

## Grace and Violence: Questioning Politics and Desire in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*

Robert Sinnerbrink

Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), the first film in his *America: Land of Opportunity* trilogy (which includes *Manderlay* (2005) and the now deferred *Washington [sic]*) has generated considerable controversy. When it premiered in Cannes in 2003, the international jury criticised the film for "lacking humanism"—a valid observation given the film's strongly "anti-humanist" perspective. Others have criticised its seeming misogyny, claiming that von Trier's "apparent artistic delight in watching women suffer," his "woman-as-victim" trope, has hit "fever pitch" in *Dogville* (see Peden 2005: 119 ff.). American film critics, unsurprisingly, have been more scathing about its political stance. Roger Ebert, for example, denounced the film as a crude anti-American diatribe, opining that von Trier "approaches the ideological subtlety of a raving prophet on a street corner" (2004). Todd McCarthy, well-known film reviewer in *Variety*, went even further, describing it as von Trier's call for America's destruction:

There is no escaping the fact that the entire point of *Dogville* is that von Trier has judged America, found it wanting and therefore deserving of immediate annihilation. This is, in short, his "J'accuse!" directed toward an entire nation. [...] (2003, quoted in Fibiger 2003)

McCarthy continues:

The identification with *Dogville* and the United States is total and unambiguous, even without the emphatically vulgar use of pointedly grim and grisly photographs of Depression-era have-nots and crime victims under the end credits, accompanied, as if it were needed, by David Bowie's "Young Americans." Through his contrived tale of one mistreated woman, who is devious herself, von Trier indicates as being unfit to inhabit the earth a country that has surely attracted, and given opportunity to, more people onto its shores than any other in the history of the world. Go figure. (2003, quoted in Fibiger 2003)

This breathtakingly indignant sermon on America, morality, and politics would be worthy of analysis in its own right. What it signals, I suggest, is the strikingly *affective* response that *Dogville*, like other von Trier films, generates in relation to the question of ethics and politics. Here we should acknowledge that much of this intensity has been a response to the question of *violence* in *Dogville*, in particular the depiction of violence towards women, the awful suffering that is inflicted upon Grace (Nicole Kidman) (see Bainbridge 2004 for a discussion of traumatic affect and spectatorship in von Trier's work); but the discussion also clearly concerns the question of violence and politics, in particular the violence of (American) democracy. McCarthy's stridently defensive response is representative of a diffuse, inchoate, but also pronounced awareness of the political dimensions of *Dogville*, its violent critique of American, or more generally liberal democracy, an awareness that is articulated in *affective* rather than conceptual terms.

Perhaps for just this reason, however, many critics have questioned whether *Dogville* can even be read as a political film (see Fibiger 2003). Jacques Rancière, for example, has claimed that *Dogville* exemplifies what he calls the contemporary "ethical turn" in aesthetics consonant with the post-ideological politics of democratic consensus and its supplementary morality of "infinite justice" (Rancière 2006: 2-4). While there is a complex critique of morality in *Dogville*, this does not exhaust its philosophical and political meaning. In what follows, I wish to question Rancière's reading of the film and to suggest that it engages, rather, in a political, moral, and aesthetic experiment: one that aims to show the violence inhabiting liberal democracy, but which also explores the forms of desire that underlie contemporary morality and politics (an experiment carried on in *Manderlay* with respect to American race relations). In approaching *Dogville* as a work of cinematic philosophy, I explore the following question posed in and by the film: what is the relationship between morality,

politics, and violence in liberal democracy? Far from expressing a depoliticised consensus politics and ideologically tainted morality, as Rancière maintains, I shall argue that *Dogville* enacts a cinematic questioning of two dogmas of democracy: the role of morality in the constitution of democratic community, and the primacy of exchange relations in liberal democracy. The film critically challenges these dogmas by exposing the underlying libidinal economy of desire that organises and maintains the democratic community.

### Rancière on *Dogville*: The ‘Ethical Turn’ in Philosophy and Cinema

In a fascinating recent article, “The Ethical Turn in Aesthetics and Politics,” Jacques Rancière (2006) cites von Trier’s *Dogville*, along with Clint Eastwood’s *Mystic River* (2003), as filmic instances of the contemporary *ethical turn* in cinema. *Dogville*, Rancière claims, depicts the “avatars of justice in a local community” (2006: 2), displaying the contemporary retreat or eclipse of politics in art in favour of a *post-political* aesthetics that either attempts to reforge the ethical and social bonds of community in a pluralistic manner, or else bears witness to the unrepresentable and irredeemable catastrophes of history and politics (2006: 2-3). We should note that Rancière by no means provides a fully-fledged reading of the film but uses it, rather, as an “illustration” of this contemporary ethical turn (much like Tom Edison Jr. does in the film, taking the character of Grace to be an “illustration” of the problem of acceptance). Indeed, it is not the cinematic or philosophical aspects of the film that interest Rancière so much as its *ideological* significance, the way it exemplifies the ethical turn as a broader cultural phenomenon.

Before turning to his discussion of *Dogville*, let me outline very briefly what Rancière means by the “ethical turn”. Put simply, for Rancière the contemporary ascendancy of “ethics” signals the increasing collapse of the distinction between *fact* and *law* in favour of a universalised liberal democratic ‘consensus’ coupled with a morality of infinite justice. It refers to the suppression of the dissensus within the social body that generates and sustains politics as such. Here we must understand politics not in the “post-ideological” sense of mere socio-economic management, but in Rancière’s emphatic sense of the “impossible” demand for universal justice and equality made on behalf of the radically excluded, or “part of no part,” within any antagonistic social body (1999: 123 ff.). With the ethical turn, politics becomes defined by the socio-economic management of competing interests negotiating their diverse social, economic, and cultural claims against the normative background of the market and established frameworks of law. This situation generates not only an increasing *indistinction* between *what is* and *what ought to be*; it also generates a compensatory return to *absolutist morality*—“an unprecedented dramaturgy of infinite evil, justice and redemption” (2006: 2) - that supplants politics in the proper sense. For Rancière, this contemporary morality of “infinite justice” - whether directed at an unpredictable evil threat (terrorism) or a past and irredeemable catastrophe (the Holocaust) - finds expression not only in philosophy and politics but in contemporary art and film.

There is much more to be said about Rancière’s line of argument here (see Rancière 1999: 95-140). In what follows, however, I shall focus on his claim that *Dogville* exemplifies the ethical turn in contemporary cinema. Because of this particular focus, Rancière passes over the very interesting cinematic and dramatic features of *Dogville*: the obviously theatrical, quasi-Brechtian space in which the narrative unfolds, the absence of buildings and major props, the painted lines and labels representing the buildings, streets, and geography of the town (recalling Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* and *Caucasian Chalk Circle* but also Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*), the conspicuous use of music (from Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* to David Bowie’s *Young Americans*, which replaced von Trier’s original choice, Nina Simone’s version of Kurt Weill’s Brechtian song, “Pirate Jenny”), the prominent role of the narrator’s [John Hurt’s] ironic and reflexive voiceover, and so on. Instead, Rancière foregrounds the way *Dogville* “transposes the Brechtian fable, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, Brecht’s rewriting of the Joan of Arc story, showing how Joan wanted “to impose Christian morality in the capitalist jungle” (2006: 2). Von Trier transforms Brecht’s political fable into a moral tale of the misfortunes of Grace, “the alien girl,” who, in order to gain acceptance by the community of Dogville, submits herself to labour, exploitation, and finally, to persecution as she tries to escape her subjection.

Rancière’s comparison between Brecht’s play and von Trier’s film has a particular purpose: to emphasise the “gap between the two epochs,” that is, those of *political* and *post-political art*. The contrast here is between Brecht’s properly political

drama (*Saint Joan* was first performed in 1928), and von Trier's cinematic exemplar of the ethical turn, *Dogville*'s aesthetic *Verfremdungseffekt*, presumably, remaining without political consequence. As Rancière remarks, Brecht's play is a fable about the conflictual nature of politics, which starkly demonstrates the inadequacy of Christian morality to combat capitalism. Conversion morality has to be transformed into a militant morality, one which takes as its criterion "the necessities of the struggle against oppression" (2006: 2). The drama of *Saint Joan*, for Rancière, stages the conflict between two forms of right: the right of the oppressed to struggle against their oppression and the 'right' of law that accompanies and backs up the system of oppression, which is "defended by the strike-busting policemen" (2006: 3). The conflict between these two types of violence is also a conflict between two moralities and two conceptions of rights (2006: 3). Hence *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* is a properly political play, Rancière concludes, because it demonstrates "the impossibility of a mediation between these two rights and these two types of violence" (2006: 3).

According to Rancière, it is precisely this antagonism defining politics that is absent from von Trier's *Dogville*. Instead of a critical presentation of the inadequacy of Christian morality to counter the power of capitalism, *Dogville* presents us with a moral fable of good versus evil, complete with a violent retributive conflagration. In doing so, however, *Dogville* deprives the conflict at issue of its proper historico-political context, and fails to foreground its structural causes or the system of oppression that generated it. Instead of demonstrating the social and historical forces confronting the characters, we have a "timeless" fable depicting the corrupting egoism that renders impossible the utopian project of a just society. Instead of Brechtian revolution we have von Trier's destructive nihilism, symptomatic of the post-political reversion to the morality of infinite justice and retribution, an aesthetic stance consonant, Rancière goes on to claim, with neoconservative justifications for military aggression.

Rancière's summary of the ideological-moral drama of *Dogville* is worth quoting at length:

Grace no longer represents the good soul mystified by her ignorance of the causes of evil. She is just the stranger, the excluded one who wants to be admitted into the community and who is subjected by the community before being rejected by it. Her disillusionment and her narrative of suffering no longer depend on any system of domination that could be understood and destroyed. They depend upon a form of evil that is the cause and the effect of its own reproduction. This is why the only fitting retribution is the radical cleansing exercised upon the community by a Lord and Father who is no one else but the king of thugs. "Only violence helps where violence reigns" was the Brechtian lesson. Only evil repays evil, is the transformed formula, the one that is appropriate for consensual and humanitarian times. Let us translate this into the language of George W. Bush: only infinite justice is appropriate in the fight against the axis of evil. (2006: 3)

Rancière makes three important claims here: 1) that Grace is a moral figure of exclusion from the community, "the stranger," whose predicament resonates with the contemporary "ethics of the Other"; 2) the exploitation and persecution to which she is subjected is a moral evil that does not refer to any broader system of social, economic, or political domination; and 3), without any such system of domination that could be exposed and destroyed, the film culminates in a violent retribution (the fiery destruction of Dogville); an aesthetic expression of the perverted morality of "infinite justice" that is characteristic of contemporary neoliberalism. Indeed, Grace's final decision that America and humanity "would be better off" without towns like Dogville bears comparison, Rancière will claim, with President Bush's 'War on Terror'. Rancière and Todd McCarthy (of *Variety*) are not as opposed in their readings of *Dogville* as one might have expected!

Now Rancière's interpretation - that *Dogville* reflects the ideology of democratic neoliberalism rather than *resisting* it via dramatic-cinematic critique - would doubtless have surprised von Trier. In *Dogville*, the parallel between America's ideological mission to "spread freedom" by "humanitarian interventions" is made subtly, largely in Grace's concluding argument with her father and self-serving justification for her decision to destroy Dogville. But it is quite explicitly drawn in *Manderlay* (2005). In the latter, Grace returns in search of redemption, and finds it by emancipating a group of slaves who have remained anachronistically sequestered within the walls of an extensive Southern property (Manderlay) well into the 1920s. Grace liberates them from bondage and attempts to educate them to assume their democratic freedom. Like

*Dogville*, *Manderlay* depicts an experiment in spreading freedom that exposes an underlying libidinal economy of desire (signaled by Grace's transgressive affair with alpha-slave Timothy). Her attempt at educating the slaves into autonomy, however, proves to have disastrous results. A pernicious version of the master/slave dialectic is exposed, where the desire for domination - in both senses of dominating others and being dominated oneself - reveals a disturbingly complicit relationship between whites and blacks, a compulsion to repeat the trauma of racial domination that still haunts contemporary American society.

To return to *Dogville*, I wish to challenge Rancière's three central claims that allow him to cite von Trier's film as an exemplar of the ethical turn. To rehearse and respond to these claims: 1) Grace is indeed the moral figure of 'the stranger,' radically excluded from the community; but her request for asylum also exposes the violence and exploitation upon which the democratic social order is founded. 2) The exploitation and persecution to which she is subjected *does* refer to a system of domination but also to its underlying economy of desire; precisely that which sustains the inequality and injustice of contemporary democracy, concealing its violence and exploitation under the masks of nature and morality. And 3), Grace's violent retribution against the community of Dogville is not simply the expression of the foreclosure of politics by moral ideology and liberal democratic consensus. Rather, it articulates some of the deadlocks of contemporary liberal democracy that are resolved *in extremis* precisely through the use of violence. In doing so, the film exposes the violence at the heart of democracy. The dialectic of grace and violence that it unfolds, which concludes not with a synthesis but a violent interruption, is a critical meditation on the question of democracy today.

### ***Dogville* as philosophical melodrama and as moral-political critique**

"The sad tale of the township of Dogville," as John Hurt, the narrator, intones, is set in a theatrically imagined small town in the Rocky Mountains during the 1930s. With its minimal set, sparse lighting, painted street and building names, absent building walls and doors, it clearly presents itself as a 'Brechtian' theatrical space transposed into film. The opening image is a God's eye view (von Trier calls it a "moon landing" image) of the town plan: we have here both a formal Brechtian estrangement from conventional narrative cinema, but also a reflexive visual and narrative perspective on the story about to unfold. In *Dogville*, we find the 'Brechtian' interruption of cinematic convention in the theatrical *mise-en-scène*, the minimal and painted set, and the deliberately self-reflexive presentation of its own status as a narrative film that is also allegorical. Von Trier's use of the "alienation effect", however, is not so much concerned with raising consciousness, in a Marxist fashion, about the social, historical, and economic conditions of oppression. It is more concerned with opening up the affective experience of an impasse, an *aporia*, a tragic irreconcilability, all of which contribute to the aesthetic reconstitution of (cinematic) experience in response to the hegemony of Hollywood, the audiovisual or culture industry aspect of American global hegemony.

At the same time, *Dogville*, like other von Trier films (such as *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*), appropriates generic conventions of Hollywood - particularly the melodrama - while also attempting to renew the dying tradition of European modernist cinema. Indeed, we could call *Dogville* an instance of *philosophical melodrama* that attempts to rehabilitate affect, the possibility of belief, the aesthetic reconstitution of experience in the face of its manipulation and destruction through culture industry homogenisation. It is an attempt to generate *cinematic experience through a renovation of tragedy*, provoking both thought and affect (without final resolution) within a framework of artificial, self-imposed aesthetic rules. If the dramatic content of von Trier's films draws heavily on the genre of melodrama, their cinematic form adheres (rather loosely) to the austere aesthetic of the *Dogme95* manifesto (hand-held camera, rules concerning the use of music, lighting, stage props, improvisation, takes without rehearsals, and so on). As Slavoj Žižek remarks, it is as though von Trier requires the form of independent art cinema in order to screen and transmit the "forbidden" content of affectively charged, emotionally excessive melodrama, along with its philosophical and political accompaniments (Žižek 2001: 59).

Von Trier clearly adopts Brechtian techniques, primarily in order to release that aspect of Brechtian drama that remained forbidden or suppressed: *affect*. In a reversal of Brecht—who suspends affective identification, via dramatic estrangement, in favour of theoretical and political reflection—with von Trier it is the power of affective involvement—encompassing both emotion and sensation—that is elicited and intensified by means of the 'Brechtian' cinematic devices of interruption

and estrangement. The generation of affect - via an appropriation of narrative tropes from cinematic melodrama - is then harnessed for a form of critical reflection on the thwarted possibilities of contemporary cinema to generate transformative experience. [Here I am thinking of experience [*Erfahrung*] in Walter Benjamin's sense of a collective, transformative, shared orientation towards history, culture, and politics rather than the idiosyncratic, subjective 'living through' of merely private episodes [*Erlebnis*] (see Benjamin 1992: 153-159).] In the case of *Dogville*, the affective responses range from incredulity, indignation, anxiety, dismay, to anger, horror, and disgust; this affective involvement is intensified, moreover, in the name of a cinematic form of (cultural and political) *enlightenment*. This enlightening effect is directed at the American culture industry domination of cinema; the colonisation of desiring consciousness characteristic of "global culture," which we might call the cultural-ideological wing of economic and political globalisation.

At the same time, and more directly, *Dogville* also presents itself as a *political allegory*. It is a microcosm of (American) democracy: a film concerned with the violence and exploitation at the heart of liberal democracy, it shows the impossibility of a democracy based solely upon exchange relations and various forms of social, economic, but also sexual exploitation. Coupled with this political orientation, however, is also a *religious-moral* dimension: *Dogville* critically exposes the moral and religious underpinnings of political community, which have taken on a more hegemonic role in our allegedly secularist political states (everything from the institutional power of the Christian Right to the rise of militant Islamism). It is this unstable conjunction of affective, political, and moral-religious elements in *Dogville* that perhaps explains the very intense but also rather negative reception it has provoked. Let us look more closely, then, at how *Dogville* stages its cinematic-aesthetic experiment, its intensive questioning of desire and politics, leaving open for the moment the question of its ultimate success or failure as a cinematic work of art.

The quiet equilibrium of the isolated community of Dogville is disturbed by the arrival of a stranger, Grace, "the beautiful fugitive," seeking shelter and asylum while trying to escape from her powerful father and his underworld gangsters. The enigma of Grace is that she simultaneously embodies conflicting, even contradictory dimensions. At one level, Grace is an *allegorical figure*; she represents God's grace, with all the Christian religious resonances of the term including blessedness, virtue, and forgiveness. On another, she is a *gangster's daughter*, an idealistic but also strong-willed figure, questioning the privileges of her upbringing and rebelling against her allotted career as inheritor of the power to run her father's criminal organisation. She is also an *ethical figure*, whose understanding and acceptance of human desire is what separates her from the more rigid, hypocritical moralism of Dogville's residents. To be sure, Grace does have a (Christian) reforming impulse; to help the weak, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised, forgiving them their poverty-induced vices and educating them towards assuming their proper freedom. She will thereby become a figure that represents an important aspect of the American dream, the puritan-inspired utopia of a new land of freedom and opportunity; the grace that America can spread resonates with the words we hear the townsfolk singing at the Fourth of July lunch, words celebrating Grace's acceptance into Dogville ("America, America, God shed His Grace on me ..."). For all that, Grace is also clearly a figure of *romantic and erotic fascination* (a mysterious, beautiful stranger with some sort of dangerous 'past'); a fascination that soon turns to violence and degradation. Finally, Grace is also *the refugee*, seeking asylum in Dogville, a small mountain town with poor but decent folks, as far removed as she can imagine from the corruption of city life and brutality of the criminal underworld that is the fate she is trying to escape.

Grace is received by Tom Edison Jr. (Paul Bethany), the would-be writer, philosopher, and moralist seeking to awaken and enlighten his small community. Edison is in search of edification, an edifying exemplar or "illustration" for his lecture to the community on the need for a "moral rearmament" (with all its neoconservative resonances). The fundamental human problem, for Edison, is that of *acceptance*: the problem of *giving and receiving the gift* (and more ironically, as we see later in the film, of accepting the *status quo*, in all its intolerable injustice and cruelty). Are the people of Dogville really open to accepting a stranger in need, the quintessential 'Other' in need of hospitality? (See Atkinson 2005 for a reading of *Dogville* in terms of the Derridian question of hospitality) Can they receive (without demands), and freely accept the gift of Grace? Grace arrives opportunely (from Tom's perspective) to fulfill this role as living illustration of the problem of acceptance. She is a gift for Tom, but also, of course, an instrument to further his mission to morally rearm the community, which in turn serves his fantasised vocation as a writer, philosopher, and moral reformer. The gift of Grace, however, is also the awakening of *desire*, which comes to have increasingly sexual, even violent dimensions—from Tom's romantic yearning for Grace, her sexual harassment by various males in the town, to her eventual utter subjection as a social and sexual slave.

The libidinal economy of desire that Grace uncovers, as we shall see, provokes a violent, repressive response, to which Grace responds in turn with a violent *passage à l'acte* that concludes the film.

### ***Dogville's Two Dogmas of Democracy***

Rather than reconstruct the film's simple dramatic narrative, I shall focus on two key philosophical and political themes the film foregrounds in interesting ways. We might call these *two dogmas of democracy* that *Dogville* questions by staging its striking cinematic-philosophical experiment. The first is the *role of morality* in the *constitution of the democratic community*, in which Grace, the excluded individual, seeks asylum and acceptance within the social and political community. The second is the *primacy of exchange relations*, which are shown to structure not only the economic realm but to penetrate all social and sexual relations within the community. Exposing these dogmas in turn reveals the *underlying libidinal economy of desire* that shapes the various social, economic, and political relations within the democratic community of Dogville. In sum, the film seeks to unmask the violence and exploitation that founds and sustains the democratic order, which aims to preserve and administer the life of individuals but reacts with violence when its foundations are exposed or threatened.

1) *Morality and democratic community: Dogville* as a "philosophical fiction" presenting the response of a 'closed' community to the destabilising arrival of a stranger. Grace is the stateless individual outside the law (literally, an out-law), who asks for asylum, and then attempts to earn her acceptance into the community. Will the community accept the stranger even though she remains, as a fugitive of uncertain legal status, outside the law? This is the *moral* question Tom Edison Jr. puts to the citizens of Dogville: Grace is his "illustration" of the human problem of acceptance, which he thinks will show how "a greater attitude of openness and acceptance would be better for the country". But despite his high-sounding rhetoric, which makes the arrival of Grace and her possible acceptance a moral question, it is quickly apparent that the solution to the problem of Grace will be *political*: decided through public debate, negotiation, and voting. Indeed, Tom is the one who suggests - to the democratic meeting of the townsfolk - that the condition of Grace's acceptance into the community is that she *enter into exchange relations* (social and economic) *with others*. The gift of Grace can be accepted only on condition that the stranger offers something of herself in exchange: her labour, her companionship, her assumption of certain desirable roles within community, and finally, her utter exploitation as a sexual slave.

We have here a miniature, perverted version of the myth of the American dream: give us your poor, your wretched, and they will have an equal chance to pursue their own version of freedom and happiness (economic well-being) in the land of opportunity. In *Dogville*, Grace, the stranger outside the law and community, attempts to make a new life for herself, to find freedom and acceptance through the virtues of hard work and self-reliance; but she encounters instead an escalating cycle of exploitation, domination, and violence. She responds to this experience, first, by attempting to accommodate herself to the Dogvilleans' desires, no matter how intrusive; secondly, by attempting to escape from the town, paying ten dollars to be freighted elsewhere as "dangerous goods"; and thirdly, when these fail - once her escape is betrayed and she is bound in chains and subjected to nightly rapes - by exercising retributive violence that destroys the town and its inhabitants. This third strategy, the reversal of exploitation into violent retribution, culminates in the fiery destruction of Dogville under Grace's orders and the brutal machine gun massacre of its citizens (all except Moses, the black dog or mythical 'hellhound' that materialises before our eyes at the end of the film; a *cynical* [dog-like] sign of the persistence of the Mosaic law of retributive justice, "an eye for an eye," that lurks behind the democratic aspirations and moral sentimentality). Grace herself executes Tom, her erstwhile benefactor and ultimate betrayer, by shooting him in the head. Grace proceeds to this nihilistic conclusion, however, only once she has acceded to her 'proper' place in the violent social order as the inheritor of her father's criminal organisation. As Knox Peden observes, the paradoxical conclusion of *Dogville* is that the source of judgment - meted out by Grace's gangsters, those "ur-icons of American mythology" - is "the same as the crime" (2005: 123).

2) *The primacy of exchange relations and the underlying economy of desire*: the entire economy of the community of Dogville is built upon complex exchange relations, which turn out to be *exploitative* rather than equal. The film does not remain, however, at the level of exposing the social and historical mechanisms of domination, as an orthodox Brechtian play might. Rather, it goes on to expose the underlying *libidinal economy of desire* that founds and sustains the exchanges

and practices constituting this ostensibly democratic but also conservative community. By “libidinal economy of desire” I mean, in broadly psychoanalytical terms, a dynamic arrangement of libidinal relations or forms of human desire - the psycho-sexual and phantasmatic along with their various sublimated manifestations - that contribute to structuring the social relations, economic exchanges, cultural forms, and socio-political institutions of the community. [See Abella and Zilkha 2004 for a psychoanalytic reading of the film as a “parable on perversion”, which begins with a sado-masochistic relationship between Grace and the Dogvilleans, which is then reversed through Grace’s sadistic destruction of the community - an act that also exposes our own ambivalent sado-masochistic complicity with the film].

There is abundant evidence within the film of such latent economies of desire. The community of Dogville initially resists Grace’s offer of labour in exchange for protection and acceptance by the community. As a poor but proudly self-reliant community, they have all that they need, and are suspicious of this stranger with her uncertain status and exceptional situation. They only accept Grace once she offers to give freely to each member of the community not what they ‘need’ but rather what they don’t need; that is, what they *desire*. Grace satisfies their desires rather than their needs, and this satisfaction of desired goods takes various forms for each member of the community (helpmeet, companion, teacher, carer, friend, confidant, future lover, and finally, sexual slave). Grace’s arrival and attempted integration into the community gradually reveals the underlying libidinal economy of desire that sustains the social interactions, moral norms, even the political structure of the community. The underlying brutality, violence, and exploitative character of this desiring economy become increasingly manifest, escalating dramatically as Grace’s attempt to be accepted by the community starts to fall apart.

Grace attempts to win recognition of her status by attempting to satisfy desires that the townsfolk may harbour (even if they are unaware of it); yet in each instance more is extracted from her - a ‘surplus satisfaction,’ so to speak - than she can freely give. It is only when she refuses a request to satisfy sexualised desires that, first of all, the men (Chuck, Ben the lorry driver, and Tom), and then later the women (Vera in particular), begin to turn against her (it is the young boy Jason who begins this collective rejection of Grace when he perversely desires a spanking during a lesson, which Grace grudgingly complies with once he threatens to report her “brutality” - that is, her refusal to satisfy his desire - to his mother). The economy of desire here is one of unequal and asymmetrical exchange; more is asked of Grace than she can freely give to satisfy the desires of those whose recognition she requires and acceptance she seeks (who are also those upon whom she economically depends for employment). Her situation thus quickly turns into one of thoroughgoing exploitation, reducing Grace to the status of social and sexual slave, a commodity to be exchanged with the gangsters. What the townsfolk get in return, however, is not wealth, liberty, or “moral rearmament,” but rather violent death and the destruction of Dogville.

In Dogville, then, it is not freedom, equality, or the rule of law that founds and sustains the democratic order; rather it is a certain economy of desire, which remains haunted by violence and exploitation. It is this violence that underpins and sustains the democratic way of life that Dogvilleans defend (their town meetings and voting procedures, such as the collective decision to harbour Grace but also to enslave and exchange her for money). Dogville responds to the threat Grace poses to the community by oppressing and enslaving her; her truth-telling and acknowledgment of the ‘baser’ desires underlying the moral values and social practices of Dogvilleans results not in her acceptance but in her exclusion, her enslavement, and finally, her expulsion from the community. In a crucial scene, for example, Grace tells Tom that he should not feel ashamed about his desire to sleep with her (despite her sexual abuse by others), moreover, that it is only human that he too could doubt his own moral purity; this non-judgmental, even ‘masochistic’ acceptance of his ‘baser’ desires—which is also a provocation for Tom to confront the discomfiting truth of his desire—makes him feel exposed, threatened in his very (social) identity as a philosopher-moralist, indeed as a future writer and novelist. Hence Tom’s sudden decision to betray Grace to her gangster father because she poses a threat to his own fantasised identity and vocation. Grace’s exposure of Tom’s real desire leads to her betrayal and attempted destruction.

Dogville’s argument, so to speak, is that the democratic community reacts with violence and brutality when its foundations are exposed or threatened; it is the exercise of violence in the service of ensuring the preservation of the status quo that rules at the heart of (American) democracy. It is from this perspective that we can begin to reflect on Grace’s final destruction of Dogville and its inhabitants. From one point of view it recalls what Walter Benjamin called the corrupt or “rotten heart of the law,” a violent destruction that paves the way for renewal, for the re-founding of law (Benjamin 1996).

Indeed, we are not far here from the ambiguities of Benjamin's divine or law-founding violence, or for that matter, from Agamben's complex analysis of the "bare life" of the *homo sacer* or out-lawed human being as a living body exposed to the sovereign violence that founds law and political community (Agamben, 1998). As one perceptive interpreter has put it, *Dogville* can thus be read as a parable on the "dirty origin of law"; a meditation on the ambivalence between the different forms of violence—sacrificial and retributive (Girard)—that attend and underwrite this perverse institution of law (Berghenti 2006). For all these resonances, however, we must acknowledge that Grace's violence is not, in the end, akin to "revolutionary violence"—that which approximates "divine violence," according to Benjamin, within human historical experience (See Benjamin 1996) - despite its exposure of the symbolic violence at the 'rotten' heart of the law. Rather, the possibility of a pure violence clearly slides back here into *retributive* violence once Grace abandons her compact with the community, and takes up her 'proper' place in the symbolic and social order - an order predicated on the kind of symbolic violence and naked exercise of power that her grace and forgiveness had attempted, in vain, to overcome.

Tom's "illustration" of the community's failure to be open to the stranger, to really accept or receive the gift of Grace, can only end in exploitation and betrayal. Democratic consensus was the means by which Grace was accepted into the community, offered conditional hospitality, but also the means by which she was excluded, exposed to the law, which was revealed to be naked power (or law in complicity with power). She can only take her revenge (for the sake of the future, humanity, her own dignity, as she says) by assuming the corrupted power offered to her by her father, and then having assumed this socio-symbolic mandate, by proceeding to order the destruction of Dogville and its woeful inhabitants. Dogville is thus much closer to the Brechtian dictum ("Only violence helps where violence reigns") than the transformed version ("Only evil repays evil") that Rancière claims is symptomatic of our consensual, humanitarian, post-political age. The critical dimension of the film as a political allegory, moreover, is clearly emphasised in the closing credits: David Bowie's song "Young Americans" plays to a photo gallery of images from the depression era, of the underprivileged, the homeless, the destitute, the poor, many of whom are black (thus anticipating the next film in the trilogy, *Manderlay*). It is von Trier's MTV clip dedicated to those who remain excluded from the liberal democratic image of America we passively consume via Hollywood or CNN, or actively support as part of the so-called "coalition of the willing".

It is also a final Brechtian touch, especially if we recall that von Trier considered using Nina Simone's version of "Pirate Jenny," which tells the story, precisely, of a downtrodden and exploited woman who dreams of revenge and then, with the help of sailors on the mysterious "Black Freighter", ends up killing her former exploiters: "Then they'll pile up the bodies/ And I'll say, /'That'll learn ya!'" (see <http://boscarol.com/nina/html/where/piratejenny.html>). Grace does in fact find herself uttering a line from "Pirate Jenny" - "Nobody gonna sleep here" - while changing one of June's soiled sheets: an ominous, 'unconscious' harbinger of the death and destruction that she will soon inflict upon Dogville. We should note, though, that von Trier ultimately rejected this choice of Brechtian song as "too obvious" to close the film.

### **The Ambivalence of *Dogville***

We should be careful, therefore, not to succumb to the temptation to read the film as a straightforward political or moral allegory. On the contrary, *Dogville* is akin to a Nietzschean genealogy of morals, an ambivalent unmasking of the economy of desire and will to power that sustains the moral, social, and political order. Like Nietzsche's genealogy, Von Trier self-reflexively signals the film's complicity with that which it attempts to expose and critique. The destruction of the community of Dogville at Grace's command is also a self-destruction (or self-deconstruction) of *Dogville* as a von Trier/*Dogme* film. Tom concedes that his "illustration" - using and betraying Grace to explore the problem of acceptance - is far surpassed by Grace's own "illustration"; the retributive destruction of the community of Dogville, for the sake of humanity and her own dignity, as she ironically claims. We should note, moreover, that Tom's vocation as a writer finally commences - once he has betrayed Grace - with his penning of the first chapter of a novel, *Dogville*, narrating the events we have witnessed in the story of Grace's fall from grace. Dogville thus implodes, self-destructs, at the hands of Grace, Dogville's exploited Other and its avenging angel. The film we have been watching thus indicts *itself*; moreover, it exposes *our own* economy of desire, our own complicity (as honorary Americans) with Dogville, even our own sado-masochistic complicity with the violence the film depicts, especially in its destructive conclusion (Abella and Zilkha 2004: 1524-1525).

The questions *Dogville* leaves us with are disturbing and unsettling. We are left hovering between the deadening nihilism of forced liberal democratic consensus, with its moral hypocrisy and social exploitation, and a violent destruction or *passage à l'acte* that would annihilate the corrupted democratic community while also canceling itself. Perhaps we should see this as an ironic expression of some of the deadlocks of contemporary politics, which, as Rancière and others have argued, remains caught within a condition of globalised consumer capitalism, foreclosing politics in the radical sense, or else generating the sort of violent counter-tendencies we witness in militant Islamism. It presents a diagnosis of the nihilistic dogmas of democracy, describing our social pathologies without prescribing a cure; an answer to the political question, what is to be done? Rather, *Dogville* poses the question of democracy as a question of desire; a question that, as the narrator ironically concludes, will not be answered here today. It is this question of desire and politics that *Dogville* poses with extraordinary force, exposing the economies of desire sustaining the social and ideological formations of democracy. The intense responses to the film can thus be read as symptoms of its ambivalent exposure of violence and our own uneasy complicity with it. *Dogville* is both a philosophical experiment and cultural-political intervention concerning the question of democracy today.

## References

- Abella, A. & Zilkha, N. (2004) "Dogville. A Parable in Perversion" in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 85, pp. 1519-26.
- Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Atkinson, A. (2005) "On the Nature of Dogs, the Right of Grace, Forgiveness, and Hospitality: Derrida, Kant, and Lars von Trier's *Dogville*", *Senses of Cinema*, issue 36 (July-September 2005) <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/36/dogville.html>, accessed May 28, 2007
- Bainbridge, C. (2004) "The Trauma Debate: Just Looking? Traumatic Affect, Film Form and Spectatorship in the Work of Lars von Trier" in *Screen*, vol. 45 no. 4, pp. 391-400
- Benjamin, W. (1992) "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London: Fontana
- Benjamin, W. (1996) "Critique of Violence", in *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin*, Volume I, 1913-1926, ed. M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Brighenti, A. (2006) "*Dogville*, Or, The Dirty Birth of Law" in *Thesis Eleven*, no. 87 (November 2006), pp. 96-111
- Ebert R. (2004) "Dogville," *Chicago Sun Times*, April 9, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040409/REVIEWS/404090303/1023>, accessed February 14, 2007
- Fibiger, B. (2003) "A Dog Not Yet Buried—Or *Dogville* as a Political Manifesto," point of view: *A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, No. 16, Special Issue 'Film and Politics' (December 2003) [http://pov/imv.au.dk/Issue\\_16/section\\_1/artc7A.html](http://pov/imv.au.dk/Issue_16/section_1/artc7A.html), accessed January 26, 2007
- McCarthy, T. (2003) "Dogville", *Variety*, 19 May
- Peden, K. (2005) "The Threepenny Shot" review of *Dogville* (2003) and *Inside Deep Throat* (2005) in *Critical Sense: A Journal of Political and Cultural Theory*, vol. 13 no. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 119-129

Rancière, J. (1999) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. J. Rose, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.

Rancière, J. (2006) "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," trans. J-P. Deranty, in *Critical Horizons*, No. 7 Issue 1, pp. 1-20

Žižek, S. (2001) *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*, London: British Film Institute

*Scan is a project of the Media Department @ Macquarie University, Sydney*