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Grace as Provocation to Politically Correct *Dogville*: Von Trier's Challenge of the Canons of Society

Abstract. The aesthetics and poetics of Lars von Trier constantly provoke the audience. His movies are shifting the limits in visual arts and very often communicate with the audience through the effects of shock, whether targeted to aesthetic or moral values.

In *Dogville*, Lars von Trier synthesizes formal elements of the movie and Brecht's theory of the epic theatre. Destroying the existing aesthetic and visual canons, von Trier enables the spectator to experience new level of content reception.

Through the experience of Grace, the main character, von Trier is pointing to the experience of man in today's society. Grace points out the imperfections of the society, and therefore puts herself in the position of the victim of the subjective and objective violence (symbolical and systemic). Žižek says that opposing to all forms of violence – from physical (mass murder, terror) to ideological violence (racism, purring the violence, sexual discrimination) – is the main preoccupation of the dominant "tolerant liberal world view". Focusing on the obvious violence you miss to notice objective violence, the one which is part of the society. Grace was an object of both subjective and objective violence without opposing, desiring to fit into the society which, paradoxically, had no grace for her.

Von Trier provokes *Dogville* inhabitants through the character of good, hardworking and obedient Grace, and he destroys the ideal picture they had of themselves. Grace becomes their mirror of reality. In the character of Grace, this closed society gets the role of the Other (Lacan) and uses it as a mirror, to see itself.

Using the relation between power and violence, von Trier points out to the imperfections and shallowness of the society which is relating to what we today call political correctness. The movie itself is von Trier's provocation of the society and a call for rewieving the limits of the social and political correctness.

Keywords: *Dogville*, Lars von Trier, provocation, subjective and objective violence.

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Dogville (2003) is the first part of the unfinished trilogy *USA – Land of Opportunities*, consisting of *Manderlay* (2005) and *Wasington*.

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Director and screenwriter, Lars von Trier (Jan Lumhold, 2005) inspired by Berthold Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, based the plot on revenge.

Dogville is a story about a girl Grace who, running from gangsters, finds shelter in a small town. The reason she escaped, and at the same time she arrived to town, is violence. Grace spends her days going from one citizen to another and offering them help in everyday activities. She therefore shows her gratitude for their willingness to accept her and offers them possibility to get to know her better and accept her. Soon, Grace, once a victim of gangsters, becomes a victim of the citizens of Dogville. The reason of her escape found her again in her shelter. Dogville citizens, aware of the fact that Grace depends on them, use her inferior position and start abusing her on various ways. Her kindness and openness to accept all the people with their virtues and shortcomings was a provocation for a closed society of Dogville. The extent of violence demonstration towards her gradually grows until the end of the movie. In the beginning, Grace finds excuses for every single act of violence she underwent. At the very end of the movie, she realises that the real excuse for their violence does not exist and she gets her revenge on them for the things they did to her.

Dogville's aesthetics as a provocation of the movie form – The application of Brecht's theory on movie

Dogville's aesthetic and poetic are provocations to movie form. Using Brecht's theory, von Trier makes a concept of Dogville which changes the existing movie boundaries on many different ways.

The movie is divided in nine chapters with the prologue. Every chapter has a title which describes the plot of the chapter. When a spectator knows what is going to happen next, he can focus on the content and meaning of the event in the wider context. Specific scene gets more important meaning because the focus is on it and the reason of its setting is brought into question. Using Brecht's principle, von Trier wanted to inform the audience in advance about the things they are going to see in the following chapter so that they could focus on both the action and the reason why specific scene is happening in a specific moment. Apart from the scenically presented action, the action is presented through the narrator as well. Using the explicit narrative exposition, von Trier controls the spectator's focus and influences intensity creation.

He often uses ironical descriptions which make the spectator create the wrong picture, until they do not discover the truth on their own, according to the plot presented. Fragmentation of the scenes offer to the spectator better insight in the process of the development of movie plot. Brecht considered that individual scenes fit into one dramatic whole could better present and explain social process and human behaviour. Von Trier applies this form of scene structuring. The title of the fourth chapter is "Happy times in Dogville" which is the indicator of the good relationship between Grace and Dogville. But, because we know the nature of the relationship

between them in advance, we ask ourselves: "Why is this so?". In Brecht's sense, this scene is used to show that reciprocity functions as ethical code between Grace and Dogville.

The whole movie was made on the audio stage, with the houses marked with white line. There is no formal scenery, in order to focus the spectator's attention on the actors. Von Trier insists on Brecht's reduced stage. If the scenery had existed, all the characters would have been put in the space of emotional empathy of the spectator and therefore the whole impression would reduce the chance for critical approach. One of the basic ideas of Brecht's epic theatre is to explain society into details and to reveal all the motives of all the characters. Von Trier presents this objective reality of society with his "bare" aesthetic. This "movie stage" erases the boundaries between private and public and between inside and outside, camera passes through the walls and always presents all the citizens of *Dogville*. *Dogville* is always present and observed, but it always observes *the other*.

Von Trier syntheticizes formal elements of movie and Brecht's theory of the epic theatre. The main principle of the concept of the epic theatre is to emotionally alienate the spectator and therefore develop the critical approach towards social processes. Brecht achieved this with non naturalistic acting, minimalistic scenery and structure of the episodic narrative. His plays are situated in the past. Historical distance emphasizes the universality of the theme of the work. Following this principle, von Trier situates the plot in 1930s on purpose, in the time of crisis and great depression in the whole world, and especially in America. In Brecht's manner, he creates the effect of the *estrangement*. Also, the form of the movie itself creates the effect of estrangement. We can say for *Dogville* that it presents the aesthetic, moral and political experiment which questions the existing movie language and uncritical way which the audience uses to watch the movie. Their attention is directed to interpersonal relationships because the visual part of the movie does not produce fiction they can take part in.

At the very beginning, when the narrator presents the city and the citizens to the spectators, he describes the houses as "ramshackle shacks" while the spectators have the opportunity to see only the set with houses and streets marked with a white line. This is how the spectators are introduced to social and financial status of *Dogville* citizens, which as well stays on the level of the information. Because of the minimalistic set, spectators do not get the complete visual impression, and therefore they have the different approach to watching. Their attention is directed towards the relationships between people, while the visual part of the movie constantly reminds them that they are spectators and not participants, i.e. the movie does not distribute the fiction they can take part in. This is how Von Trier makes permanent effect of estrangement which is used by the narrator during the movie to create new estrangement effects, by commenting *Dogville* citizens, their lives and their behaviour towards Grace.

Didacticism can be spotted on many different levels in *Dogville*. The narrator himself points to the first level, in the movie prologue. He presents Tom, who is a

writer, although he hasn't written anything yet. Tom regularly gathers the citizens together and holds the meetings about "rearmament"¹. Therefore, the spectators get the opportunity to observe "moral lectures" presented in the movie. In the first chapter, Tom suggests Grace that she should be "illustration" for acceptance. The relationship between Tom and Grace is a new level for learning moral lectures. Tom plays double role of a teacher. On one hand, he helps Dogville citizens to accept Grace, and on the other, he helps Grace to be accepted. However, both of the levels finish differently from the starting point. Dogville citizens accept Grace at the beginning but, until the end of the movie, she becomes the victim of their violence. In the second example, Tom who protects Grace the most at the beginning, supports and joins violence performed upon her because it is "for her own good".

The third and the most important level is related to the Grace's attitude towards Dogville citizens. Different from the first two, based on the relationship between Grace and the citizens, the third is a sort of a comment of a complete movie. In the final scene, Grace comments on both her behaviour and behaviour of the citizens toward her with her father, the head of the gangsters who were looking for her. Although she tries to find an excuse and understand them because they "were doing the best they could", this changes after her father asks her "Is their best good enough?" After few minutes of observation of Dogville citizens, she concludes that their best is not good enough and that cannot justify something she would not do if she was in their shoes. She makes the decision that gangsters should burn down the town and kill the citizens, as the narrator explains "for the sake of both manhood and for the sake of human beings, as Grace herself is".

Like some of Brecht's plays, Dogville is both shocking the audience and encouraging it to think. Didacticism is in the contradiction to the characters and in the fact that their behaviour influenced their life. Why did "good and honest" citizens of Dogville lose their humanity and become sanguinary, like dogs? Why a person who gets the power loses control over himself and his own behaviour? How can societies that in the theory claim to be open, friendly and politically correct can show their real face when they get the chance to present the theory in the practice? Von Trier, in the way Brecht did it, leaves open questions for the spectators to find the answers on their own.

Since the gangsters massacre the citizens, we see a drawing of a dog which gets up and the same moment becomes real dog and starts barking frighteningly. The movie is ended by the narrator's sentence: "Has Grace left Dogvill or Dogvill left her?".

During the credits, we hear the merry sound of Bowie's song "Young Americans" juxtaposed with iconographic photos of Great depression and other scenes of American poverty and violence. Humorous melody is followed by the photos of Americans- poor, marginalized and ugly. "Do you remember, the bills you have to pay for even yesterday?" is a line of a song that reminds on the fact that a lot of Americans do not want to be seen the way they really are.

Both of the methods show something that was repressed during the complete movie. This “reality” appears in the very end as a way to emphasize insufficiency of a movie alone since the effects of its reality lean on the stereotypical forms of probability. Even those documentary photos seem more iconographic than real. And so, between disturbing allegory which takes place on the empty stage and disturbing photos, we know what the truth is. It appears as frozen and canonical, a picture that has the biggest power is the picture of a dog- which transforms from the symbol into the thing itself. In a Brecht’s manner, allegorical and satirical research of invented characters from *Dogville* and their virtues and sins is more than artistic experiment.

Using Brecht’s theory, Lars von Trier creates a new aesthetic form of the movie which disables movie illusion and encourages the spectators to think critically. Lack of illusion does not reduce artistic quality of the movie. Exactly as Brecht insisted on removing the boundaries of dramatic theatre and introducing the rules of epic theatre, Lars von Trier creates new form of epic movie using the rules of epic theatre. Placing the movie on the stage he manages to create double effect and his epic movie becomes epic movie theatre.

Subjective and objective violence as a defence from Grace’s dissimilarity

Dogville citizens are the closed community, self-sufficient one. They see themselves as “good and honest”, as the author describes them at the beginning. They can accept stranger, but they do not have the need to test their hospitality. In theory, they are politically correct society, open for all the strangers and people different from them. In practice, they are completely opposite.

On Tom’s insisting, they decide to “give Grace a chance” – they accept her and they become her friends. Initial relationship between Grace and *Dogville* citizens is cordial and harmonious, and lasts until she reflects a picture about them which is in the alliance with the things they want to see. That harmonious, cordial and friendly relationship stops the moment Grace starts provoking *Dogville* citizens with the truth. She started showing realistic picture – reality as it is, and not the one they would like to see. Grace knows the truth, but when she decides to tell it, she realises this will have bad consequences on her future in *Dogville*. That could be seen for the first time in her conversation with Jack McKay, blind old man who, describing the pictures from the past, tries to cover his current state – blindness. After that conversation, he admits to her and to himself something that was obvious to all, that he is blind. This is the first small conflict which ended positively for Grace, but announced the change that will come. From that moment, *Dogville* citizens start identifying Grace as a threat, start mechanism of power of the community and find the excuse for the violence directed against her. They all become aware that Grace is not blind anymore, and expressing the things she sees, she is destroying their imaginary concept of correctness and openness.

Power is characteristic of the individual object and its character, says Hannah Arendt (Arendt, 7). Power of individuals can be overpowered by power of many who are united to destroy power because of its individual independence. The essence of the group is to turn against independence and independent *power*.

Grace's power is the reason why Dogville citizens start turning against her. Since the arrival to town, Grace was enduring different forms of violence, without objections or rebellion. She was stable and independent figure. Dogville citizens were testing the boundaries with their behaviour and were trying to destroy her. Destroying the power, they wanted to destroy Grace and to make her kindness less visible. This is how their "kindness and honesty" will become visible again, which was under threat to great extent by Grace's arrival.

"Subjective violence is just the most visible peak of a triangle which is also made of two other kinds of objective violence" (Žižek, 8). Žižek divides objective violence into *symbolic* and *systemic*. He defines *symbolic* violence as the one embodied in language and forms, the one Heidegger calls "our house of being". *Systemic* violence is related to the consequences of the economic and political systems.

Position of the observation of subjective and objective violence is different. Subjective violence is observed in opposition to zero point and is violation of "normal" peaceful condition of things. On the other hand, objective violence is the one which is characteristic for "normal" order of things. Bearing in mind that it supports the state of zero point, objective violence is invisible. You can notice it only if the state of zero point is endangered and when violence starts being experienced as subjective.

Žižek compares system violence with *black hole* in physics, which is counterbalance to visible subjective violence. System violence is invisible, but it is very important in order to understand the existence of "irrational" outburst of subjective violence.

Žižek states that it seems that opposing to all forms of violence – from physical (massive murder, terror) to ideological violence (racism, stirring violence, sexual discrimination) is the main preoccupation of the "tolerant liberal world view" which is dominant today. He asks himself if the focus on subjective violence, the one that social participants, mean individuals and fantastic crowd produces, is drawing attention away from the center of the problem. Focusing on the obvious violence disables the one to notice objective violence, i.e. the one that it is not so obvious.

According to Žižek's opinion, objective violence should be observed from historical perspective. He considers that objective violence got its shape in capitalism.

During the movie, Grace was the victim of objective, i.e. systemic violence (she was tolerating, she wasn't objecting to and not opposing). Subjective violence (raping and hard physical labor), she was also the victim of, Grace accepted as a part of the system. This example is, in some way, opposite to the things Žižek says about the perspective of the observation of subjective and objective violence. She was, of course, aware of the physical violence performed on her, but she accepted that as the part of the system she does not know very well, but she has to respect. According to Žižek

“Logic of victimization once again proves to be a condition of community existence, as a secret link that connects”. Grace sacrifices herself because she tries to become the part of the community. On the other hand, Dogville takes from her the possibility to become the part of the community because it clearly puts her in the position of the victim.

Žižek claims that “it is as if authentic community is possible only in conditions of permanent threat, in a continuous state of emergency” (Žižek, 28). Dogville is a constant threat for Grace. Each of the citizens can in every possible moment report her to gangsters or to police, this is why she accepts the conditions Dogville sets up to her. She consciously accepts subjective violence.

The moment when she realises that she was the part of systemic, i.e. objective, violence arrives at the end of the movie. After the conversation with her father, she observes Dogville citizens and realises they “are not good enough”. The father compares Dogville citizens to dogs. He says that if you forgive every mistake and bad behaviour to dog, you won’t make it good. The same case is with people Grace shared every day life in that moment. Grace realises that Dogville used her kindness with entirely selfish and corrupted intentions, and that citizens behaved badly towards her. She uses weapon to fight with the system. The only good thing for the world is to destroy such a system. This is how systemic violence goes into the level of objective.

The Other as the mirror for the different

As Žižek claims “There are two topics which determine today’s liberal tolerant attitude towards Others: the respect of Otherness, openness towards it, and the obsessive fear of harassment – in short, the Other is OK insofar as its presence is not intrusive, insofar as the Other is not really Other” (Žižek, 40). Grace is in the position of “the Other which is OK” when she acts and lives in accordance with the wishes of Dogville citizens. Until she starts showing them the true picture about them. Until that moment, her presence is discrete and she does not endanger the existing order, and therefore does not create the picture about the possible attack. When the change of behaviour appears, the citizens activate the fear within themselves and they start performing violence in order to eliminate Grace as the Other from their community. Her Other becomes invasive because she can jeopardize the existence of their kindness with her genuine kindness.

Grace becomes their mirror. The thing that shows the true picture to Dogville citizens. Demonstrating violence, they want to break that mirror, and to destroy the existence of the intrusive Other, i.e. the existence of the picture manifested through Grace.

Grace came to Dogville with the wish to be accepted, to become the part of the community, i.e. Dogville wanted to put her into their world view, to subsume her under their rules, to shape her according to themselves. To accept her not the way she is, but to make her the way they wanted her to be like. This is why Grace

does everything to achieve the change level, the level of the subordination to Dogville citizens and Dogville itself, the level required from her. But, after some attempts, she realises that she will never be able to adapt to that system, in which being part of the community means to accept the violence performed in it. To become part of the community didn't mean to be accepted with your own differences, but to adapt the differences, i.e. assimilate yourself with the existing community.

When we are talking about the concept of the other, there is a question if we are actually able to think about something other and different and, at the same time, not to start from the concept I? How can we preserve the different with something different? We can try to seek for the answer to that question in the text *Order of discourse* by French philosopher Michael Foucault. He, talking about the acts of excluding in the society, states that the truths would be different, i.e. that the other would not be rejected in such a way that the limit is differently set.

Unfortunately, the order in Dogville cannot accept that. You either adapt or you are not the part of the community, there is no middle. Or in Grace's case, you decide to answer to violence with violence, i.e. to exclude yourself from the community on your own.

Conclusion

We have to observe violence in picture, i.e. violence in movies, through the prism of practical example, in order to understand it. Dogville is a very good example of this, because it has within itself more levels through which we observe, perceive and analyse violence. Those are examples of violence, which we generally found in theory, embodied in the example of one city, one community, a sort of a small town. As Radomir Konstantinović gives definition of small town in the book *Small town philosophy*, as a community which is self-sufficient, hermetical, and does not accept differences, this is the principle according to which Dogville functions as well. Dogville citizens are similar to small town citizens. Seemingly good, peaceful, introverts, they do not accept anything and anyone who does not fit into that shape. In humane nature is to take the defence pose and violently react because of fear and threat.

When Grace offers them help, they all reject saying they do not need it, and that someone else needs it more. Therefore, Dogville always sees the problem in the other, and never in themselves. As every contemporary society, they are always finding the excuse for the violence performed. And, when in the end of the movie, Grace starts killing Dogville citizens, she in a way becomes the part of the narrative of violence. At least for a short time, she fulfills the most important condition to be the member of the community, and this is accepting violence in its the most honest and the most cruel form – death.

Von Trier provokes the spectators with his aesthetic and poetic and makes them question the boundaries of correctness of the modern society. He points out that

political, racial, religious... correctness and tolerance is not only saying that you accept the other and the different, but also to accept yourself in the community with him.

Endnotes

- 1 Moral Re-Armament (MRA) is international moral and spiritual movement that was developed in 1938 from the movement of American minister Frank Buchman. The movement had its roots in Christianity, but it developed into informal, international network of people of all religions and origin. One of the main ideas of the movement was that the changing of the world begins with the search for the changes within ourselves.

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