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Film Review

Dogville

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Lars von Trier's most recent film *Dogville* (Denmark/Sweden 2003) is an unusual and highly remarkable experiment in the possibilities of the medium. Entirely shot with an American cast in an old factory in Göteborg, the film is also a striking encounter between Hollywood's history of narrative film and a profoundly European approach to the screen.

The film takes place in an imaginary model town somewhere in Rocky Mountains (not the Rocky Mountains). Its plot, presented in 10 chapters, has been reduced to some very basic lines. It tells the story of Grace Margaret Mulligan (Nicole Kidman) who is hiding from the mafia. Tom (Paul Bettany), the town's would-be poet who likes to engage in moral sermons, has offered her shelter in the village after having successfully convinced the villagers to accept Grace as one of them. At the same time, however, Tom stresses the fact that Grace is willing to work hard for her stay. While the townspeople initially shy away from abusing Grace, they gradually change their attitude (especially since the police appear twice with a warrant for her). In the end, they even chain her to a huge steel wheel that she has to drag behind herself wherever she goes (after a futile attempt to escape from the village). The logic of this change in the relationship between Grace and the citizens of Dogville is extremely cold; it works with an almost mathematical degree of precision.

It seems that von Trier uses the presence of a supposedly innocent woman in need of protection as a touchstone of Dogville's moral values. Needless to say that the town lives up to its name: Nancy has to "work like a dog," and she becomes everybody's favourite object of rape. In other words, Dogville's supposedly good and pious citizens turn out to be crueler than any animal. The film's end strikes us with the intensity of a story from the Old Testament: Grace has the entire town wiped out. She keeps it to herself to

kill Tom, though, because "There are certain things you have to do on your own." All in all, the film conveys a highly sceptical lesson in morality.

Dogville confronts us with a Ptolemaic universe that only consists of a few props and signs. The film is entirely set on an empty black stage; the names of streets and places have been written on the ground. There are hardly any houses; only their basic lines and the names of their owners have been designated by chalk. In this manner, the old mine is represented by a word only, just like the village dog. We hear it barking but we never see it. When the actors walk through imaginary doors, we hear the doors screeching; the rest is pantomime. Only a few props have survived; a bed and an armchair, for example. In short, *Dogville* presents a highly theatrical setting that does not pretend to be representational. As German critic Tobias Kniebe has correctly noted in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Lars von Trier seems to work under the assumption that, given the amount of computer-animated film sequences that we have been exposed to since the 90s, the genesis of artificial realities has reached a level of cinematic perfection that cannot be surpassed anymore and has actually turned into a rather joyless affair. Lars von Trier's answer is a "filmische Selbstkasteiung," a cinematic process of self-castration.[1] Katja Nicodemus arrives at a very similar conclusion in *Die Zeit* when she calls the film "eine semiotische Fastenkur," a semiotic period of fasting. She sees von Trier as the deconstructionist of contemporary cinema who cross-examines the medium of film and its possibilities. The result is a fascinating symbiosis of the cinema and the barren stage aesthetics of Brecht's Epic Theatre.[2]

Von Trier's success is partly due to the fact that he manages to elicit top performances from his actors. Nicole Kidman's portrayal of Grace, for example, is absolutely stunning; the actress manages to retain an artistic balance between existential fear and a stoic kind of fatigue that gradually drains her of all life energies. It is due to Kidman's outstanding performance that Grace becomes an almost heartbreaking example of human suffering. Her final transformation into an Angel of Vengeance is equally convincing. It has to be stressed, though, that *Dogville*'s entire cast, ranging from Lauren Bacall to Ben Gazarra, from John Hurt to Chloe Sevigny, is simply superb. All of these first-class actors almost naturally integrate into an ensemble in

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1 Tobias Kniebe: "Rettet Grace: Die weltbesten Drehbücher kommen aus Dänemark—Lars von Triers Film *Dogville.*" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. 22.10.2003, 13.

2 Katja Nicodemus: "Das Leben, ein Brettspiel. Das Kino als hundsgemeine Versuchsanordnung: Lars von Triers neuer Film *Dogville* ist ein großartiger Appell an die Vorstellungskraft des Zuschauers." *Die Zeit* 44: 23.10.03, 33.

which the word "star" seems to cease to exist. It is Lars von Trier's great achievement to have turned his film into an experience in which every actor contributes to the homogeneous impression of the entire film and its constantly growing degree of tension.

Simultaneously, von Trier manages to retain an impression of immediacy and movement by entirely relying on the hand-camera, thus reminding us of his *DOGMA* days.[3] It is especially this combination of an outstanding camera-work and a Brechtian approach to the stage that is totally unique and a stunning experiment in film aesthetics.

One might argue that, after *Breaking the Waves* (Denmark/England 1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (Denmark/Sweden/France 2000), the director's most recent film is just another passion play involving a strong element of female suffering. This element, however, becomes part of a society game in which civilization in general has to lose, as German critic Katja Nicodemus maintains. For her, the director is a heretic without a belief, a revolutionary without a utopia. In simpler terms we might state that *Dogville* tries to demonstrate the impossibility of goodness in a rotten world.

The film closes with David Bowie's song *Young Americans* that serves as a soundtrack to a number of Walter Evans photos from the depression years showing homeless people and deprived farmers from the South. It is this ending that is the film's one and only artistic flaw. Both the song and the documentary shots add an element of social criticism and concreteness to the film that is simply not in keeping with *Dogville*'s aesthetical approach and its plot that resembles a modern morality play. Instead of *Young Americans,* Lars von Trier should have selected a different Bowie song entitled *This Is Not America.* And although the film is intended as the first part of an America trilogy (waiting to be completed in the upcoming years), the fact has to be underlined that von Trier's apparent anti-American stance does not result from personal experience (the director has never been to the States) but from a (sometimes almost ideological) alliance with misanthropy.

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[3] The word goes back to the DOGMA 95 group which produced a "semi-legendary" manifest consisting of the so-called DOGMA rules, a set of guidelines for film directors. Most of them have been abandoned again in *Dogville.*