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Film Review

Dogville: Trier's America à la Brecht

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Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and
Repulsion, reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are
necessary to Human existence.
From these contraries spring what the religious call
Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason.
Evil is the active springing from Energy.
Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.
William Blake

Rarely has a major European director managed to escape the appeal of Hollywood. Danish film director Lars von Trier is one of those exceptions. Unlike most other European directors who make their journeys to America after their major successes in Europe, only to take part in bigger productions at the expense of their originality, Trier chooses to remain the director he is, still experimenting with the art of cinema. With *Dogville*, he escapes the Hollywood clichés which other directors depend on and paints a critical picture of America using a Brechtian style.

Having established his universal fame with earlier films such as *Europa, Breaking the Waves, Dancer in the Dark* and the Dogme Manifesto, Lars von Trier continues his experimental journey in cinema with his latest film, *Dogville*, the first part of the America trilogy, which is an anti-American parable at the outset. However, it would be wrong to attribute this parable only to America since the issues discussed in the film are not limited to the United States but are universal. Trier's major tool in presenting these universal issues, which include domination and exploitation in general, is the form he uses. The influences seem to be multiple, from Blake and Shakespeare to Wilder but the dominance of Brecht's epic style is evident with all the alienation effects, the episodic structure and the narrative form.

Dogville, which comprises nine chapters, a prologue and an epilogue, is about a young woman named Grace (Nicole Kidman) who, running away from gangsters and police, ends up in a little town in the Rocky Mountains. Tom (Paul Bettany), who finds her and is fascinated by her, consults the townspeople to get permission for her to stay in the town. Not many people live in the town: a married couple with many children, a blind man who pretends to see, a black cleaning woman, a shop owner, and a young man who transports goods. Grace is given two weeks to prove herself to the inhabitants of the town, and by the end of that trial period she is loved by all of them. Occasional intrusions by the police to announce that Grace is a thief and a murderer leave clouds of doubt over the townspeople, who gradually turn from angels into monsters. Grace now has to do constant physical work as well as meet the sexual needs of the men. Two thirds of the film is about her suffering and submission in the town and the remaining part is about her revenge, a revenge that leaves not even a single person alive in the town.

The revenge theme comes from a song in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera:* "Pirate Jenny."[1] The song is about a servant girl at an inn who is waiting for a ship to come in. When it comes the ship bombards the town, and the only survivor is the girl. In fact, the ship comes to wreak vengeance on its people because they have treated her badly. Like the inhabitants of Dogville, the people living in Brecht's small town have no idea who the girl is. The discovery of her real identity brings along death for all. The ritualistic aura of the film, especially during the rape scene, reminds one of Jean Genet's theater. The fact that the characters turn out to be rather different from what they seem to be in the beginning is also reminiscent of Genet.

Trier is like a modern day Prospero: after making full use of his magical power, he relinquishes it. He seems to renounce all the power the art of cinema invests in him, from freedom of space to visual effects, and adopts Brecht's epic theatrical style as well as his subject for Dogville. Epic theater's notions of stripped stage, open-endedness, the use of a narrator, an episodic structure, and the alienation effects are all employed in the film. The bare stage with few props serves a purpose. This simplicity of the stage, with minimum visual distractions, focuses the viewer's attention on the characters and their acting, thus indirectly on the content. Such stylization, the non-existence of the walls, allows the viewer an insight that would have been concealed otherwise.

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[1] See the appendix.

The white paint on the stage that sketches the outlines of the houses and streets is suggestive of a crime scene where the removed dead bodies are marked with white paint, and Trier, in the figure of Dogville, sees America as a place of crime. The stage is also reminiscent of a classroom chalkboard. Trier uses the stage as a teacher would use the board, with the purpose of teaching something to the audience, that is to show them that there is a limit to the submissiveness of the exploited and abused and that their reaction may be violent. Such a Brechtian style which Trier adopts enables him to express emotion and remain at a distance at the same time, without one dominating the other.

The dramatic form of the film is enriched by an epic form through the use of a narrator. The Narrator (John Hurt) comments on the action, setting up a counterpoint between the episodes of the play and his universal observations (which are also the director's). The use of a narrator is necessary for further alienation as the spectator soon adjusts his perception to the bare stage. This also enables the director to bring the spectator back to reality, giving him time to fit the pieces in the film together. When the story is halted in such a manner, viewers have an opportunity to consider more carefully what they have seen and relate it to other aspects of life.

Another aspect of the film that has been borrowed from Brecht is Trier's representation of the inner conflicts of human beings. Brecht's greatest contribution to modern drama, as Styan argues, "lay in his constant insight into the incongruities and contradictions of human motive, and his ironic approach to the material of his plays could produce an acute sense of ambivalence in his audience" (153). This is the paradigm where Trier combines Brecht with Blake. Blake chose the subtitle "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul" for his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, foregrounding the notion of 'contraries' and its importance in his work. Trier seems to possess this romantic spirit. Like Blake who said "without contraries is no progression," Trier seems to be questioning the dualities: good and evil, content and form, and like Shakespeare, among many others, he seems to be pointing the distinction between appearance and reality.

The dualities are ever present in the film. Trier seems to challenge his previously obvious faith in Christianity. Like Blake, Trier depicts Grace before and after the fall of man. Besides all crucial decisions being made in the town chapel, there are religious references to both the Old and the New Testaments. For most of the film, Grace seems to be following the New

Testament's principle of 'turning the other cheek': each time she is exploited, she submits without complaining. In the last part of the film, however, she seems to have changed her attitude to that of the Old Testament 'an eye for an eye.' This is represented in the final chapter, when Grace has to make a choice: she has to choose either to stay in Dogville and go on unconditionally surrendering herself as her name suggests, or to go back with her father, who turns out to be the gangster she was running away from in the beginning of the film, after every single person in the town is annihilated. As it seems, this is not an easy choice to be made since her reason for coming to the town was to escape the violent world of her father and his men and to find peace. This is the point where the idea of revenge in the Old Testament defeats the idea of submission in the New Testament. However, is this the right choice? As Hirsch points out for Blake's poetry, "*Innocence* was deliberately composed to represent a state of the soul which is inadequate by itself and requires for completion a representation of the contrary state, Experience" (14), the two conflicting representations of Grace suggest that the 'two contrary states' are not mutually exclusive, and only through the recognition and reconciliation of these states can progress be achieved. The possibility of progress is located in the tension between these apparently opposed states of the mind. However, it is not possible to talk about such reconciliation and progress in *Dogville* since the notions of "good" and "evil" are constantly blurred and what remains is a total catastrophe.

The question of contraries is dealt with not only through the film's content but its form as well. When Trier's highly stylistic understanding of reality (represented by the chalk marks on the stage) is compared with the end credits, which show real documentary photographs of lower class Americans (accompanied by David Bowie's song 'Young Americans'), the implicit becomes explicit, laying bare the director's view of what America is like. At the same time, such a device (using documentary photographs) ties the ethical theme of the film to current reality. By nature our universe consists of "good" and "evil" and it is obvious that what Trier is trying to show both through his content (the townspeople, including Grace, are represented as both angelic and demonic) and form (the stage he creates is that of a theater stage but the tools he uses are those of cinema), is a kind of a universal picture where such contraries coexist.

Grace's revenge not only signifies the power the exploited may hold, but also the change in the director's attitude toward his female characters.

The women in his earlier films, the Golden Heart trilogy, like *The Idiots, Breaking the Waves*, and *Dancer in the Dark*, were all victims of society who sacrificed themselves for others. However in *Dogville*, although two thirds of the film displays a self-sacrificing female figure, Grace revolts against the maltreatment she receives and is not the victim anymore. The vulnerable female figures of his previous films have evolved into Grace, the saintly woman who towards the end of the film enjoys the demonic power she beholds.

Politically, the film is an allegory of the power America exerts on other countries. Grace is exploited by the town, but the finale of the film shows that these exploited people can and do fight back, with tragic consequences. It is impossible not to associate the final annihilation in the film with the terrorist attacks on September 11. Trier seems to suggest that what is destroying the United States is power and the greed that accompanies it. Only a director truly free from Hollywood's creative and financial control has such freedom to criticize the dark side of American society.

Works Cited

Hirsch, E. D. Jr. *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake.* New Haven: Yale UP: 1964.

Styan, J. L. *Modern Drama in Theory and in Practice: Expressionism and Epic Theatre.* Vol. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.

Appendix
"Pirate Jenny" (1928) Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill

You people can watch while I'm scrubbing these floors
And I'm scrubbin' the floors while you're gawking
Maybe once ya tip me and it makes ya feel swell
In this crummy Southern town
In this crummy old hotel
But you'll never guess who you're talkin'.

Then one night there's a scream in the night
And you'll wonder who could that have been
And you see me kinda grinni' while I'm scrubbin'
And you say, "What's she got to grin?"
I'll tell you.

There's a ship
The Black Freighter
with a skull on its masthead
will be coming in

You gentlemen can say, "Hey gal, finish them floors!
Get upstairs! What's wrong with you! Earn your keep here!"
You toss me your tips
and look out to the ships
But I'm counting your heads
as I'm making the beds
Cuz there's nobody gonna slep here, honey
Nobody
Nobody!

Then one night there's a scream in the night
And you say, "Who's that kicking up a row?"
And ya see me kinda starin' out the winda
And you say, "What's she got to stare at now?"
I'll tell ya.

There's a ship
The Black Freighter
turns around in the harbor
shootin' guns from her bow

Now
You gentlemen can wipe off that smile on your face
Cause every building in town is a flat one
This whole frickin' place will be down to the ground
Only this cheap hotel standing safe and sound
And you yell, "Why do they spare that one?"
Yes.
That's what you say.
"Why do they spare that one?"

All the night through, through the noise and to-do
You wonder who is that person that lives up there?
And you see me stepping out in the morning
Looking nice with a ribbon in my hair

And the ship
The Black Freighter
runs a flag up its masthead
and a cheer rings the air.

By noontime the dock
is a-swarmin' with men
comin' out from the ghostly freighter
They move in shadows
where no one can see
And they're chainin' up people
and they're bringin' em to me
askin' me,
"Kill them NOW, or LATER?"
Askin' ME!
"Kill them now, or later?"

Noon by the clock
and so still by the dock
You can hear a foghorn miles away
And in that quiet of death
I'll say, "Right now.
Right now!"

And the ship
The Black Freighter
disappears out to sea
And
on
it
is
me