

BENEATH THE SURFACE: WHAT DOGVILLE REVEALS ABOUT US

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Abstract

Lars Von Trier has consistently challenged the boundaries of cinematic form, narrative, and aesthetics through his radical and emotionally charged films. This article explores his transformative impact on contemporary cinema, with a particular focus on *Dogville* (2003), a film that marked a decisive break from conventional storytelling and production methods. Building on the foundations of Dogme95, a movement he co-founded to purify filmmaking from artificiality, Von Trier developed a minimalist, theatrical approach in *Dogville* that foregrounds moral complexity, viewer discomfort, and artistic introspection.

The film represents a turning point in Von Trier's cinematic evolution, diverging from earlier works such as *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), which, while groundbreaking, still adhered more closely to narrative and visual expectations. In contrast, *Dogville* strips cinema to its bare essentials—eschewing realistic settings for a chalk-drawn stage and embracing a Brechtian style that forces viewers to confront the ethical core of the narrative. This radical deconstruction reimagines the aesthetic experience and critiques not only Hollywood conventions but also broader socio-political ideologies embedded in film.

Moreover, this article traces Von Trier's continued aesthetic experimentation in films such as *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011), and *Nymphomaniac* (2013), highlighting a thematic and stylistic continuity rooted in provocation, existential questioning, and a critique of cinematic norms. Through *Dogville*, Von Trier offers a philosophical commentary on human nature and American values, using the medium of film not just to entertain but to disturb, provoke reflection, and ultimately redefine the viewer's engagement with cinema.

In doing so, Von Trier positions himself at the intersection of film as art and film as critique, crafting works that challenge the comfort of passive viewership and inspire a more conscious and critical cinematic experience. This article thus evaluates the aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical implications of *Dogville* and its enduring influence on both European and American film industries.

Keywords: Lars Von Trier, *Dogville*, Cinematic Deconstruction, Aesthetic Experience, Dogme95

1. Introduction: Lars Von Trier and Dogma95 challenge

Making movies is not making beautiful movies. If we look at the history of cinema, that purpose is immediately debunked. Lars Von Trier seems to have taken a cinematic purpose of equal importance. Lars Von Trier claims a reflective and emotional arousal on sleepiness, if not numbness, on the current film industry, and specifically, in the American productions.

In its already long history, *Dogville* (2003) represents the culmination of a specific way of filming and producing films; if we remember some of his earlier films, we will realize that evolution, such as *Breaking the Waves* (1996), *The Idiots* (1998) or *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). *Dogville*, however, is not surpassed by films that affirm their very distinctive style as the *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and more recently, *Nymphomaniac* (2013). And it is not, because even they carry that brand of aesthetic originality, provocation and reflection, *Dogville* inaugurated a unique paradigm in the way producing films (let us say in a way of artistic production) and at the same time, reinventing the aesthetic experience (at least for the viewer).

Lars Von Trier films deconstructs the conventions and their own copyright conditions, not only through the demonstration of new artistic, aesthetic and cinematic possibilities, but also in the way that we conceive the philosophy of art (also present) in cinema. With *the Idiots* – first forerunner of the “Dogma 95 movement” – Lars Von Trier challenged the conventions of American (industry) cinema, by putting the camera in his own hands/shoulders and shooting a group of people who pretended to be “retarded” (the purpose was precisely to represent, sarcastically and/or ridicule the idiocy present in today's society).

But Lars Von Trier did not limit to this particular way of shooting – everything was produced without concern for sets, lighting, makeup or music (as postulated in the Dogma 95). But here, it can be felt a certain kind of production, a production that seemed to announce and denounce a certain horizon of amateurism, almost looking as if there were no artistic purpose in it (as we know, the public reception was a terrible misunderstanding about the movie). However, the controversy raised in producing films without major economic and technological resources, awaked thanks to that criticism.

Dogville recovers, one would say, a masterful lesson that Trier would take away from their previous productions: make a ground-breaking film, causing crowding and perceptual consciousness of the viewer that is, making a film that does not leave subdue the concepts introduced by the film industry on a global scale. Lars Von Trier revises their concepts, modifies them, adapts them or even neutralizes them to create, as indeed does any artist in the process of development and engagement with art. So, one should begin by noting that *Dogville* takes a subtle irony: the artist who creates makes the village a space where there is no place for artistic creation. *Dogville* is a quiet town, conservative, stuck to their own moral values so methodically that the smallest event that breaks their routine is a reason for holding a meeting with all residents to decide what to do (a quasi-perfect example of democracy). And this is also an irony about how to break the lobby of cinema criticism.

2. **Dogville: the plot and the uncanny feeling**

Dogville tell us about a normal village, with normal people and a perfectly normal life, and yet, it represents also an obscure area of human nature, and in this sense, became exactly the opposite of the things we create in our minds to construct the idea of normal day life. It is not only the question of alienation but the question of violence, of the absence of time (specially the alteration of perception of time), of values, and if we prefer, the question of what is reality without the movie we create in our mind (like neurosciences puts it).

Everything seems to be organized according to the collective vote, apparently all the people treat each other as equals and respect each other, in a place that is a “city dog” (another irony that Lars Von Trier plays with the title, as we will see). Therefore, there is no space for the creative human in *Dogville*, as if Lars Von Trier was telling us: democracies function as a space for collective numbness that kill the creative man (as if Lars Von Trier took us to believe that art died in the world as in *Dogville*, and we almost feel here the echo of Nietzsche's Zarathustra appeal for the Dionysian and tragic man. But if the American cinema intent to mobilize and please our perception, Lars Von Trier counterattacks and satisfies the greatest appeal that is artistic creation, revealing to background the interest of the observer (our intuition in aesthetic viewing experience). In fact, we feel uncomfortable with his films. There is here a strange Freudian “uncanny” feeling, (*das Unheimliche*): everything is strange and familiar at the same time as in the relationship we develop with the world, with thought, with our mind; everything leads us to a kind of emotion absurd, cruel, almost grotesque, but at the same time enchanting, enchanted, peacemaker,

which echoes the profound nature in which us (un)composes. Lars Von Trier gives us this dimension of ourselves, of our inner life, our obscure inwardness. This is the scenario in which Lars Von Trier put us in *Dogville*.



Fig.1. Map/plant of Dogville, and the point of view of God

As mentioned, his way of filming - and here we should note that Lars Von Trier had to retrofit their commitment to Dogma 95 - that is, creating a higher plane where we seem to place the point of view of God, all encompassing, and its way of presenting *Dogville* is an immersion in this strange and uncanny feeling. His masterful genius makes itself felt immediately in the absence of scenarios, which forces the viewer to mentally recreate the scenario. Everything happens in a black stage that signalize, as in a plant, with white marks the limits of each house. This lack of real scenario where the characters open and close invisible doors, where the sounds create images, plunges us into an aesthetic experience of continued recreation. We may also realize the paradoxical metaphor that conceals the absence of such scenarios: our complete inability to understand what is happening around us, but also the inability of safeguarded from others scrutiny, given the vulnerability of the scenario in which we live in. The stage design of this movie is not only extremely effective as revolutionary, it is as if we were in a philosophical exercise: to convey a concept in his absence.

But, strangely, the viewer after a few minutes no longer thinks about this absence of scenarios; now the viewer believes in the existence of that town, their homes, and their concentration is shifted to the plot, to the story and dialogues of the characters.

The movie takes place in the decade of 30. Grace (played by Nicole Kidman) is a beautiful runaway who arrives in the isolated town of *Dogville*. Tom Edison, an aspiring writer who wandered down the street, heard shots and realizes the presence of the fugitive Grace. Tom makes him a strange offer: to be able to hide and stay in the village, Grace has two weeks to make the inhabitants start to like her.

Encouraged by Tom (played by Paul Bettany), which is like a spokesperson of the city and a mediator – we will retake this aspect forward – Grace makes with the local population an informal agreement: the inhabitants protect it and in return, she will work for them (note however, that the protection herein is more like to allow to be hidden). Though, when the search for Grace intensifies the local population begins to manifest the desire to make a better deal with Grace, because of the risk that they all seem to run for allowing her to hide. Grace starts now to be indispensable to the welfare of all, and is as in modern societies, a commodity, a „thing“ to which we have become accustomed and which allow us to need, to demand. From here and in a *crescendum*, we see how people

change their attitude when they realize the power that they have over her and start to abuse her, without any scruples. Grace realizes now that the apparent willingness of the people of *Dogville* has a price.

Grace is therefore the character exiled, the foreign. There is no organic link with the village; Grace is a kind of a traveller in power, a personification of the fickle, which in a quiet village like *Dogville*, became to be a disturbance element. No one knows the duration of her stay in the city, not even herself. Remember George Simmel, for whom a foreign host is an element that allows determining the size of the social cohesion of a group through the similarities and/or differences. Similarities are given to mark (interrogation) the Universalist values, and therefore in the first of the similarities, appears the (common) humanity. Grace is thus initially welcomed by residents based on their common humanity. But in fact, the inhabitants never wanted or expressed a desire to integrate her; they just adapted, they metamorphosed their first expendable tasks in necessary tasks. Thus, the principle of cohabitation based on the exchange suspends its integration in the group, conditioning the act of what she could give it back. Such a contractual position requires the mediator, Tom. Thomas Edison has the desire to bring something to his own community, because he feels involved and responsible for her. But his task of young writer hides the ambition to tell something unique, to tell something that not only pass "in town", but "something universal." That's how we see that the arrival of the foreign Grace is considered a gift to him, and therefore proposes, as on several occasions of the film, to make an "illustration". This concept illustration is really pertinent. Lars von Trier proposed us to plunge in this miniature representation of society guarding a more detached view, more adequate to our own observation. *Pour se faire, et par une mise en scène austère et épurée*, the viewer enters the city, guided by a descending vertical plane, made by a camera situated on the scene. Why this? Because too often the character Tom describes the situation as an "illustration", recalling us that the filmmaker proposes a trial, an aesthetic experience. Taking a more philosophical analysis, what is actually happening in *Dogville*?

3. Rethinking society and human condition

The main character, Grace, seems to be in search of her humanity, as she lived, as we will realize at the end of the film, in a family of gangsters. Grace is able to escape from them and seems to favour her solitude, not on a whim, not only to escape a less dignified life, but to access her inner silence. In this sense, it seems significant that she seeks refuge first of all in the city's mine, the place where it extracts what is in the depths of the soil; it is as if Grace was searching in her deep soul, as if she was digging in the depths of her interiority, a piece of humanity. It is at the heart of the inner existence that existence manifested itself, is there in the profound background of the soul that arises the human creativity, their integration with truth or with the divine.

By contrast, *Dogville* is a superficial village, almost dehumanizing, full of shallowness and therefore no longer gathers the conditions to dig the truth in the interiority of its inhabitants. Everything is, we would say, ordered towards the alienated community itself, where there is no right for individuality. Everything is, as written in the output of the mine, *dictum ac factum*. If all is said and done, the redemption of mankind would only be possible through the unique individuality that is able to recognize it as a unique and singular - as an authentic mode in Heidegger's views, that emerges from the depths of the individual and of her own existence.

From a more technical point of view, *Dogville* while working with actors is no different from theatre: mind body-intuition, principles of the "Theatre of Cruelty" of Antonin Artaud, hearts and minds torn to what is fundamental to the work of artist, as also Bertold Brecht signaled.

Let us make a very brief note: for Artaud, the theatre is the privileged place for germination of forms that retrace the creative act, forms capable of driving forces. In 1935, Artaud concludes *Le Théâtre et son double*, one of the most influential books of the twentieth century theatre. The theatre of cruelty of Artaud: where there would be no distance between actor and audience, and all (should) be actors and all would be part of the process at the same time.

Dogville is the illustration of what Goffman proposed as a scheme of interpretation of social functioning, constructed from the structure of theatrical representation. Goffman studied the encounters of people in society and argued that such meetings resembled a theatrical drama since «individuals leading to a face-to-face interaction on the stage of a theatre must respond to the same basic requirements that we find in real situations» (Goffman, 1993, 297). Like E. Goffman thought a few decades ago, people in reality/society are playing a role, i.e., they play the role that is expect them to perform. In this sense, *Dogville*, is the masterpiece of life acting. Paradoxically, the more the individual is engaged in a reality that his perception cannot reaches, more attention will focus on appearances, and this is the drama that after all can watch, this is what is happening in real life.



Fig.2. Scene from *Dogville*; Grace becomes exploited by everyone

Dogville is, in a way, this scenario of social *experimentum*. But Lars Von Trier went further by putting on the shoulders of Grace the hypothetical situation mentioned by Pierre Klossowski that opens the chapter *La monnaie vivante* of the book with the same name: "imagine for a moment a regression seemingly impossible: that is, an industrial phase in which producers have the means to require, by way of payment, objects of sense for consumers. These objects are human beings» (2008, 75).

According to Klossowski view, Grace became the "monnaie vivante", the live currency of the village. Whatever be the Grace of *Dogville* or other Graces of other Dog-cities – the human exploration in an Asian factory, torture in a distant war, the suffering of those who have nothing to eat, or sexual slavery –, we know that this occurs but we do not want know; that's what Slavoj Zizec describes as a kind of "fetishist degeneration", that is, as if we watch these movies with the attitude: «"I know, but I do not want to know what I know, and so I do not know". I know, but I refuse to fully accept the consequences of this knowledge, so I can continue to act as if I did not know» (Zizec, 2009, 54).

Grace takes the precious value of living currency, that is, assume that strange meaning of symbolic exchange value that already stigmatizes the still-latent enslaving of human societies. Klossowski refers that at «the eyes of the economy, the so-called erotic enjoyment could not be assimilable to the enjoyment of a good [property] among

others: it is only insofar as it relates to a living subject (therefore the body), that enjoyment of that object while subject is possible or can be estimated as a good [property]; an object of use - what words of Sade express, at the same time so very simple and very misleading: *the right to property over the enjoyment* "(2008, 25).

4. In conclusion

Lars Von Trier shows as "human nature" is transformed by power, by the abuse of power, which destroys any trace of solidarity and humanity (best feature revealed late in the film). Notice how the music itself is used in various scenes, namely that one of Antonio Vivaldi "*Cum Dederit*" of Psalm 127, makes reference to such cruelty: "Unless the Lord build the house, in vain work those who build it; Unless the Lord keep the city, in vain the watchman stays awake/ In vain for those who rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows, for so He give to his beloved sleepiness". So, *Dogville* seems to be not only a philosophical interrogation, or better ethical, but a political (in the sense of *animal politicus*) parable about the ways of use of power by those in a more favoured status.

But the film also reveals itself as an aesthetic educational project. It is not just the way it was filmed (that was referred to at the beginning of this essay) but it is about what it shows beyond the immediacy of the senses. All aesthetics go beyond this boundary of the immediate, because all aesthetics live at the intersection between what is given and what already lives within us (thoughts, memories, concepts, lived experiences, feelings and emotions). Douville's analysis of the human condition provides an aesthetic understanding of man and the place he occupies in society, his place in the world. *Dogville* gives, on the one hand, the aesthetic dimension of (Grace's) vision as a look that goes from innocence to violence, and on the other hand, gives an aesthetic perspective on the look of others as a pragmatic and committed view to their interests. The understanding of these visions given in the film and, therefore, of the human condition, are significant for an aesthetic education since understanding the reach of our condition as humans is already perceiving aesthetically our way of being and feeling in the world. To conclude, at the end of the movie, in the credits, we see original photos of that region of the USA, in the 30's, with people and places in poverty and totally abandoned. The music we hear (another final irony) is from David Bowie "Young Americans", which brings us back to the American dream contrasted with the heartbreaking poverty of those who did not tell a story, of those who have not lived or dreamed any American dream. If the city is the place where everything takes place in the life's modern man, if the city is the world which man created to live in accordingly to his dreams, there also remains that absolutely true about all this, that is the place in which he is condemned to live, which means: *dictum ac factum*.

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