

***Dogville*: Lars Von Trier's Desexualized America**

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Lars Von Trier's movie *Dogville* is one of the most interesting European "takes" on America. *Dogville* is largely a film about the film industry itself, in which the key word "illustration" -- being so frequently mentioned by the narrator and the film's focus male character, Thomas Edison junior -- plays a major part in communicating that idea to the viewer. Cinematic America is indeed *Dogville's* major "illustration". The fact that the Danish director never visited the United States makes it altogether more fascinating. To be able to give such a strong statement about America, from afar, using mostly an American cast, attests to the fact that America, the symbol, the dream, the philosophical concept that goes far beyond the country, belongs to everyone aware of it on Earth and to no one in particular at the same time. Though the movie might be understood as a critique of human nature in a universal sense rather than an anti-American onslaught, the director, unequivocally, cuts short the possibility of such interpretation by ending the film with a series of shocking photographs, presumably pointing to America's social injustices.

The argument that will follow will show that what *Dogville* as a cynical as well as a Brechtian cinematic work says about America reflects a vision that tries to render America a desexualized mutant of Europe. Put another way, *Dogville* as a European text seeking to read America is in one way capable of doing so by arguing how America, seen as an inheritor of European civilization, desexualized itself to be different and non-European. In the course of this, the structural and conscious processes by which *Dogville* invents a desexualized America and relates this desexualization to the idea of murder will be revealed. The main point that I would like to make however is that this anti-American European take on America, in spite of its outspoken aggressivity, seems to mark a certain unconscious erotic affair between the inventing European subject and the invented image of America. This is precisely where the Lacanian intervention occurs. To summarize greatly, the main two questions posed here are *how* and *why* *Dogville* invents a certain negative image of America.

In his essay "America First", Michael Wood writes: "Home is what we know we ought to want but can't really take. America is not so much a home for anyone as a universal dream of home, a wish whose attraction depends upon its remaining at the level of a wish" (1989: 40-42). It is exactly this that *Dogville* seems to aim at demolishing. For the America invented in it is in fact a home, but obviously only for a certain type of people. It is the "universal dream of home" that is targeted by indicting America's ideas of home, community, hospitality, and, above all, the altruistic democratic ideology represented by the writer character, Thomas Edison Jr., who plays the enlightened philosopher, the possible instigator of social change, the one who is looked upon as a savior, *and*, at the same time, the one who turns out to be the weakest and most treacherous of all of *Dogville's* inhabitants. All of this makes Von Trier's film unapologetically cynical. But what kind of cynicism does one find in it? To what extent

does this cynicism constitute a political position taken via artistic transgression? Or is it mere cynicism? Is there anything more to it than being a sign of paranoid repression?

A cynical work of art always causes such controversy around its message and its usefulness in the field of cultural politics. Cynicism is always caught between being politically active through transgressive satirical laughter, unbound sensuality and body politics, and, being that "enlightened false consciousness" that the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk describes in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* as the "modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and in vain" (1988: 5). In its first instance, cynicism would take roots in the Bakhtinian realm of carnival, and the cynical work of art would belong to that special political "antibody" which Michael Gardiner, as one of the Bakhtinian circle of thinkers, perceives through "Bakhtin's own bacteriological metaphor" as "living within a pathological social body, always threatening to rupture it from within" (1993: 37). In its second, however, it falls back into Sloterdijk's "enlightened false consciousness" and its dilemmatic postmodern condition of being "well-off and miserable at the same time"; a consciousness which "no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology" because "its falseness is already reflexively buffered" (1988: 5).

But somehow *Dogville* seems to be devoid of the carnivalesque sense. There seems to be an elaborate kind of satire as well as a sharp cynicism in John Hurt's tone and deliciously tortuous style of narration, but certainly, no satirical laughter. It "hurts", but from above, from what seems, or rather *sounds* to be, an aristocratic tower, and not from below, not from a carnivalistic sense of a social public sphere. From the very opening scene, Hurt's voice introduces the viewer to an obvious miniature representation of small town America living in a particular time that defined the future of modern America; the time of Thomas Edison. With an unflinching British tongue that seems to reflect how America was seen by the aristocratic and socially hierarchical 19th century Europe as simple, sentimental, honest, urbanly as well as urbanly primitive, he starts his narration with:

This is the sad tale of the township of Dogville. Dogville was in the Rocky Mountains in the U.S. of A.; up here where the road came to its definitive end, near the entrance to the old abandoned silver mine. The residents of Dogville were good, honest folks, and they liked their township. And while a sentimental soul from the east coast had once dubbed their main street Elm Street, though no elm had ever cast its shadow in Dogville, they saw no reason to change anything. Most of the buildings were pretty wretched. More like shacks frankly. The house in which Tom lived was the best though and, in good times, might almost have passed for presentable.

It can be argued thus that the all-seeing-eye view of the town of Dogville which the film opens with and which persists all along penetrating physical barriers that had to be made invisible, reflects a degree of contempt by which Lars Von Trier looks down upon his material. But it also communicates an unmistakable Brechtian message that advocates the alienatory way of creating art while being hostile to the illusionary way that targets the viewer's emotions rather than his or her intellect. It is relevant to the present discussion to mention some of the many subtle references to Brecht's works before discussing what America meant to Brecht himself as the most appropriate introduction, I think, to try to understand Lars Von Trier's "Dogvillian" America.

While the film's staging and style persistently detach the viewer and impede identification with the characters, the ghastly content evokes *Die Dreigroschenoper*. The name of the town itself, Dogville, seems to play on the allegorical character of Dogsborough in *Aufhaltsame Aufstieg Des Arturo Ui*. While the film obviously targets the vicious image that it invents as a collective American psyche which, it seems to claim, underlies an ostensible kindness and a deceptive simplicity of small-town America, Dogsborough, in Brecht's *Arturo Ui*, is an American citizen who is "reputed to be honest" but whose "morals go overboard in times of crisis", "a hard-boiled broker, who takes a lawyer with him to his lawyer's" and, above all, someone who should be "educated" by others who are more experienced in matters of life and human nature -- in Brecht's symbolism: Europeans (1976: 12-14). Dogville's society, like that of *Der Gute Mensch Von Sezuan*, is portrayed as a society that rhapsodizes over virtue and generosity while its practice contradicts both. In the interlude following scene nine of that particular play, one of the three gods' characters comments on such a society in a way that could as well describe Dogville's: "What a world we have found here: nothing but poverty, debasement and dilapidation! Even the landscape crumbles away before our eyes. Beautiful trees are lopped off by cables, and over the mountains we see great clouds of smoke and hear the thunder of guns, and nowhere a good person who survives it!" (1974: 98). Shen Teh, taking her mask off in scene ten, retorts back to the three gods' shocked reaction to her gesture by: "Your original order to be good while yet surviving split me like lightening into two people. I cannot tell what occurred: goodness to others and to myself could not both be achieved" (1974: 105). Shen Teh's disguise in most of the play and the taking off of her mask close to its end corresponds with Grace's hidden identity which is not revealed to the people of Dogville until the last scene of the film, where she transforms from the town's victim to its judge and prosecutor. Brecht's symbolism of the three gods disappearing in a mechanical pink cloud that descends from the ceiling of the theatre in scene ten after giving up the prospect of finding a single good person on earth is evoked in *Dogville* by the alternative dramatic *appearance* of a god-father in one of the "Cadillac series 355 C" in order to punish Dogville for not having a single good person living in it. Even that which might be thought of as an anti-Brechtian realism in the film; using real life photographs as a background for the end credits, can still be argued to evoke Brecht's deviation from his usual style at the end of *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* where documentary images of Lenin, Stalin and Mao background the action on the stage.

What America meant to Brecht himself cannot but have a powerful influence on his followers and admirers, and Lars Von Trier is no exception in this regard. In his essay "America Before and After," one of the authority writers on Brecht, James K. Lyon, writes:

Much like a social scientist, Brecht tended to see the world in terms of 'models' -- in this case models constructed out of Marxist ideological views and out of his poetic imagination. His sociological model for America when he arrived was based on the assumption that it represented the most advanced form of capitalism and consequently the most uncivilized, inhumane form of human existence. (1980: 341)

As a socialist and anti-fascist, Brecht's experience in America after fleeing Nazi Europe was not seen by him as devoid of harassment due to his ideological commitment to communism and to his famous confrontations with the film industry which he perceived as capitalistically exploiting. His entanglement with Hollywood's film industry clearly marked an unhappy phase in his life as the British film-analyst and critic Martin Walsh argues in his essay "The Complex Seer: Brecht and the Film" where he writes: "It is clear that Brecht regarded his

work in the cinema as simply a means to earn his living. Hollywood was always eager to secure 'name' writers, and Brecht churned out scripts, which were so chewed over in the studio factories that his ideas were invariably modified beyond recognition" (1981: 10). Arguably, nothing could have made a Marxist writer like Brecht more bitter and resentful than altering his ideas so as to produce right-wing conformist works that he undoubtedly detested. Thus his sad lines in his poem entitled *Hollywood* which is cited by Walsh in the same essay:

Every day to earn my daily bread
I go to the nearest market where lies are bought
Hopefully
I take up my place among the sellers (1981: 10-11)

Brecht's experience of exile in America has been epitomized by his being investigated as a witness in 1947 by the House Committee on Un-American Activities among nineteen personalities deemed unfriendly to American values and ideology. James K. Lyon cites his statement before that committee in which he said: "I am not a film writer, and I am not aware of any influence I have had on the film industry, either politically or artistically;" a statement that Lyon sees as summarizing "not so much his view of himself as a writer, but the realities of his life in the film world" (1980: 71). Needless to say, contrary to Brecht's own words, he had an everlasting artistic imprint on the film industry, especially in Europe. *Dogville* is one of the most obvious effects of that. America seems to have been such a hostile place to Brecht -- and he in turn such an intimidating figure to it -- to the extent that even American Marxists themselves were not particularly on good terms with their European comrade. In "The Ideological Brecht," Lyon gives an interesting account of the mood that defined Brecht's controversial relationship with members of the Marxist American left-wing:

Joseph R. Starobin, an active member of the American communist party at the time, recalls an experience that captures the atmosphere that often prevailed. In the company of other Communists, he met Brecht and Gerhart Eisler at a soiree in New York City in 1943 or 1944. It was, Starobin says, 'a painful evening, with Brecht lying astride a bed, contemptuous of everybody.' The exile, he claims, shared the 'general European self-centeredness and arrogance' that American Communists sensed in their European counterparts. (1980: 288)

Even the destruction of the town of Dogville in the film's last scene could be argued to symbolize the "destruction of America" that Brecht seems to have carelessly announced out of his political over-enthusiasm at some point during his life of exile in the United States. Lyon writes:

In 1947 he strongly espoused the cause of Henry A. Wallace, who was emerging as a third party candidate for president. Bentley recalls hearing Brecht say that, if Wallace were not elected, the alternative for America would be World War III. There was no middle ground. And when the House Un-American Activities Committee launched its investigation of Hollywood in 1947, Brecht announced to friends the imminent destruction of America. (1980: 303)

Dogville thus, as a film that style-wise belongs to Brechtian cinema as well as one that obviously pays such a high homage to Brecht, his works, his ideology and his life, is

obviously a work that tries to *mutilate* the image of America. And because an image is never just an image, or, to put it in a Žižekian way, "an appearance is never 'merely an appearance', it profoundly affects the actual sociosymbolic position of those concerned" (1997, 26), the invented image, like fantasy, not only covers up gaps in the sociosymbolic network of its inventor, of which instance in the present context would be the destabilization of his or her very constructed subjectivity, but it can actually infuse or confuse reality with the phantasmic -- either for its producer or its consumer. A pertinent starting point would be the character of the philosopher/writer, Thomas Edison Jr. It is obvious enough where Tom got his name from. Thomas Alva Edison (1847-1931) is the celebrated American engineer whose great inventions substantially defined the modern age. Two of his most important contrivances are film projectors and motion pictures. The fact that this historical piece of information is almost forgotten seems to obliterate the notion that it is not just by Hollywood's hegemony over international film industry that people tend to think of the world of movies as an American one. Cinema *is* an American invention, and the history of film *is* largely an American history.

One exceptionally interesting European text dealing with the character of Edison is Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Tomorrow's Eve*, in which the French writer (1838-1889), who was actually a contemporary of Thomas Alva Edison, creates a fictional character of a scientist whose name is *Thomas Alva Edison*, "the man who made a prisoner of the echo" (2001: 7). Not so different from the Thomas Edison of *Dogville*, Villiers' fictional scientist is a man whose "favorite foible is to think himself ignorant, by a kind of legitimate naïveté. Hence that simplicity of welcome and the mask of rough frankness -- sometimes even the show of familiarity -- with which he veils the icy realities of his thought" (2001, 8). Perhaps there is no better example in the present context on how the fictional problematizes the sense of reality in the case of anything related to America than the advice that the writer of *Tomorrow's Eve* gives to his reader as a preface to the main text. In "Advice to the Reader", Villiers makes an exceptionally meticulous effort to show the reader that his fictional character of Thomas Edison refers to the "legend" that "has sprung up in the popular mind regarding this great citizen of the United States" (2001: 3) and not to the real American Engineer. And since the legend is completely separate from the real man, the writer seems to suggest, then it belongs to the world of literature.

So, with a Catholic sense of a must to eradicate all confusion, he starts his advice with: "It seems proper to forestall a possible confusion regarding the principal hero of this book" (2001: 3). Yet, his repeated emphasis on the need to eradicate such confusion somehow seems to reflect how much he is himself confused. Later he writes: "The Edison of the present work, his character, his dwelling, his language, and his theories, are and ought to be at least somewhat distinct from anything existing in reality" (2001: 3). The affirmative "are" is not only diluted by "at least somewhat distinct" but immediately undermined by the following skeptical "ought to be." It is as if Villiers is at odds trying to convince *himself* that the legend, in his mind, is truly something separate from reality. Even after making his point thrice, somehow his feeling that it is not established firmly enough persists. So, at the end of his advice he adds:

Let it be understood, then, that I interpret a modern legend to the best advantage of the work of Art-metaphysics that I have conceived, and that, in a word, the hero of this book is above all 'The Sorcerer of Menlo Park', and so forth -- and not the engineer, Mr. Edison, our contemporary. (2001: 3)

This is his final statement by which he convinces the reader and himself -- hardly I think -- that the judgment that the legend belongs to literature while the real belongs to the real world has been established. Yet as a conclusion arrived at after this most apologetic preface, Villiers' statement seems to be very shaky indeed, as if trying laboriously to suppress a fundamental suspicion; that the fictional might in fact still be more established than the real. If *Dogville* can be considered a film of any significance in the field of cultural politics -- something which I strongly doubt -- the questions that it would be posing in such a case would be of this kind: Is reality actually distinguishable from what has been created as a legend? Is America distinguishable from what has been created by Hollywood as cinematic America? Or, to take the issue further, how much of the reality of America has been created by cinematic America? None of these questions can have a clear-cut answer.

In *Tomorrow's Eve*, Thomas Edison creates a mechanical woman, *Hadaly*, who represents the dream of the ultimate romantic love. Edison's genius makes Hadaly look, move, and talk exactly like a real woman. Moreover, she is so eloquent and no less versed in managing a dialogue than a philosopher or a great poet. But what is really significant about Hadaly, according to her creator's expressed point of view, is that she is devoid of what men perceive in women as female pettiness and small-mindedness. The feminine conscience is what Edison was able to get rid of by inventing the android -- for the usage of man. As a female android, Hadaly seems to have everything except the soul and the Eros of a woman. She is a desexualized creature. Besides that, Hadaly's cinematic movements and gestures in the scenes in which she plays the heroine of a romantic love story are numerous and unmistakable. At the end of Villiers' eccentric novel, the android gets destroyed by an accidental fire on board of a transatlantic liner on her way to Europe. It seems that by giving the celebrated American name "Thomas Alva Edison" to his scientist character, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's text implies that his fictional scientist who wanted to invent a mechanical woman ended up, *in reality*, inventing only cinema instead. The displacement seems to suggest that cinema, as an American invention, is desexualized at birth; the implication of which comes out to the surface a whole discourse that seems to be lying deep in a certain European subject's unconscious; that America, at its highest symbolic representation, is portrayed as a desexualized woman.

With a more or less the same Thomas Edison as a focus character among the inhabitants of *Dogville*, the strange atmosphere of anti-eroticism in the film shrewdly presents the sexual either in its most violent/sadistic form or as being entirely dominated by the economic. On the one hand, raping Grace is made to be the only way to have sex with her, on the other, all the town's inhabitants seem to be asexual creatures, each of them in his or her own way. The first rape scene could be considered one of the most disturbing rape scenes in the history of motion pictures. Lars Von Trier was actually able to put in it his whole perspective of the power discourse and its relation to sexual exploitation. The victimizer's suggestive short statements of vicious entrapping are contrasted to the victim's bewildered yet apprehensive questions:

- I wouldn't try to run away
- Why would I want to run away Chuck?
- I wouldn't try to holler either
- Why I would I wanna do that?

The persuasion takes its philosophical turn when Chuck tells Grace "I need your respect Grace," to which she replies "you have my respect Chuck." He follows up by repeating: "I

want your respect." The demand for respect somehow verbally replaces the sexual desire, as if the metonymic structure of desire assumes no disguise at all, in a clear message that defines the relationship conventionally assumed between the powerful and the powerless, the male and the female, the ruling and the ruled, the colonizer and the colonized, the master and the slave, or, in Marxist terms, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. When the direct talk of force starts to take place by Chuck's statement, "I can force the flowers to bloom early in the Spring, I can force you," the camera, in one of the most cynical moments of the film that hardly fails to draw a suppressed titter, if not outright guffaw, moves to a contemplating Tom while he is taking a stroll "outside" beside Chuck's house. This, I think, is where the satirical factor in the film reaches its highest point. The lack of physical barriers seems to point to the classic role of the philosopher in human civilization; to contemplate while power has its way right in front of his eyes. And while Chuck's grim "practicality" unabashedly declares that friendship cannot exist between two people when one of them has the opportunity and the power to exploit the other, Tom's assumed position of the enlightened model of man, in spite of the fact that his own sexual desire matches Chuck's, makes him recoil from acting in the same manner. His pathetic position gets revealed by his brief awkward questions to Chuck and the latter's unruffled tone and suggestive invitation right after the rape scene:

- Have you seen Grace?
- She is at my place
- She is busy?
- Not anymore, go right in.

Yet he opts to walk away after standing reluctantly at the invisible door of the house; a gesture attesting to his complete awareness of what Grace went through. Hurt's voice cuts in right after that only to add to the viewer's discomfort with his cynical, "yet again, Grace had made a miraculous escape from her pursuers with the aid of the people of Dogville."

For the truck driver, Ben, the sexual is attained only through the economic. He visits prostitutes when he has enough money to have sex, and when he rapes Grace in his truck he makes a point of assuring her beforehand that this is "not personal," philosophizing the whole situation according to the rules of the "freight industry." Grace, in fact, becomes a receptacle for the town's psychic troubles; an unpaid prostitute who not only suffers humiliation silently but who often masochistically defends her tormentors as well. As for Tom, the sexual, though sought after all along, counts for nothing compared to his desire to maintain a sense of "author-ity" over Grace and everybody else in the town, including his own self. The authority of being the "author" of everybody and everything around him. This image of mastery upon the self and upon the other makes Tom the very representation of man striding forward on his way of human enlightenment. His leadership of the people of Dogville strikes a resemblance between the town and the image that Adorno and Horkheimer draw for Odysseus' ship filled with marines under his command as a representation of human civilization detaching itself from myth or the sirens and their infatuating song. The movie seems to me to represent a static moment however, where the ship stops, takes aboard one of the beautiful sirens, and risks listening to the song for two weeks -- needless to say with disastrous results. Tom, whom the film projects as some kind of small time Odysseus, "complies with the contract of his bondage, and, bound to the mast, struggles to throw himself into the arms of the seductresses" for whom Grace stands. His character is where the humanist, the artist, the saviour, and the philosopher intersect, and, it is exactly that character that carries the ultimate sacrifice and the ultimate guilt within. He seems to represent what Adorno and Horkheimer call "the introversion of sacrifice" as what the history of human civilization always meant

(2002: 43-46). Tom's life's project is to acquire an identity as an author, and for that he always proves capable of sacrificing anything. It is of course fitting, in the film's discursive narrative, that this particular character becomes the ultimate victim in the last scene of vigilante justice that Grace brings to the town.

Perceived as a cinematic critique of America and the American people, *Dogville's* main point, I think, is to make the anonymous viewer ill-at-ease. For the "universal dream of home," of liberty and democracy, that idea that epitomizes the human experience and its achievements to be at stake, ought to be a gloomy idea. There seems to be little doubt that *Dogville* does not view America as just another civilization in the course of human history. As Hurt states in the opening scene, Dogville is "up here where the road came to its definitive end," in other words, where the human experience seems to be coming to a close. Yet it is the portrayal of the society of Dogville itself that is meant to make the viewer ponder over the question: Is this really where the road comes to an end? The satirical message of *Dogville* subtly suggests that it is certainly ironic that the road should come to its definitive end in such a place where hospitality, overcoming human selfishness, the ability to forgive and, above all, friendship are all impossible. Dogville's inhabitants are portrayed as gregarious but not friendly. A gregarious person tends to associate with people of his/her type, which does give some sense of belonging to a group or a certain society or a family. But one of the main messages that *Dogville* seems to be communicating is that friendship demands more. Friendship demands acceptance of, and the erotic rivalry with, "the other" as such. Perhaps this is why the inhabitants of Dogville, in spite of their common human differences, are portrayed in such a way so as to strike the viewer as outlandishly alike. A stark similarity can be observed between them and a group of people that Dickens's hero "Martin Chuzzlewit" meets in a hotel bar in America. Criticizing Dickens's work in his essay "Institutional America," the Australian writer Peter Conrad writes: "The Americans Martin encounters are without exception listless, hollow-cheeked, tedious, and portentously verbose. The company in the hotel bar endlessly replicates the set of five or six types he has already met. When you've seen a thousand Americans, you've seen one. Their common worship of individualism has ended by effacing their individuality. They all value personality as a commodity, but because it is the same ideal personality which everyone wishes to acquire, the result is homogeneity" (1980: 57). *Dogville*, not unlike Dickens's story -- which may be thought to be less popular than his other masterpieces in English literature -- is an artistic work that invents an image of America that is meant to reflect a superficial and pretentious innocence, mixed with a religious hypocrisy that suppresses the erotic. Therefore, representing the sexual as always twisted, unnatural, and dominated by the economic seems to be targeting what is perceived by the inventor of *Dogville* as the innocent and religious nature of small-town America. In other words, one of the reasons why the sexual is suppressed, or, why America is desexualized, could be a particular view which sees the idea of sexuality to be incompatible with what is commonly perceived as America's Puritanism, pragmatism, and religious nature.

In spite of the fact that one of America's perceived postures is that of being the home of commercialized sex, the religious spirit and the idea of innocence were always taken as markers that distinguish America from Europe. America has always been thought to differentiate itself from Europe by a number of things, chief among them religiosity and references to God in National emblems. In his classic work *Democracy in America*, the 19th century French statesman and writer Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) writes:

America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men's souls; and nothing better demonstrates how useful and

natural it is to man, since the country where it now has widest sway is both the most enlightened and the freest. (1988: 291)

Tocqueville's observation, even if arguably problematic today, does point to the uniqueness of America's character as a country whose quest for enlightenment, power, democracy and modernization, is paradoxically mixed with an avowedly religious spirit -- unlike Europe. Religious eschatology is therefore used by the creator of *Dogville* subtly to suggest that such eschatology must be firmly established in America's beliefs and, ought to be at its strongest in the American mind.

The film seems to make use of religious eschatology as well as to mock it. Its epitome, reached by Grace's transformation from the historical victim or the sacrificed son of God to the revengeful Christ of the Day of Judgment, can be interpreted in terms of the Freudian return of the repressed, but what establishes its satirical message is that it is made to look like a typical American stunt with guns blazing all around. The film seems to communicate to the viewer that the idea of the ultimate sacrifice, which is the core of Christian thought and what constitutes its *Aufhebung*, or its (anti)thetical departure from Judaism, seems to be alien to itself due to its incompatibility with the eschatology. The final dialogue in the film between Grace and her father sums up the whole idea. The father's discourse suggests that God sacrificing himself, or part of himself, purposefully for alleviating sin off humanity, i.e. to make humanity sinless or innocent, seems to be a sacrifice of himself for himself. "Arrogance" is the key word by which this position is described, and through which the idea is communicated to the viewer in one of the most interesting dialogues in the history of film making:

- Grace: So I am arrogant, I am arrogant because I forgive people.
- Father: My God, can't you see how condescending you are when you say that. You have this preconceived notion that nobody can possibly attain the same high ethical standards as you ... I cannot think of anything more arrogant than that. You forgive others with excuses that you would never in the world permit for yourself.
- Grace: Why shouldn't I be merciful?
- Father: You should be merciful when there is time to be merciful but, you must maintain your own standards, you owe them that. The penalty you deserve for your transgression they deserve for their transgressions.
- Grace: They are human beings.
- Father: And does every human being need to be accountable for their own actions? Of course they do. You don't even give them that chance, and that is extremely arrogant.

At the same time the eschatological idea of God returning to punish humanity for its sins completely destroys the core idea of sacrifice. Eschatology thus cannot be but human imagination inevitably reflecting human psychic turbulences; a limited imagination that seems to be unable to take off any farther than asserting -- consciously or unconsciously -- that the repressed has to return somehow, someday, in some form or another. What is supposed to be a divine scheme about where humanity originates from and where it is going seems to always fall back helplessly in what Lacan describes as "the realm of what is considered acceptable or, in other words, the realm of prejudices" (1999: 251). *Dogville* is a text that is aware of what it ridicules, though what is ridiculed in it is itself what is being used to communicate its final message of retribution.

The film's final message is certainly a violent one, not to mention that the idea of murder casts its shadow on it from its start to the very end. The figure of Grace, in spite of her victimization, seems to carry the air of the femme fatale. Her aura and her charm captivate, if not Dogville, then certainly the viewer. The idea that she ends up being the ultimate murderess, if carefully contemplated, actually carries no surprises. The conversion of the ultimate martyr to the ultimate murderer is in fact one of the most likely conversions. Grace seems to carry the germ of Sophocles's heroine, Antigone. There is no tyranny in her, and this means, precisely, no human weakness. In his analysis of the tragedy of *Antigone*, Lacan writes about Creon: "We will see later what he is, that is, like all executioners and tyrants at bottom, a human character. Only the martyrs know neither pity nor fear" (1999: 267). He differentiates between Creon's and Antigone's antagonistic positions by pointing out that Creon's tyranny belongs to the "normal" barred subject, in other words, it belongs to the "sane" human being who is constituted by his symbolic network, while Antigone's martyrdom marks her total identification with her desire for death. At such level of identification with one's own desire, there can be no difference between killing the self and killing the other. So, when Grace finally decides to kill everybody in the town she also *literally* kills her own old forgiving self without which she cannot be "Grace" anymore. But it is the style of the execution that evokes a countless number of similar scenes in Hollywood movies when guns start going off. If the people of Dogville are made to represent the society of small town America, Grace herself is the ultimate representation of the familiar cinematic Hollywood image of the lonely American cowboy, the vigilante killer, who saves the day by executing justice in his own way with his own gun. America thus is represented in *Dogville* simultaneously and divergently as desexualized as well as murderous.

In an article entitled "The Prayer of Lady Macbeth," I argue that

the affinity between desexing and murder seems to have a certain implicit -- sometimes explicit -- legacy in literature and film. As for Hollywood productions, the examples range from classic cowboy movies with the lonely vigilante killer who lives outside the city, away from what defines and confirms his sexuality, woman, up to the *Terminator* series. (Elbeshlawy, 2006: 110)

The difference between *A Fistful of Dollars* and *Terminator* is that in Sergio Leone's film, the hero is a man whose slow movements, slow speech and the unbelievable, mechanistic and superhuman speed by which he uses the gun resemble that of a machine, while in James Cameron's film, the hero is a machine that looks like a man. Both the desexualized machine-like man and the desexualized man-like machine, however, have the same cinematic cowboy ethics. As for literature, it can be argued that the association of murder with the idea of desexualization goes back in the history of literary production at least to Shakespearean drama. The Roman general Caius Martius of *Coriolanus*, who is "portrayed in most of the play as a desexualized war-machine" seems to strongly represent it, as Shakespeare's verses "seem to give him a kind of mechanistic inhuman quality" (Elbeshlawy, 2006: 110). His unrivalled systematic slaughter of the enemy carries a striking resemblance with the Terminator:

Death, that dark spirit, in's nery arm doth lie, which, being advanced, declines, and then men die ... His sword, death's stamp, where it did mark, it took from face to foot. He was a thing of blood, whose every motion was timed with dying cries. (Shakespeare, 1994: 532-544)

What makes Martius an exceptional tragic hero is Shakespeare's ambiguous presentation of him; a presentation that seems to make *Coriolanus* as a play both a tragedy and a satire, with a tragic hero who seems to derive both sympathy and laughter. His epic figure as the awesome Roman general is oddly enough mixed with a sort of a boyish attitude which makes him his mother's boy. His unrivaled accomplishments as a highly experienced warrior are only matched by a kind of immaturity and innocence that make him a social and political failure.

It is not strange thus that *Dogville* seems to subtly associate these ideas of desexualization and murder with its main attack target: what it perceives as American innocence. American innocence is in fact a theme that has been handled by many writers in various ways. Michael Wood, for example, argues that America talks itself into being innocent via cinema with a discourse that suggests that:

the innocence of victims stems from the principle that says that victims must be innocent, that unless you are innocent, you are not a victim. If you are guilty, even only slightly, the whole question changes, since merely getting more than your just deserves is plainly a matter of moral accounting rather than a miscarriage of justice. (1989: 140)

He then argues that "at the back of all this lurks the American weakness for the idea of purity, for the notion of an entirely unflecked innocence" (1989: 140). While Wood investigates the effect of Hollywood's representations of American innocence on American society, Edward Said examines America's political motives behind that image of innocence which, for him, is already established in the collective American psyche. In an essay entitled "The Other America," Said questions the American "collective we," which he perceives as:

a national identity represented without apparent demurrals by our president, our secretary of state at the UN, our armed forces in the desert, and our interests, which are routinely seen as self-defensive, without ulterior motive, and in an overall way, innocent in the way that a traditional woman is supposed to be innocent, pure, free of sin. (Said, 2003)

Though this seems to be a human image of America as woman, it is not so far away from Hadaly who, as a machine, cannot be but innocent, pure and free of sin. Ihab Hassan, for another example, creates one of the most sublime versions of American innocence in which it is seen as a form of positive neurosis that constitutes a "regressive force that prevents the self from participating fully in the world ... As a result, the greatest values affirmed by the American conscience have often been affirmed against the ruling spirit of the land" (Hassan, 1961: 40).

What can be perceived from all of these accounts of American innocence is that America is always expected to go beyond just the country and its national interests. Everybody overloads the symbol with their own romantic images. Some (mis)recognize in it an un-worldly spiritual detachment, an epic quality, and an unrivalled conscience. Some question its isolationism. Some read violence underneath its image of innocence. And, some mutilate it, as I will argue in what follows, out of love; a love, however, not for America, but for something that does not exist -- yet. With regard to *Dogville*, the conclusion that I would like to draw here is that in spite of its totally negative image of America -- or precisely because of that -- the film seems to me to belong to those works that mutilate America out of

disappointed love. As one of numerous phantasmic representations of America, it overloads its invented image of it with its own romantic, or traumatic, fantasies. Like Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Tomorrow's Eve*, *Dogville* presents us with one of the principal heroes of the modern age, the Odysseus of enlightenment, who lives in an America that is made to sacrifice the sexual for a mixture of the scientific, the economic, the religious, and, in *Dogville*, the killing instinct. No human civilization has been more mythologized or dehumanized in the history of man. The myth seems to have gone even beyond Hollywood's wildest dreams. The fundamental difference between *Tomorrow's Eve* and *Dogville* however, as texts created by European subjects, is that the European subject himself is represented in Villiers' novel by the second major character in it, Lord Ewald, while in *Dogville*, the European subject shuts himself outside the text; a kind of repression that does not fail to point to the fact that this subject, just as Lord Ewald loves Hadaly, the mechanical android which represents the perfect romantic love, is himself in love with what America is supposed to represent.

Love, in Lacanian thought, is a coin that always carries aggressivity on its other side. Because love is of a "fundamentally narcissistic structure" (Lacan, 1994: 186), the object of love is both a confirmation of the lover's ego and a destabilization of that ego at once. Because the lover always (mis)recognizes what he loves in the object of love, he tends to overload it with more than it can afford. Lacan sums this up by the following words: "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you -- the *objet petit a* -- I mutilate you" (1994: 268). Similarly, what the critique of America by the European subject seems to unconsciously say is: "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you -- the myth, the dream, the universal home, the unattainable, that which goes beyond the country, or, that which never reified/will never reify -- I mutilate you." In other words, love is a letter which "*always arrives at its destination*" because the addressee, as Žižek puts it, is "from the very beginning the sender himself," and the content of the message is his own being (2001: 13). It emanates from the subject and is reflected back on the subject, precisely because it is the field where the ego most practises its favourite ritual; self-alienation, or, that first erotic relation with the self which establishes itself in the mirror stage. Lacan states that:

there is a sort of structural crossroads here to which we must accommodate our thinking if we are to understand the nature of aggressivity in man and its relation with the formalism of his ego and his objects. It is in this erotic relation, in which the human individual fixes upon himself an image that alienates him from himself, that are to be found the energy and the form on which this organization of the passions that he will call his ego is based. (1989: 21)

It comes as no surprise that this love/hate relationship often produces the most interesting texts around objects of love that are never complete, and thus, they always leave the subject hanging perpetually from an illusion that Lacan names as the *objet petit a*. The mutilation is thus largely caused by the disappointment that the subject suffers from first or repeated paranoiac (mis)encounters with the real, namely in this case, that his imagined object of love is in fact devoid of romantic or sublime traits. It is of course arguable that *Dogville* can be interpreted simply as a work of bad conscience, yet, it seems to me that at its unconscious core, it is a paranoiac work which *produces* this mis(encounter) by taking the agency of creating a particular image of America and attaining a kind of mastery over the creation to compensate for the unattainable imagined beloved.

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Filmography

Dogville. 2003. Dir. Lars von Trier. Zentropa Productions.

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The Terminator. 1984. Dir. James Cameron. Orion Pictures.