FILM-PHILOSOPHY

The Politics of Gift-Giving and the Provocation of Lars von Trier's *Dogville*

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In one of the most memorable scenes of Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003), the 'beautiful fugitive' Grace (Nicole Kidman) is visited in her improvised shelter at the restored Old Mill by three of the township's women. In what she announces as a moment of 'girl talk', Vera (Patricia Clarkson) discloses to Grace that Martha (Siobhan Fallon), the pious spinster who runs the mission house 'until the new preacher arrives', saw Grace having sex in the apple orchard with Vera's husband Chuck (Stellan Skarsgård). Although the viewer knows that Chuck has been taking advantage of Grace ever since the moment he brutally raped her on the floor of his own house, he seems to have defended himself to his wife when she confronted him about the events by saying that it was Grace who had made advances towards him, and "not for the first time". Vera exonerates her husband, whom she describes as 'a withdrawn and primitive man' who is 'at heart' 'loyal and good', but she is not prepared to forgive the 'seductress'. And so she decides to teach her a lesson, if only because 'she believes in education', by smashing the collection of seven tiny china figurines which Grace has purchased during the happy months in Dogville from Ma Ginger's (Lauren Bacall) 'expensive shop', with what little money the town's inhabitants had given her in return for her totally 'unnecessary' physical labour. Yet Vera does not just throw Grace's collection to smithereens in one single destructive act. Instead she presents Grace with an ethical and emotional challenge: she will destroy two of the figurines and if Grace is capable of demonstrating her knowledge of the doctrine of Stoicism, which Grace has been teaching to Vera's children, by holding back her tears, she will stop. As soon as the two figurines are broken before Grace's eyes, the gangster's daughter, who 'in her lifetime had had considerable practice constraining her emotions', herself breaks down and 'for the

Nobus, Dany (2007) 'The Politics of Gift-Giving and the Provocation of Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 3: pp.23–37. <http:/www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n3/nobus.pdf>
ISSN: 1466-4615 online

first time since her childhood' gives free rein to her tears. Mercilessly, Vera proceeds to breaking the remaining five figurines, after which the three women leave the Old Mill.

This scene, in which the town of Dogville once again bares its teeth, is the only moment in the film when one of Dogville's inhabitants shows some form of allegiance to the principle of 'Dictum ac factum' ('no sooner said than done') – the hackneyed words of Terence's self-tormentor, which are inscribed on the cross beam at the entrance to Dogville's abandoned silver mine, like a programmatic mission statement or a perennial reminder of a bygone prosperous era, when there was no need for moral rearmament and acceptance was not an issue. Yet the scene proves also crucial when Dogville's fate is sealed at the end of the film. For the memory of it comes back to Grace when she decides that 'if there's any town this world would be better without' it must be Dogville (thereby echoing Chuck's confession that he would not miss the town 'if it fell into the gorge tomorrow'), and her father accordingly instructs the mobsters to shoot everyone and burn the whole town down. In light of what she experienced at the Old Mill during the night of 'girl talk', Grace feels that Vera deserves special treatment. Grace: 'There's a family with kids. Do the kids first and make the mother watch. Tell her you'll stop if she can hold back her tears.' Grace's command, here, appears as extraordinarily cruel, heartless and inhumane, especially against the background of her unusual, almost inhuman ability to forgive, and the friendship she has built up with Vera during the happy days in Dogville. How can the passionate destruction of a collection of seven ugly little figurines, however fragile they may have been and however hard-won their acquisition may have felt, justify the cold-blooded assassination of seven beautiful children, who are, if not entirely innocent perhaps, at least entirely free of blame for the deplorable actions of their parents? Grace's 'sadistic' command appears all the more cynical as she calmly justifies it to her father with the words: 'I owe her [Vera] that'. What did Vera 'give' to Grace that could possibly justify Grace's decision to repay her own debts in this cruellest of fashions? Unless we interpret Grace's words as a prime example, not of the doctrine of Stoicism but of the 'dog's philosophy' called Cynicism, it is hard to define the nature of Grace's indebtedness to Vera, for it seems that instead of having been given something by Chuck's wife during that night of 'girl talk' in the Old Mill, the angry woman rather took something precious away from her.

In what follows, I wish to use the circumstances and dynamics of the nocturnal scene of destruction at the Old Mill and the subsequent scene of carnage at the house of

Chuck and Vera in *Dogville* as a springboard for developing some reflections on the 'politics of gift-giving', and the relationship between friendship and hostility in the exchange of social goods. The term 'springboard' is no doubt too vague, here, because I intend to approach the two scenes, and the film as a whole, as a radical provocation, thus distinguishing my approach from the traditional methodology of 'application', in which a work of art is used in order to exemplify a certain theoretical construction. As it happens, 'provocation vs. illustration' in itself constitutes one of the key 'moral' antagonisms of von Trier's film and, as I shall argue, it is the dogged determination of Tom Edison Jr. (Paul Bettany), the town's amateur-philosopher, moral lecturer and self-crowned "miner of the human soul", to illustrate the human problem and his failure to be provoked which brings unrest to the township of Dogville and which finally makes it go to the dogs.

It seems to me that the two aforementioned scenes, when read in conjunction, not only capture the essence of von Trier's exploration of 'goodness', in what is to be the first part of the director's 'USA Trilogy', but also provoke a serious re-consideration of the notions of acceptance, tolerance, hospitality and solidarity, which political theorists and sociologists have identified as central principles of a democratic society. It is not my intention to discuss the way in which 'gift-giving' operates within different political systems (democratic vs. dictatorial; egalitarian vs. class-based), but to investigate the way in which 'gift-giving' is conditioned by politics. One should understand the notion of politics, here, in the same way as Derrida uses it, with reference to Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, in his *Politics of Friendship*, notably as a configuration of socio-economic governance which involves the creation, production and manufacturing of something, such as a system of exchange (Derrida 1997[1994], 8). In this vein, I shall explore the 'politics of gift-giving' along five distinct yet interlocking dimensions: 1. the object of the gift; 2. the act of giving; 3. the giver (donor) and the recipient (the donee); 4. gift-giving as a symbolic system of exchange; and 5. the significance of gift-giving for discursive transformation. These five dimensions by no means exhaust the process of gift-giving as a means of social interaction. Indeed, additional aspects of gift-giving might be distinguished and investigated, such as the meaning of the gift (and giving), the intentions of the donor and the purpose of gift-giving. If I have decided to set these aspects aside, it is not because they lack importance, but because I believe they connote social-psychological and cultural mechanisms, which as such occupy a secondary role within the 'politics of gift-giving'.

It is universally agreed that the process of gift-giving requires the presence of a gift. Without an object that qualifies as a gift, there is no such thing as an act of giving. Yet this is probably where the agreement ends. Ever since Marcel Mauss published his seminal essay on the gift in the mid-1920s (Mauss 1990 [1923-24]) sociologists and anthropologists have found it much easier and much more convenient to focus their research on the systems of exchange in which gifts operate, and on the motives that condition gift-giving, than on the object of the gift as such, thus taking their lead from a rather peculiar oversight in Mauss's own work. For as Derrida pointed out in *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*: '[A] work as monumental as Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* speaks of everything but the gift: It deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift *and* countergift—in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift *and* the annulment of the gift' (Derrida 1992[1991], 24). The problem of researching and defining what constitutes a gift-object has recently been demonstrated by Aafke E Komter in her empirical study on *Social Solidarity and the Gift*. Before presenting the results of her work into the patterns and profiles of gift-giving, Komter asks 'What exactly is to be considered as a gift?', to which she responds with the answer:

> Using the respondents' own definition of what they experience as a gift is apparently a good approach. However, this would imply another type of research than we had in mind. Because we were mainly interested in the sociological patterns of gift giving and in the psychological motives underlying these patterns, and not primarily in the subjective definitions of "gifts" as opposed to "nongifts," we distinguished several giving objects or giving activities, material as well as nonmaterial: presents, monetary gifts, hospitality (inviting people to dinner or letting them stay in one's house). Our idea was that, in spite of obvious differences between them, practices such as ritual or spontaneous gift giving, offering help or care, or hospitality to other persons have one very essential aspect in common: all these gifts are imbued by the subjective experience of being given out of free will and are not being dictated by any economic rule such as fair exchange or barter. (Komter 2005, 39)

Although this passage exemplifies social scientists' inclination to concentrate on the sociological and psychological mechanisms governing practices of exchange, rather than the object of the gift, it nonetheless provides us with at least three interesting angles

on the gift as object: 1. What constitutes a gift is conditioned by subjective experience. Whose subjective experience is not entirely clear. It could be the subjective experience of the giver, that of the recipient, or both; 2. The subjective experience which enables the identification of an object as gift is tantamount to its being experienced as the product of a free will, that is to say, the experience rests on an evaluation of the nature of the act (of giving) which carries the object; 3. Gift-objects can be material or immaterial and may cover the entire spectrum from economically valuable goods such as money to exclusively social activities such as hospitality.

One could easily conclude from these ideas that the main reason why the gift-object escapes clear definition is that within a social system of exchange everything (and nothing) can potentially function as a gift, provided the donor, but especially the donee, interprets the object in a certain way. A gift, then, becomes any object that the giver and/or the recipient *interprets* as a gift. Hence, the object of the gift does not even need to be collapsed onto the (im)material, ostensibly detachable object that is transferred from the donor to the donee, because it may very well coincide with the donor as such. As Hannibal Lecter would no doubt have said whenever a dinner guest asked him what to bring: 'Just bring yourself!'. Yet if all of this seems plausible, it still does not do justice to the complexity of the object *qua* gift. For how can any donee (but the same is no doubt true for the donor) ever arrive at the conclusion that an object is given out of free will? How can a recipient (and a giver) determine that an object is *not* given as part of an economic system of exchange — as a loan, in return for something already received, or perhaps as a payment towards the reduction of an incurred debt. More radically, how can anyone calculate that the given object does not require its return? It is well-known, here, that in Mauss's conception of the gift, the practice of gift-giving cannot be divorced from the principle of *do ut des* (I give for you to give in return). As Mary Douglas reminded readers in a recent exchange in the *Times Literary Supplement*, this implies that for Mauss there is no such thing as a 'free' gift, although this fundamental 'contamination' of the gift has never stopped anyone from thinking that a 'true' gift *should* always be free (Douglas 2005, 15).

The question as to whether Mauss was correct in arguing that no gift is ever entirely free continues to divide scholarly opinion, and has often generated vehement discussions about the extent to which a human being is capable of relinquishing selfishness in order to express 'real' altruism. Freud (1912-13, 1930a[1929]) believed that human beings only ever perform unselfish, altruistic acts as a result of their compliance

with the suppression (renunciation) of the drives that is enforced by the constraints of social life. Altruism and sociability are but secondary, neurotic formations built upon the remnants of a primary, hostile set of impulses. This idea has received support from orthodox Darwinians, who have argued that altruism runs contrary to the principle of natural selection (which essentially requires creatures to follow their self-interest), yet hard-core socio-biologists such as E.O. Wilson (1975) have revalorised altruism as a genetically controlled, adaptive feature of human nature, which implies that the 'free' gift (including self-sacrifice) constitutes a necessary biological factor for the maintenance of community life.

Whichever perspective on 'free' gifts and altruism is closer to the truth, neither of them dispels the fundamental paradox that reigns over the gift-object. If there is no such thing as a 'free' gift, but everyone believes that a gift should be free, then it is not only clear that a genuine gift does not exist, that we can never offer and receive real gifts, but that we are forced to deceive ourselves with the thought that a gift is free in order to be able to give and receive. But if a 'free' gift does exist, if something can really be given for nothing, then the resulting truthful identification of the object *qua* real gift would in itself reduce its quality, because its sheer recognition as gift will inevitably induce experiences of gratitude (and debt) on the part of the receiver and self-approval (and narcissistic gratification) on the part of the donor. As Alvin Gouldner put it: 'There is no gift that brings a higher return than the free gift . . . For that which is truly given freely moves men deeply and makes them most indebted to their benefactors' (Gouldner 1973, 277). Remarkably, Gouldner remains reluctant to give up his belief in the existence of the 'free' gift, despite the fact that his assertion clearly indicates that the 'freest' gift is simultaneously the 'un-freest' gift, since it attracts the highest rewards.

Following Derrida in *Given Time*, the only possible conclusion seems to be that the gift-object is the 'very figure of the impossible':

> The simple identification of the gift seems to destroy it. The simple identification of the gift as such, that is, of an identifiable thing among some identifiable 'ones', would be nothing other than the process of the destruction of the gift. It is as if, between the event or the institution of the gift *as such* and its destruction, the difference were destined to be constantly annulled. At the limit, the gift as gift ought not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as

> gift. Neither to the 'one' nor to the 'other'. If the other perceives or receives it, if he or she keeps it as gift, the gift is annulled. But the one who gives it must not see it or know it either; otherwise he begins, at the threshold, as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give. (Derrida 1992[1991], 14)

It is worth noting, here, that Derrida does not exclude the possibility of the social exchange of gifts, whether ritualised or spontaneous, but rather emphasizes the impossibility of an object's continued existence as gift, that is to say as something which does not presuppose or imply a return, from the moment it is identified as such. In other words, an object can only be exchanged as gift for as long as it is not appreciated as a gift-object.

To the best of my knowledge, Derrida does not tease out the implications of his account of the gift-object for the act of giving, nor for the relationship between the giver and the receiver, and the way in which a social system enacts and reproduces patterns of gift-giving. In addition, Derrida builds his argument around the idea that as soon as an object is identified as gift, the gift is annulled because of the effect of restitution that this identification produces, whether in the form of a self-congratulatory, narcissistic gratification (on the side of the donor) or as guilt-ridden gratitude (on the side of the donee). Yet this process of mutual indemnification only works if there is some form of economic equity between the value of the gift-object and the value of the compensatory rewards that it attracts. If the value of the gift-object, or if the cost of the identification of an object *qua* gift outweighs the profits that it generates, then it is difficult to see how the gift could be annulled. In other words, it seems entirely possible to conceive of the persistence of the gift-object, despite the inevitable force and sum of its returns, if we accept that the value of the gift-object, when it is recognized as such, and the value of its (present or anticipated) effects do not *de facto* cancel each other out, which is exactly what Derrida seems to assume in his economy of gift-giving. I would even dare to go a step further and propose that it is not so much the gift-object that represents the impossible, but rather the equality of measure between the cost of the gift-object (not its actual financial cost, of course, but the expenditure involved in its perception as gift) and the value of its resultant benefits. The fundamental disparity, the impossible complementarity

between the former and the latter is thereby less a function of the actual or attributed weight (personal significance, socio-economic value) that they carry, than of the temporal (and logical) order that separates the two events. The value of the gift-object's resultant benefits may either fall short, or over-indemnify or occasionally match the cost of the object's identification as gift, yet this does not exclude the impossibility of complete complementarity, because the identification of the gift-object will always occur first, as a point of departure, before the occurrence of whatever benefits it attracts. For this reason, I venture to propose that the gift, apart from being the 'very figure of the impossible', in its unavoidable attraction of returns (which is, in a sense, Derrida's reformulation and radicalisation of Mauss's idea that there is no such thing as a 'free' gift), is also, and perhaps more fundamentally the 'very figure of loss', owing to the temporal impossibility of the cost of the gift-object being annulled by the value of its returns.

What are the implications of this for the act of giving, the relationship between the giver and the receiver, and the way in which a social system enacts and reproduces patterns of gift-giving? If Derrida is right in claiming that the gift is the 'very figure of the impossible', and we accept the aforementioned thesis that the gift is the necessary precondition for the act of giving, then common sense no doubt dictates that the act of giving is equally impossible, at least in its identification as a 'giving act'. But perhaps we must not let ourselves be guided by common sense and be too quick in formulating conclusions. Why would it be impossible to give something that is in itself 'the very figure of the impossible'? Why would the impossible gift-object by definition make the act of giving it into an impossibility? Wouldn't it be possible to conceive of an act of giving that maintains the impossibility of the given object, i.e. that does not *de facto* presuppose the identification of an object as gift? Wouldn't it be possible to conceive of an act of giving without there being an actual gift?

During the 1950s, Lacan famously defined love as 'giving what you don't have' (Lacan, 2002a [1958], 243; see also Lacan, 2002b [1958], 276), thereby implicitly borrowing a phrase from Heidegger's discussion of 'The Anaximander Fragment' (Heidegger, 1950 [1946]). In this formula, love appears as the epitome of the 'impossible gift', yet at the same time it is by no means impossible to engage in the act of giving it, to actively give someone or something one's love, indeed to make love to someone or to love something. We could even go so far as to say that the act of giving love is essentially predicated upon a refusal or an avoidance of the identification of the object as a gift. If love were to be perceived and

ascertained as a gift-object by one or more of the loving parties involved, then the act of loving would instantly be annihilated and re-integrated within an economically sanctioned process of commodification and exchange – reduced to the provision of a social service. The act of loving simply does not tolerate the object of love being identified as a gift, neither by the lover nor by the beloved. The act of loving does not hold up to the beloved responding to the lover's love with the words 'Thank you for that!'

However, the possible co-existence of an act of giving and an unidentified gift-object – stronger still, the radical dependency of an act of giving upon the non-identification of an object as gift – should perhaps not necessarily be restricted to the field of love. And indeed Lacan himself does not appear to have privileged love, here, since he also considered this dynamics to be operative in the passions of hate and ignorance (Lacan, 2002a [1958], 252). How far the conjunction can be extended beyond the realm of the passions remains to be seen, yet the phenomenon of love demonstrates clearly how the act of giving can be crucially dependent upon the impossibility of the gift-object, on the object of love not being identified as a gift that as such would elicit self-esteem and gratitude. Of course, following Derrida, we also need to acknowledge that the refusal to identify the love-object as a gift is precisely what allows it to persist as a pure, uncontaminated, free gift-object and what makes room for the act of love to be recognized as an act of giving. Again, I believe we could go a step further here and argue that, conversely and paradoxically, it is this type of non-identification of an object *qua* gift which can make it possible for an act of giving to acquire the connotation of love. The extent to which an act of giving can be experienced as performed with love is inversely proportional to the degree with which the giver and the receiver identify the object as a gift and, by implication, congratulate themselves on it or feel the need to express their gratitude to the other.

If we accept that the gift-object, apart from being the 'very figure of impossibility', is also and perhaps more fundamentally 'the very figure of loss', then common sense offers less clear-cut answers as to its implications for the act of giving and the relationship between the donor and the donee. If the gift's returns are incapable of annulling the cost of its identification, for reasons of temporality more than anything else, then how does this uncompensated expenditure affect the process of gift-giving? How does it affect the way in which the donor and the donee relate to one another, before, during and after the gift has been given? At this point, I wish to return to Lars von Trier's *Dogville*, in order to

expose myself to the provocation of the two scenes, of the nightly 'girl talk' at the Old Mill and the moonlit 'sadistic' infanticide in the house of Vera and Chuck, that I singled out at the beginning of my text as paradigmatic depictions of the politics of gift-giving.

The most difficult question posed by these two consecutive scenes is no doubt that of the adequacy and justifiability of the compensation (retaliation, revenge) which Grace decides to inflict upon her 'friend' Vera. How can the destruction of seven tiny ugly figurines warrant the assassination of seven beautiful children? Why must the passionate breakage of a series of inanimate objects, irreparably damaged yet not necessarily irreplaceably lost, be repaid with the dispassionate murder of a series of living subjects, irreparably wounded yet also ever so irreplaceably lost? Why does Grace 'owe' Vera this? And how can we make sense of what she says immediately afterwards: 'I am afraid she [Vera] cries a little too easily'? Of course, this is what Vera herself confessed to Grace when Grace went to see her in order to baby-sit for little Achilles, as part of Tom's 'Trojan horse'-plan for ensuring that Grace 'wins over' the sympathy of Vera's grumpy husband: 'I cry too easily, both in sorrow and in joy'. But if it is indeed the case that Vera cries too easily, then the ethical and emotional predicament imposed by Grace becomes entirely futile, for she knows in advance that her 'friend' will not be able to hold back her tears and will thereby be forced to see the rest of her children die as a result of her own weakness and vulnerability.

To grasp the extent of von Trier's provocation it is worth recalling what the voice-over says when Grace is forced to witness how Vera smashes two of the seven figurines on the floor of the Old Mill: 'But as the porcelain pulverized on the floor it was as if it were human tissue disintegrating. The figurines were the offspring of the meeting between the township and her. They were the proof that in spite of everything her suffering had created something of value'. Despite, or perhaps by virtue of the hardship Grace has had to sustain, the seven figurines have acquired great emotional and symbolic value. She has come to regard them as the progeny of her loving communion with Dogville. In this respect, von Trier seems to suggest that Vera's seven children are in fact but a small 'compensation' for the seven little figurines, because they have *much less* emotional and symbolic value (the children are physically neglected and socially deprived) and they have not even been born out of a loving relationship—as Tom explains to Grace when he introduces her 'to the town he loves': 'Chuck and Vera have seven children and they hate each other'. Hence, when judged in terms of the emotional and symbolic value of the

object, Grace's assassination of Vera's seven children suddenly appears as an *insufficient* rather than an exaggerated compensation for Vera's destruction of Grace's seven figurines. The cost of the porcelain (and not only do we know how much Grace had to work in order to earn the money that allowed her to buy it, but also how much she must have been ripped off by Ma Ginger and her 'expensive shop') is not cancelled out by the price of the children. And so Vera has to die too, and all the citizens of Dogville have to be killed with her, and the entire township burned down, and the memory of its spiteful existence preserved in the only surviving creature of the massacre – Moses the dog. What von Trier's film provokes, here, is not only our realisation of the fundamental lack of solidarity that animates, permeates and substantiates a community of people, but the equally intrinsic lack of reciprocity that governs and maintains the exchange of social goods. The gift-object as the very figure of loss determines the radical impossibility of reciprocity in the relationship between giver and receiver.

One could no doubt object, here, that neither Grace's seven figurines nor Vera's seven children function as gift-objects, because Grace purchased her 'offspring' from Ma Ginger's shop and it is very likely that, given Chuck's brutality, Vera's children were actually forced upon her. Yet it is precisely insofar as these objects are *not* identified as gift-objects, at least during the time of their material existence, that they retain their purity as 'free', sacred, inviolate goods, for which there is no return, no pay-off, no symbolic equivalent. Unlike all the other objects in *Dogville* that are perceived and received as gifts—Grace's arrival in the township, her two weeks of 'doing things that don't need doing', the goods Grace discovers in her bundle (a loaf of bread, Tom's map, Jason's penknife, the gooseberry-pie from Ma Ginger and Gloria, clothing, matches, a hymnal, and even a dollar-bill) before she departs for the old silver mine to await the town's verdict – the little figurines and the children operate beyond the principle of 'quid pro quo' and do not require any kind of 'counterbalance'. Interestingly, it is only when Grace's objects are being destroyed that she starts to see them as 'something of value'. The material destruction of the objects endows them with a gift-like quality which they did not have until then or which at least she had not clearly articulated. Only in confrontation with her material loss does Grace come to realise the full extent of her suffering and what it had created – 'something of value'. And only in the identification of the worthless, ugly and overpriced figurines as 'something of value' do they re-enter the circuit of gift-giving and does Grace realise the costliness of what she had acquired and what she has lost. The 'quid pro quo' thus becomes

inevitable, although (as I have argued above) what Grace 'owes' Vera is something she will never be able to pay back, even when Vera no doubt also realises, and perhaps for the first time, that her children constitute 'something of value', in confrontation with their merciless assassination.

Dogville provokes us in its depiction of how 'simple, good, honest folk' living a quiet life in an admittedly impoverished, yet nonetheless undisturbed little town turn out to be 'rotten from the inside out' (as Chuck puts it so perceptively in his conversation with Grace when Tom's 'Trojan-horse' plan unfolds) or, indeed, a 'community of scoundrels' (Kafka, 1991). One may of course feel entitled to argue that the people of Dogville were always already corrupt, exploitative, treacherous, greedy, dishonest, unforgiving, cruel, insincere, in one word 'perfidious', because they earn their living with dubious practices (the Hensons grind the edges of cheap glasses in order to make them look expensive; Ma Ginger and Gloria run an 'expensive shop' because it is the only one in town and nobody ever leaves) and they cannot even accept themselves (Jack McKay cannot accept he is blind; Liz Henson cannot accept that she is in love with Tom Edison Jr., Tom Edison Sr. cannot accept he is healthy; Martha cannot accept that the new preacher will never arrive; Ben cannot accept that he is not part of the 'freight industry', and Tom Edison Jr. cannot accept that he is not a writer). And so Grace's arrival would merely appear to exacerbate dramatically a mindset that was always already there. Yet the real provocation of the film is much more unpalatable, notably that the installation of a symbolic system of exchange on the basis of solidarity, reciprocity, 'quid pro quo', counterbalance and friendship does not lead to the development of stable community life, but to the gradual deterioration of the social fabric into a structure of retaliation, punishment, revenge and outright hostility. The more the town of Dogville shows its acceptance and hospitality by integrating Grace into a mutually agreeable pattern of social transactions, the more Dogville's politics of gift-giving crystallize into a shared, communal and seemingly 'fair' practice of exchanges, the more the town turns itself into an inhospitable, hostile and radically unfair community. The more Dogville's people want respect the more disrespectful they become. The more Grace shows them her 'true face' and offers them her vulnerability, the more they take advantage of it.

The key question, of course, is whether we should read von Trier's provocation as a cynical tale of social inevitability or, less pessimistically, as a representation of social living conditions gone awry. Although I tend to believe that any politics of gift-giving, in light of

the gift-object being a figure of impossibility and loss, defies (rather than facilitates) the installation of solid solidarity and receptive reciprocity, the film offers us a number of indications to see the bleak picture of social decline which *Dogville* presents as a parable of tragic possibility rather than necessity.

As I pointed out at the beginning of my text, von Trier's entire film revolves around the dialectical relationship between provocation and illustration, whereby the two poles of the divide almost function as pseudonyms for the film's two main characters. Tom Edison Jr., the township's 'moral guide', doggedly defends the practice of illustration, whereas Grace Margaret Mulligan, the 'beautiful fugitive', ruthlessly pursues the cause of provocation, despite her ostensible diligence in accepting the trials and tribulations of her fate. We discover at the end of the film that the reason why she ended up in *Dogville* in the first place is that she had to escape her father's wrath after she had called him 'arrogant'. Yet later on, when she is working for Dogville's acceptance, she calls Tom 'arrogant', indulges in 'a shady piece of provocation' when forcing Jack McKay to accept his blindness, and surreptitiously provokes Chuck into a state of silent conflict when asking him for forgiveness for not returning his advances. Whereas Tom uses every event to illustrate, and thus to confirm his preconceived ideas about moral rearmament and acceptance, and uses every opportunity to persuade his fellow citizens of his philosophy, Grace presents people with an opportunity to question, re-evaluate and revoke their beliefs about themselves, their neighbours and the community in which they live. In this way, Grace personifies the gift's inexhaustible power to provoke. As a figure of the impossible and loss, the gift-object (and the process of gift-giving supporting it) is able, more than anything else, to destabilise and reorganise existing structures of power, the more so as the act of giving is spontaneous (as opposed to ritualised) and as the gift-giver is a stranger and an outsider (as opposed to a recognized member of an established social unit). Tom's 'mistake' (and the 'mistake' of the entire community of Dogville when they accept and implement his philosophy) is to radically deny the possibility of provocation and to interpret every provocative occurrence ('a force to be taken seriously', as only the dog Moses seems to realise) as a further illustration of what is already known. The result is that belief turns into conviction and that Dogville becomes ever more dogmatic in the affirmation (and acceptance) of its perfidious core.

So it seems that von Trier's fictional tale of the wretched little town of Dogville does leave us with a possibility to escape the grim reality of a social structure that is

intrinsically promised to destruction. Much like 'the way up the mountain', which offers an alternative, yet dangerous trail out of Dogville, the escape-route requires bravery, courage and a fundamental willingness to risk everything that is dear. It requires an ability to be provoked, to avoid provocation becoming illustration, and to employ the politics of gift-giving as a means to question the hypocritical and 'rotten' systems of solidarity on which the community is based, not with a view to developing better forms of solidarity, but with a view to constantly re-organise the community around the central figures of impossibility and loss, and the essential lack of reciprocity they entail.

Acknowledgements

Paper presented at the International Conference 'The "Gift" in Modern Society through Lars von Trier's *Dogville*', organised by the Heyendaal Instituut and the Jan van Eyck Academy, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 18-19 May 2005.

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