'It's Been Edifying, Don't You Say?' The Dialectic of Evil in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*

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Abstract
This chapter is an attempt to show that Lars von Trier's film *Dogville* (2003) may be understood as an effort to break down the pact of goodness between the viewer and the film. Every work of art, the author argues, implies a silent contract between the subject (the viewer, reader, etc.) and the object (the film, book, etc.), saying that no matter how horrible the story depicted is, the aesthetic experience is ethically edifying to the subject. Drawing on the French philosopher Alain Badiou, the author contends that this implicit ethics is reactive and nihilist: the goodness of art depends on a more fundamental idea of evil. The discussion circulates primarily around a crucial moment in the end of the film, when the whole setting is turned around, and the merciful victim becomes a cold blooded executioner. One way to understand this moment is to say that von Trier rips the ethical contract, with a very confusing result. What von Trier tells us is, in a way, that we're all stuck in a rudimentary fiction of goodness, which is kept up by contrasting narratives of evil.

Key Words: Lars von Trier, Alain Badiou, evil, nihilism, idealism, materialism, fiction.

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1. The Silent Contract of *Dogville*

There is a moment in Lars von Trier's film *Dogville* when everything is turned upside down. Not only the plot and the destiny of the central characters, but something more fundamental, something involving the assumptions of the spectator. What I'm aiming at has to do, I believe, with the concepts *good* and *evil*.

Dogville is everything but a mainstream movie. In a very non-realist, theatrical way, using a lot of *Verfremdung*-effects, it tells the story of Grace, a mysterious fugitive who arrives to the small American village Dogville. There she meets Tom, a young idealist who introduces her to the other inhabitants and convinces them to let Grace hide in the village. After a while she wins the hearts of the skeptical locals, but later on the hospitality is gradually replaced by hostility. Little by little Grace is pushed out, mistreated, made a prisoner and finally abused in all possible ways.

What interests me in von Trier's film is not so much the possible interpretations (theological interpretations, political interpretations, feminist interpretations, etc.) of the story. What I'd like to highlight is rather the ethical implications of the breakdown of the conventions or assumptions in the last scene. Fredric Jameson once pointed out that genres in the end are social contracts between the author and

the public. The function of this contract is to show how a certain artifact - a novel, a poem, a film - is to be understood, or used, in order to avoid that it succumbs to a variety of contingent uses.[1] Jameson's comment strikes me as pertinent when it comes to explaining what is at stake in *Dogville*: what is turned upside down, or broken, in the last scenes is the contract Jameson is talking about. All of a sudden it becomes obvious that we have seen the movie in a naïve way. And not only that; it may even be that we have seen *every* movie in a naïve way. *Dogville* makes us aware of the ethical aspects of the silent contract between director and spectator in general.

So, what's happening more precisely in the last scene (or 'chapter' as it is called in the movie) then? Well, Grace's father, a mighty gangster boss, arrives with all his sidekicks and guns. They find Grace locked inside a shed, chained to the bed. Grace's father surprises the inhabitants by showing a friendly attitude towards Grace - who was running away from him in the first place - and tries to convince her to come with him and become his partner. At first Grace, who so far has appeared almost like a saint, shows no interest at all in his offer, but then she starts to reconsider her situation. Or as the narrator puts it: 'Dogville underwent another one of those little changes of light. It was as if the light, previously so merciful and faint, finally refused to cover up for the town any longer.'[2] Suddenly it stands clear to Grace that the people of Dogville *had not* acted good enough, as the narrator expresses it. This is a painful insight to her: 'It was as if her sorrow and pain finally assumed their rightful place.'[3]

After some more thinking and discussion with her father she not only agrees to come with him, but also asks him to kill all the people of Dogville and burn down the village. She even adds that they should see to that the children of a certain family are killed in front of their mother who should be forced to watch. 'I owe her that,' she explains.[4] In the end there's only Tom left, a young man who arranged Grace's stay in the village, and to whom Grace has declared her love earlier in the film. Tom asks for forgiveness, in his own stupid way, but Grace shoots him down herself without hesitation. Then the film ends, to the dry, slightly ironic words of the narrator, who has been commenting the entire film:

> Whether Grace left Dogville, or on the contrary Dogville had left her and the world in general, is a question of a more artful nature, that few would benefit from by asking, and even fewer by providing an answer. And nor indeed will it be answered here.[5]

Von Trier was once asked if he understands *Dogville* as a morality. He answered a bit vaguely:

> [...] perhaps. The thing is that I often manage to create a certain mess in my stories, so fortunately the final message becomes a bit

> unclear. But morality? I'm not quite sure about that. All in all most films deal with man at heart being an animal unable to control himself and his existence.[6]

His hesitation in front of the question is understandable: *Dogville* certainly has something of the exaggerated clarity of an old morality. There seems to be an obvious moral of the story, an almost explicit message. Grace's father steps in on the scene almost like a God, making justice in the most simple way. This aspect is also underlined by the voice of the narrator, which gives the whole movie a touch of a Dickens novel.

But at the same time as that description - Dogville as a morality - seems rather appropriate, it is outright inappropriate.

2. Nihilism and Catharsis

'[I]n a certain way,' the French philosopher Alain Badiou writes in his essay *Ethics*, 'every definition of Man based on happiness is nihilist.'[7] Badiou's point is that 'Ethics' (he's aiming at the ethics of the so called ethical turn, the ethics of the rights of Man, etc. - that is, an ideology that has been growing very strong during the last decades) in reality is founded on its presumed opposite: *evil*. Trying to illustrate this hypothesis he turns to the war in former Yugoslavia, or rather the intellectual western European responses to the war:

> it is pointed out - with a kind of subjective excitement, an ornamental pathos - that these atrocities are taking place 'only two hours by plane from Paris.' The authors of these texts invoke, naturally, all the 'rights of man,' ethics, humanitarian intervention, the fact that Evil (thought to have been exorcized by the collapse of 'totalitarianisms') is making a terrible comeback. But then these observations seem ludicrous: if it is a matter of ethical principles, of the victimary essence of Man, of the fact that 'rights are universal and imprescriptible,' why should we care about the length of the flight?[8]

To Badiou this is an illustration of how this Ethics is dependent upon a rudimentary but more fundamental idea - or one might say *construction* - of Evil. This is why the relatively short distance from Paris to Yugoslavia matters: 'Ethics feeds too much on Evil and the Other not to take silent pleasure in seeing them close up (in a silence that is the abject underside of its prattle).'[9] It is from this observation that he draws the conclusion: the ethics of the rights of Man is nihilist.

The point with Badiou's idea is the way in which he turns our notion of ethics and evil upside down. In that sense there is a Nietzschean touch to his idea: just like the Christian belief in a transcendental salvation implies a devaluation of

immanence (that is, life here and now), the tendency to treat the Rights of Man as a transcendental idea, involves a prior devaluation on an immanent level.[10] I believe this point is highly relevant for our understanding of *Dogville*. In short, his critique affects not only the overtly *ethical* interpretations of film or literature that have become so popular during the last decade, but the ethics implied in our mundane ways of watching (or producing) movies in general.

Before being killed by Grace, her former ally Tom tries to defend his cowardly behavior when Grace was abused:

> Although using people is not very charming, I think you have to agree that this specific illustration has surpassed all expectations. It says so much about being human. It's been painful, but I think you also have to agree it's been edifying, don't you say?[11]

His comment may be read as an argument for the film itself: it has been painful, but also edifying. It says so much about being human, doesn't it? This is the traditional bourgeois defense of art, which can be traced back to Aristotle: no matter how painful or evil the dramatized story is, it may be edifying to take part of it as a spectator. Accordingly, we could say that Tom is speaking for all of us, *Dogville*'s spectators in general, everyone who, like myself, went to the cinema, paid for the ticket, enjoyed or endured the 'painful illustration', in the belief of somehow being educated.

This edifying quality presupposes a certain *distance*: the illustration may have been edifying to Tom, but it is hardly the right way to describe it to Grace, the abused victim. By the same token, the condition for our appreciation of the movie as spectators - our feeling educated, purified, entertained, affected etc - is of course that we at the same time stay *unaffected* (unharmed) by the action on the stage or screen or page. In that sense there is a similarity between the intellectuals in Paris that Badiou was discussing, and the cinema audience. There has to be a *distance* to the war that keeps us safe; a *frame* that stops the evil of the illustration from reaching us, so to speak. If we return to Jameson we could call it a *contract*, a contract that says, among other things, that 'this is fiction, you're neither responsible nor really affected; and if the story contains atrocities, it is only in order to educate and purify you. Don't worry!'

In *Dogville* this frame or contract is underlined by the narrator, whose reassuring voice guides us through the film. But even without the narrator, the frame would be there, as an integral part of the genre itself: no matter how painful, film is always edifying; there is always a metaphysics or ideology of the goodness of art that keeps us safe.

But the concealed point with approaching *evil* is that it helps sustain our own goodness. In that sense, our presumed distance from or independence of the object is illusory: in fact our unspoken ethics is parasitically dependent on our assumption

of evil. That is why, when we come too close, it becomes frightening: not because evil suddenly is 'for real,' but because the difference between good (ourselves) and evil (the object) isn't that clear anymore. The distinct frame that we took for granted can't really protect us.

3. The Dialectic of Evil

If we take a step back for a moment, and try to generalize, we could distinguish between two fundamental views on the relation between art (including film) and evil. From one perspective evil is the radically *other*, that which the artwork defeats through its mere existence. Art is consequently good by definition.[12] From another perspective evil is on the contrary a premise of art, perhaps even the core around which all narrating and every creation circulate. Without evil, no poetry, no novels, no film, no art. Accordingly, it is not possible to separate art from evil - art is just as *good* and just as *evil* as everything else.

The difference between these two views could be boiled down to two concepts: autonomy and heteronomy (or idealism and materialism). That is: either art works through its separateness from society, economy and all relativizing circumstances; or: art is fundamentally permeated by time, life, reality, capital, politics, religion, ethics, etc.

The point, in any case, is that, at a closer look, it is impossible to keep these two positions separate from each other. If art is autonomous from everything else, it is indirectly dependent upon what it distances itself from. And if art coincides with everything else, including *evil*, it must still differ in some sense if the concept of art is to have any substance at all.

So, on the one hand it is impossible not to comprise the idealist notion of art as a possibility of constructing something better than what exists independently of art. It is simply not possible to create an evil movie or write evil literature, since the artwork one tries to create isn't only an individual creation, but also inevitably a product of a two thousand year long tradition. On the other hand, the hope that art is less evil than everything else, is just as false as the hope that one could fully liberate oneself from that idealism. Through the very ambition of creating something better out of something not so good, art is deemed to reproduce something of the violence and evil it sought to leave behind. A one sided stand would inevitably fall back into the opposite it wants to avoid; the relation between art and evil may only be dialectic.

To return to *Dogville*, what is interesting about it is the very sophisticated way of not only illustrating, but also handling this dilemma. *Dogville* fools the spectator into the traditional contract. Even though the setting is odd, we have seen the story of the beautiful female martyr a thousand times before - in that sense *Dogville* is nothing but another repetition of the standard Hollywood drama. But when everything seems to be wrapped up and we are ready to leave the *illustration* as better human beings, the martyr becomes the executioner and we are forced to

make a choice: supporting the eye-for-an-eye-ideology and the excessive violence of the revenge, or dismissing the film as both ethically and aesthetically deficient.

Or is there another possibility? There may be, if we take into account the Chinese box phenomenon which becomes visible in the end of the film. The thing is that there are at least three levels of fiction, three dramas, in *Dogville*. Firstly there is Tom's *illustration*, as he calls it; his way of arranging Grace's stay in the village as some kind of lesson to the inhabitants. The conflict here is obviously between Grace and the residents. Secondly there is the story told by the narrator. The conflict on this level is between the reality of Dogville and the world outside (the gangsters, the police, the law, things in the past), to which Grace steps over in the last scene. Thirdly there is of course the movie that reaches the audience. The responsible here is von Trier himself, and the ethical conflict could be said to be between the film and reality. (This is underlined by the after texts: a series of documentary photos of poverty, misery, ugliness etc, accompanied by David Bowie's 'Young Americans').

The point is that every one of these levels implies a transcending, which brings an uncovering of the failure on the prior level. (In a way already Tom's *illustration* does this: exposes the prejudices of the people of Dogville.) The narrator exposes the naivety of Tom in forgetting the outside world. And then, on yet another level, von Trier tells us that this is only film; there is also a reality outside of the movie theatre.

But then of course another question arises: isn't there yet another level, one that reveals the failure of von Trier? Without doubt there is such a level, but what it unveils is more doubtful. The conflict, on this fourth level, is, I believe, between what's edifying and what's destructive, *good* and *evil.*

In other words, in the end *Dogville* could be understood as a meta-drama about the ethics of film, an attempt to dismantle the implicit idealism that every film is stuck in from the outset. *Dogville* dramatizes the contracts, the frames; it ignites a becoming in which all frames, all contracts, all certainty about good and evil becomes unstable. There may always be yet another level.

Notes

[1] F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Symbolic Act*, Methuen, London, 1981, p. 106.
[2] L. von Trier, *Dogville*, Zentropa, Denmark, 2003.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] S. Björkman, *Trier om von Trier: Samtal med Stig Björkman*, Alfabeta, Stockholm, 2005, p. 338 (my translation).

[7] A. Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Verso, London & New York, 2001, p. 37.
[8] Ibid., p. 34.
[9] Ibid., pp. 35-36.
[10] Cf J. Rancière, 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 103, No. 2, 2004, pp. 297-310.
[11] L. von Trier, loc. cit.
[12] With Wittgenstein, that which we can't talk about, that which lies beyond our conceptualizing abilities.

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