school administrator, Grethe, that Lucas has exposed himself to her.

Grethe, sympathetically sensitised to such things, calls in a child psychologist, who plies the child with leading questions. He decides the police must be informed, she thinks the issue should be raised at an imminent parents' meeting and that Lucas's son could be in need of protection. First slowly, then rapidly, Lucas is buried in an avalanche of suspicion, the very weight of which turns accusation into conviction and transforms the victim's existing doubts into paranoia.

Lucas, the decent man marginalised by social change, is transformed into an object, a threat to the community, someone to be ganged up against, a dangerous figure who helps those around him discover a new sense of angry unity. Shops refuse him service. A butcher provokes a fight with him and Lucas retaliates. A shot is fired through his window and his dog is killed. He withdraws into himself and the delicate fortress of his home. Only his son and the boy's godfather stand beside him. Meanwhile, the child who has caused it all stands uncomprehendingly by, passing on to other things and other stories. It's a frightening and all too convincing story that has its parallels in current events in Britain, where deep waters are being plumbed and disturbing ripples created by the Jimmy Savile affair.

Eventually the movie comes to a climax during a Christmas Eve service in the local church, where the whole community is confronted by Lucas and they are forced to confront themselves. The result is immensely powerful in its invocation of the true meaning of Christian charity and its symbolism. Another significant symbol is that of the hunt – for scapegoats, witches, victims, and for innocent animals, whom Lucas hunts in the woods, a manly pastime he ironically initiates his own son into.

At the centre of The Hunt, rarely out of the frame, is Mads Mikkelsen, one of the finest actors at work today. In recent years he's played the most frightening of Bond's enemies (Le Chiffre, the villain with bleeding eyes in Casino Royale); Stravinsky in Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky; a reckless Resistance leader in Nazi-occupied Denmark in Flame and Citron; a petty Copenhagen criminal in the first two parts of the Pusher trilogy; a charismatic 18th-century physician in A Royal Affair; a medieval prisoner of Norse warriors in Valhalla Rising. He's played every kind of man and everyman and given each real individuality.

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