

JOURNEY BETWEEN MIRRORS

Lars von Trier's *Manderlay* as a cinematographic essay on modern freedom¹

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Mais quoi! [...] pour avoir la liberté il suffit de la désirer ...
Etienne de La Boétie, *De la servitude involontaire*

The inhumanity of art must exceed the inhumanity of the
world for humanity's sake.
Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of the New Music*

1. A mirror ...

Dogville (2004), the first of Lars von Trier's trilogy entitled "USA, The Land of Opportunities", is a theoretical film, a kind of cinematographic essay. It explores the hidden foundations of modernity's liberal socio-political order, and discovers the 'gift' as being its repressed and denied paradigm. Gift and gift-giving is a basic phenomenon with which modern society seems unable to deal with, although that gift is present in the very heart of freedom and persists in modern free society.²

Manderlay (2006), the second movie of von Trier's trilogy, is a cinematographic essay as well, and goes further in exploring what is hidden underneath the foundations of modern society. Before going into the content of this exploration, it is striking that its narrative procedure is based on an reflection in the literal sense of the word: it puts things vis à vis one other in such a way that one thing reflects the other, as in a mirror. The movie's *formal* principle is based on mirror effects. It is an 'envelop of looking glasses little by little developed during the course of the movie. A complex fold full of mirrors unfolded one by one, chapter by chapter, until the hidden truth is revealed. Only by following carefully the slippery logic of these mirror effects, is one able to get the basic idea – the 'theorem', the argument – the movie develops.

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² See my "Vilage with She-Dog: The Gift in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*" (to be published).

Actually, its basic idea is that, in freedom, slavery is reflected and that, vice versa, in slavery freedom is reflected, and that both reflections are rather hiding than revealing the truth that is involved. That is why mirrors have to be repeated, why they must reflect one another and, again and again, produce new mirrors. For the theoretical point made by the movie-essay tells that during the reflecting procedure things change. The point of the movie is not simply that slavery reflects freedom and, vice versa, freedom reflects slavery. The film makes a *journey* through the complex proliferation of mirrors, in order not so see *in*, but *through* the mirror. Freedom, after its multiple reflections in slavery, changes; and, vice versa, slavery passed through freedom's mirrors, is no longer the same slavery.

What, then, will have changed? Not so much freedom or slavery as such. They remain what they are, and their distinction will stay valid as before. But what will have changed is the 'self' underlying freedom or slavery. What, then, will have to be reconsidered thoroughly is the *subject* of freedom, the *subject* of slavery. *Manderlay* is a reflection about the subject of modernity's free society, i.e. an inquiry into the basic 'supposition' imagined to be its bearer, its support, its 'subjectum'. It invites the spectator to journey through a series of mirrors in order, at the end, to find himself at the very place he started from, but not as the 'self' he thought he was, but as 'another' who seems to be more 'himself' than he imagined he was. The movie illustrates the function Jacques Lacan ascribes to any genuine work of art: it 'decenters' the subject.³ Identifying herself with the characters on the scene, the spectator steps into a mirror relation with them in order, at the end, to find herself being de-centered, subverted, deconstructed.

In a way, the first five minutes – and even more precisely, the very first words uttered by the first appearing character – already tell the essential point of the whole story. What follows only unfolds this scene and, mirror by mirror, reflects it. After having left the burning town of Dogville, the "army of gangsters" is on its way to the South and has a short picnic-stop near a cotton plantation named Manderlay. The leader of the gang, Grace's father (William Defoe) steps out while chatting to his chauffeur:

No, they will not admit it, but it's a fact. Deep down inside, there is no woman alive who does not nourish these fantasies, dreams of harems, being hunted in the jungle by torch-bearing natives, however much they go on and on about civilisation and democracy. Sexy it ain't.

³ Jacques Lacan (1986), *Le séminaire, Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, Paris : Seuil, especially the chapter on « La fonction du beau » (The function of the beautiful).

The one whom he is talking about – and who, at that very moment, is listening at a distance – is Grace, his daughter (Brice Dallas Howard). Only a few days ago, in the town of Dogville at the feet of the Rocky Mountains, he delivered her from a strange kind of slavery she was fallen in. This makes his saying now quite sarcastic and cynical, for it unmasks his daughter's traumatic months in Dogville to be in fact her own secret, sexual wishes. It is the hidden desire of every woman to be enclosed in a harem, and, deprived of all freedom, to be subjected to the perverse wishes of unknown male strangers, so she hears her father joking to one of his gangsters. He claims his daughter's deepest desire to be reduced to a mere sexual object and, even, to something totally abject. As if the uncountable humiliations and violations she had been victim of in Dogville were nothing than a kind of unconscious enjoyment, a long-lasting party of pleasure and sexual delight. Even if this is not what her maffioso father *literally* says, it is undoubtedly how he is understood by his daughter, who at that moment is listening from within the car.

Here, we face the first of a long parade of mirrors. For, first mirror, these joking words of the father reflect the central theme of the trilogy's former film, *Dogville*, although it puts it in a much less dramatic context: what we saw in the first movie, now seems to be just every girl's secret dream, a fantasy men rightly laugh about. And, second mirror, these very same words will be reflected in what is going to happen in this movie, in *Manderlay*. There, we will indeed see Grace fighting against the desires and fantasies her father had mentioned, and we will even see her succumbing to the one for whom she is nothing more than another sexual catch, i.e. to Timothy (Isaach de Bankolé). What drives her to save the black people from humiliation of slavery appears to be her own drive for such things. The behaviour she hates in *Manderlay*'s free slaves will end up to be the mirror of Grace's darkest desires. Being hunted by Dogville's as well as *Manderlay*'s villagers, Grace is the mirror of what happened to the black slaves hunted by America's free citizens – *before* as well as *after* the abolition of slavery. And she will meet herself as being reflected not in the wish to get free (as she first thought) but in the wish to get enslaved.

The same mirror procedure makes the end of the story the very reflection of the beginning. Entered the cotton plantation in order to avoid the whipping of Timothy who was falsely accused of having stolen a bottle of wine, at the end of the story, before leaving, it is now Grace herself who accuses Timothy falsely of the same 'crime' and even executes the whipping. As if nothing has changed in *Manderlay*, as if the entire series of events were nothing but a journey through a mirror palace, arriving at the point it started from. Slaves, who refused to be free, refuse it still at the end. Slavery, forced by freedom to look into the

mirror and to discover their will to be free recognizes, there, one of freedom's old hidden dreams, its dream to deny freedom and to freely choose slavery.

2. ...of O

This is the core theme of the movie: the free will of liberated black slaves to remain slaves, and Grace's failure to cure them from that perverted, enslaved kind of freedom. At the end, that failure confronts Grace - as it confronts in fact the modern free citizen we all are - with the dark side of her - and our - own will to be free. It is a confrontation with the impossible wish secretly at work in modern freedom. This is what von Trier's cinematographical essay is after by mirroring freedom into slavery: freedom's inherently tragic structure.

The words of Grace's father at the beginning of *Manderlay*, telling that "deep down inside" every woman longs to be a slave, refer to a book that specifically has inspired von Trier's in the writing of this scenario: a notorious French novel from 1954, *Histoire d'O*, written by 'Pauline Réage' (pseudonyme of Dominique Aury, pseudonym of Anne Desclos⁴). It is the "Story of O", a woman who, out of love for her beloved, becomes his slave and, thus, the slave of his friends and of all others she is lent out to. It is a beautifully written, but cruel, implausible and unacceptable story. It rightly evokes questions such as: how a woman can go so far in embracing freely endless series of humiliations? Has what happens to O anything to do with love? Is this not simply pathological sickness? In his foreword, the editor of the novel, Jean Paulhan, anticipates such reactions and tries to give Réage's book a chance by referring to an historical event which took place in the isle of Barbados (the Antilles) in the year 1838.

Une singulière révolte ensanglanta, dans le courant de l'année mil huit cent trente-huit, l'île paisible de la Barbade. Deux cents Noirs environs, tant hommes que femmes, et tous récemment promus à la liberté par les Ordonnances de mars, vinrent un matin prier leur ancien maître, un certain Glenelg, de les reprendre à titre d'esclaves. Lecture fut donnée du cahier de doléances, rédigé par un pasteur anabaptiste, qu'ils portaient avec eux. Puis la discussion s'engagea. Mais Glenelg, soit timidité, scrupules, simple crainte des lois, refusa de se laisser convaincre. Sur quoi il fut d'abord gentiment bousculé, puis massacré avec sa famille par les Noirs qui reprirent le soir même leur cases, leurs

⁴ She was born as Anne Desclos (1907-1998). 'Dominique Aury' was the pseudonym she took as literary critique and employee at Gallimard and NRF, two famous French publishing houses. There, she met Jean Paulhan whose lover she became. Challenged by his saying that women are not able to write real erotic novels, she wrote *Histoire d'O* under the pseudonym of *Pauline Réage*. The real identity of *Histoire d'O*'s author was only revealed forty years later, by the author herself, in an interview with *The New Yorker*. See: Angie David (2006), *Dominique Aury*, Paris: Edition Léo Scheer.

palabres et leurs travaux et rites accoutumés. L'affaire put être assez vite étouffée par les soins de Gouverneur Mac Gregor, et la libération suivit son cours. Quant au cahier de doléance, il n'a jamais été retrouvé.⁵

No wonder that Paulhan's preface is indeed the core inspiration underlying van Trier's *Manderlay*. It must have given him the basic 'mirror'-scheme of his movie: a community of slaves, being slaves by their own free will, is mirrored by a "beautiful lady" who, in Dogville, has become a slave while fighting to become free from her father, and who, now in Manderlay, meets her own freedom in her desire to become someone's slave. Modern social freedom as mirrored in the free, sexual slavery of O. A strange case of 20th century social behaviour as mirrored in the strange sexual behaviour of an individual. It is this kind of weird sexual mirror that allows a deeper insight in the hidden weirdness of modern freedom. Just like a bizarre kind of freedom is supposed to mirror an equally bizarre sexual life (as Paulhan tries to argue in his foreword to *Histoire d'O*).

3. Freedom as Mirror

But what does that strange mirror tell? What does it mean when freedom can see itself reflected in slavery and slavery in freedom? What does Manderlay show in its unfolded procession of mirror effects? In fact, it shows freedom as the very effect of such a mirror procedure. If this film essay on freedom is structured as a set of mirrors, it is because freedom itself is a mirror. It is obvious that, *if there is freedom in Manderlay, it is only in its quality of mirror or image*. Everyone imagines being free or being unfree; the freedom as such lies first of all in this very imagination.

Are Grace's father and his gangsters free? They are free in so far they imagine being free, which means that they have to work night and day to keep up that appearance. Are the black slaves free? They are indeed, but only insofar they imagine being so. And they, too, have to work night and day to keep up that appearance. And Grace, is she free? She, too, is

⁵ Jean Paulhan, "Du bonheur dans l'esclavage", in: Pauline Réage (1954), *Histoire d'O*, Paris : Jean-Jacques Pauvert éditeur, p. 1-2. See also the pressbook of the movie: "Early one morning a group of 'negroes', men and women who had recently been given their freedom by law, approached their former master, a certain Mr. Glenelg, and asked to be his slaves again. After some discussion Mr. Glenelg refused their request; nobody knows whether this was out of fear, his scruples, or simply because he was a law-abiding man. His former slaves began to manhandle him, gently at first. But then he and his family were massacred by the group, and that very same night they moved back into their old slave quarters, where they began to talk, eat and work as they used to do before the abolition of slavery. Lars von Trier was also inspired by a compatriot, the Danish photographer and writer Jacob Holdt and his controversial American Pictures." (http://www.trust-film.dk/download/Manderlay_Pressbook_UK_72dpi.pdf).

free only insofar she imagines she is. This is what, at the end of the story, she realises: the freedom she dealt with was but a mirror. Or, more correctly, she then is *on the verge* of realising this. For, at that very moment, she will flee from it, flee to the north, flee to “Washington”, which names the last, still unknown part of the trilogy.

Freedom has been Grace’s main problem from the very beginning of the trilogy. All had started with her rejection of what her father said freedom is: something based on violence, on the power to lay down the law to others. No, Grace replied, freedom is not violence; it is not the law of the jungle practiced by gangs like her father’s. It is not what comes out of a gun’s barrel, as she herself had all too vividly experienced when her father shot at her during the traumatic scene that made her flee in the direction of Dogville. How happy she was when, in that town, she found another, more natural kind of freedom, the freedom of a community where, under the “hardest circumstances” people succeeded in living together in peace and accepting the foreigner she was as being one of theirs. She was a gift for Dogville, as Thomas junior said, and she helped these people to live anew their freedom as a gift.

At least, initially. Until she began to realise it was but an idea, an all too idealistic idea – an image or a mirror reflecting solely her own wishes. Soon she had to experience that, in reality, it was even worse than the freedom of her father’s kind. Indeed, she made others free. But it was to make them free to abuse and to rape her unpunished. At the end, there was no mercy for them in her eyes. “If there is a town the world is better without, this is it”, thus the conclusion she came to. And she now used her father’s freedom – i.e. his armed power – to set the town on fire and wipe it off the map.

Such is the Grace entering the cotton plantation in Manderlay. She is free now. She has her father’s power, but she has not yet entered the ‘circle of guilt’.⁶ She still acts as an outsider, immune to the world’s evils and shortcomings, and always ready to pass judgement over it. Which is what she does when a new evil crosses her way: a community of slaves, surviving the abolition law already for 70 years. She comes just in time to prevent Timothy from being publicly whipped, and a few moments later, she is horrified by the discovery of the secret ‘book’, written by the white family and laying down the rules to the black slaves: the rationing of the food, the list of ‘crimes’ with the according punishments and, even, the ranking from 1 to 7 of the slaves’ mental attitude towards slavery. All this reminds her of the freedom her father defends, the freedom of the winners imposing slavery to the losers: the whites feeling free to enslave the blacks. In order to fight the wrong freedom and to give true

⁶ This is one of the main thesis in my essay on Dogville “Village with she-dog” (see above).

freedom a chance, she uses her newly acquired power. And although noticed by many at numerous occasions, she never really comprehends that it is only by that power – the free power of gangsters – that her idea of freedom has a chance and that, therefore, that idea lacks real ground and is but an idea, a mirror hold up to the people by force.

It is indeed by the force of arms that she puts an end to Timothy's torture and that she liberates all slaves after having assisted to the death of Mam (Lauren Bacall), the central figure of the white oppression if only because the oppressing Law explicitly bore her name: Mam's Law. At that time, Grace has not yet the intention to stay. It was only thanks to the picnic stop of her father's gang, she coincidentally intervened in the life of the Manderlay plantation. After having disarmed the white family and freed the slaves, she presumes her job done and walks back to her father and his gang, intending to leave the place.

Back in the car, she says to wait a while. 'Why?', her father asks, and already answers in her place: she hopes the newly liberated slaves will come out and say thanks. After all, she is still the Grace whose gift recently brought new life to that other community, Dogville. And had she not done the same now in Manderlay, be it in much shorter time and in a more professional way? Did she not give them their freedom? And should they not give something back, at least a little token of gratitude? This is what occupies Grace's mind, so her father rightly guesses.

And, indeed, finally Wilhelm (Dany Glover), the older slave, appears at the gate demanding Grace to come inside in order for a moment to accept the black community's gratitude. Things, however, turn out differently. Once re-entered, it is not exactly thanks she heard from Timothy who is the first to open his mouth:

TIMOTHY: When we were slaves, we were not required to offer thanks for our supper and for the water we drank and the air we breathed.

GRACE: Nobody needs to say thank you, but ...

TIMOTHY: But what? You mean there is something you think we are to be thankful for?

GRACE: (hesitating) ... I didn't mean 'but', I meant 'and'. ... There is no reason to be thankful to anything as natural as your freedom. ... I am the first to apologize for everything you and your people have been subjected to. ... See those gates: they should have been unlocked seventy years ago.

TIMOTHY: Only seventy years ago? But before that, of course, they were completely justified.

GRACE: No. ... No, no, no, you misunderstand me. ... Hm. ... What can I say?

TIMOTHY: You need to say nothing at all.

BURT: We have heard of your kind. A society lady who spends some time on rescuing oppressed niggers.

It is clear now that, in *Manderlay*, Grace faces the same problem as in *Dogville*: the people find it quite difficult to accept her gift. But now, Grace understands. It is not needed to say thanks for something as natural as freedom. And even when Timothy did not accept that idea either, even if Burt (Geoffrey Bateman) says that she is but another society lady full of compassion with poor niggers, she keeps on believing in the possibility of their freedom, because it is just a natural thing. And she, actively, has to help them in this. That is the only gift she can – and must – offer them. If only because natural freedom has to be protected against the vile ruses of the white, all too civilized men, entering with contracts that have no other intention than secretly bringing the black people back to the same old slavery in the new shape of economic dependency – as her father has predicted a few minutes ago.

Here, again, Grace appears as the great giver. To make those black people really free, she lets burn the contracts made by the white family and gives the former slaves a new contract guaranteeing a possibility to really become free citizens. Again not without the help of that other kind of freedom that she hates so much and which is represented by her pack of gangsters. Assisted by the half of her father's men (including his lawyer who re-wrote the contracts) she plans to stay a longer time at *Manderlay*, as a “gard” to keep an eye on how things develop there.

Now, Grace is really able to hold up the mirror of freedom to the unchained slaves of *Manderlay*. Only, she did not expect she would have to fight that hard the former mirror they were held up to. It was a hidden mirror, a mirror no one was allowed to look in, so Wilhelm said. It was the handwritten book of Mam's Law. Grace saw it during the first hour she was at *Manderlay*. In her hour of dying, Mam revealed it to Grace, urging her to immediately destroy it. Instead, Grace preferred that book to be read by everyone. As an excellent proof against the white oppression, she replied. Again thanks to Wilhelm's intervention, the book remained unopened and stayed where it was: underneath the mattress of Mam's bed.

And in the heart of the black people! The longer Grace stays at *Manderlay*, the more she has to admit it. The black community surprisingly remains attached to habits directly referring to the ‘ancien regime’, such as keeping up the “hierarchy of the beating”, or gathering at midday for a parade underneath the balcony of Mam's room, et cetera. And when even kind Wilhelm keeps referring openly to it (when the planting of the cotton happens to delay, he quotes Mam's law saying this it is not necessarily bad), Grace digs up the book and reads it from cover to cover. There, finally, she faces the hidden mirror she was fighting against till then, the mirror the black people of *Manderlay* were held up to under Mam's regime.

But how can one fight *hidden* mirrors? By making them public, Grace argues: every former slave should read the book and realise how badly and inhumanely he or she is treated. As always, Wilhelm tempered such intentions: “we are not ready for this”. It is the same reply as he had given in reaction to the liberation of Manderlay by Grace or to the sudden death of Mam: ‘it is too early to take the responsibility of full freedom upon us. We are not prepared to take that step’.

‘Then, you should prepare yourselves to that’, is Grace’s reply. What the black people of Manderlay need is an education in freedom. So, not unlike the only one she killed with her own hands in Dogville’s holocaust, Thomas Edison jr., she sets up school activities for the entire black community – of course not without the support of her ‘armed forces’. They now have to learn what freedom and democracy is. They have to be hold up to a mirror that is clear and open for everyone. Not a mirror open for the oppressors and closed for the oppressed, as was – and still is – the case with Mam’s law. The revelation of that law (as planned in one of the next lessons) will destroy it, so Grace things. Only then, it could be replaced it by another one, a law based in freedom, equality and justice. The dark mirror of slavery must be replaced by the enlightening mirror of freedom.

What, however, will be the result? Instead of the destruction of one of them, the two mirrors will now reflect one another. In the mirror reflecting freedom the one hiding slavery will be reflected as well. And, vice versa, in the mirror reflecting slavery, one will able to descry freedom. Which, supprisingly, does not make things necessarily more transparent or clear.

Freedom will be forced to recognize itself to slavery. How is this possible? Is freedom not free? Is freedom not what people say that freedom is; for instance, what they vote it is? Such is democracy, as Grace’s ‘students’ learn in class. If there is a dispute whether a broken rake is Elisabeth’s or Flora’s, organize a vote and things get clear. The case become less ridiculous when the voting is about old Wilma (Mona Hammond) who, during the famine after the sand storm, caused the death of Claire, Jack’s and Rose’s little daughter (Javone Prince and Nina Sosanya), who was dangerously ill and whose meal was daily stolen by Wilma. So, voting is indeed a serious thing when there is be decided whether Wilma has to be sentenced to banishment from Manderlay or to death penalty. Though in that case, death penalty was unanimously voted.

Here, things become a bit clearer, at least for Grace. For freedom is not to be considered as free from any law. Even, more precisely, freedom too is a law. A law people are the *subject of* (which is why they are free), but also a law they are *subjected to*. So is Wilma

for instance, who is sentenced unanimously to death by the democratic court. And so are the others. They are subjected to the law they have voted in their quality of that very law's subject. And so is Grace. Of course, it was she who had installed the law of freedom in Manderlay and established the people's court, but this only means that she, too, is now subjected to it. This is why it is not up to Jack, the father of Wilma's victim, to carry out the sentence given by that court. This would be mere vengeance, Grace argues. It is up to her. She, Grace, has to execute Wilma.

And this is what she indeed does. But how? Not in a clear and direct way, not face to face and speaking out the death sentence to the malefactor. Instead of that, Grace tells Wilma that everything is fine for her now, that the court had been merciful and that they are full of understanding towards a starving old lady who is no longer able to eat the mud she had eaten all too often in her long and miserable life. Happy to hear this out of the mouth of the one she imagined to be like the daughter she always had wanted, she lays down sleeping. Asleep, Grace shoots her in the head. A second later, Grace bursts out crying and collapses.

She had executed the verdict of the law, the law of freedom, supported by the general will of the people. How does that law function in the case of Wilma's execution? In a hidden way. *As hidden as was Mam's law.* Grace lies to Wilma, afraid as she is of the truth, the truth of what is the legitimate result of the freedom based justice she had established in Manderlay. And what is that truth? Not only that Wilma was subjected to the law in the sense that she had to die by its verdict, but also that she, Grace, was subjected to it as well. She was subjected to freedom's law, not as its 'victim, but as its subject. She had to bear, to support that law. Freedom is an image, an idea, a mirror hold. And in order to become something 'real', it needs someone to support and bear it. Someone has to take that all too idealistic idea upon him and to make it a law. Only then, this idea has a chance to become reality.

This is what Grace does: becoming the support – the subject – of the idea called freedom, thus enabling this mirroring idea to be transformed into all day reality. In order to take upon her the responsibility of having abolished slavery at Manderlay, she had to occupy that subject position. This is not without strange requirements. For instance *that she 'herself' has to be absent on the very place where she is freedom's subject.* Her position in Wilma's execution shows this in a surprisingly clear way. Responsible for the observance of the new, freedom based law, she had to set her personal freedom aside. She had to set herself aside and to be absent on the very position from where she laid down the law and carries out its punishments.

So, lying to Wilma in the moments before her execution, Grace is lying to herself as well. She oversees the very position she is occupying. She denies that this position makes her absent as a person and that, in a way, she remains 'hidden' behind the law she implements. The hidden character of the law: this is exactly what she hated in Mam's law. Of course Mam's law was known by all of Manderlay's slaves, although no slave had ever been allowed to read the book this law was written down in. So, not so much the book as its author was supposed to remain hidden. The veil over the book refers to the fact that the one responsible for the law – the one who sat oneself up as its subject – must remain absent to the law he lays down to others.

This is to say that he occupies the place where the law itself – or, which amounts to the same thing, freedom itself – is marked by an absence, a lack, a void. Freedom is but an idea, just like freedom's law is: it is a mirror, an image, a set of mere words. To become something real, it literally has to be supported, borne. Someone has to put his shoulders under the image/mirror/word called freedom in order to perform or to establish it. This is not to say however that, then, such one is a master over it; that he is free to do with it as he pleases. On the contrary, he is only allowed to bear the idea called freedom and freedom's law because he is himself entirely subjected to that idea or law.

This is exactly what Grace begins to realise the moments she performs old Wilma's execution. In a way, she performs her own self-execution and shoots herself too. She shoots the idea that, besides the idea of freedom and freedom based law, there is a free self-based 'self'. She shoots herself away as being freedom's owner and giver. This is why she breaks down after having pulled the trigger and shot Wilma. Now, all of a sudden, she realises she is no longer the one who can pass judgment over reality from a position that is radically outside, immune to any contamination.

It is indeed here that Grace finally steps into the circle of guilt. She knows that Wilma's death sentence is entirely justified, but that, at the same time, no reason can justify the killing of a person. Even by implementing the law in an entirely correct way, one is guilty. It is an incurable guilt that no one ever can straighten out. Though it is the very 'raison d'être' of the law as such, no law can say how to get rid of that guilt. That guilt refers to the lack on which the law itself rests. No one is that good and pure that he is fully justified of laying down the law to others. That is why, in earlier times, men thought it was God who lays dawn the law. But God is death and, nevertheless, the law has to be laid down. It is up to us, humans, to do this, however incomplete, guilty and unworthy we are.

By executing Wilma, Grace realises she has to assume that paradox. She has to accept that she is herself marked by the lack which the law she is subjected to has to forbid. Now she knows that the centre of the law fighting all 'sin' is occupied by 'sin' itself. That the violence freedom's law fights against is at work in the heart of freedom and its law. Being the subject of the law implies accepting that 'sin', that violence.

But is this not what her father and his gangsters do: accepting violence as the inevitable point from where the law is to be laid down? Is this not the sense of all the remarks the father made to his all too naïve and idealistic daughter? In other words, does Wilma's execution performed by Grace not show that she now really has re-entered the realm of her father's mafia and proves herself to be worthy of sharing his power?

Yet, Grace's act differs from the way her father's gang acts on one decisive point: in her position of being the subject of freedom, she does not feel free herself. She does not allow herself to freely do with the law what she pleases. Contrary to what the mafia thinks, she considers freedom to be something she is subjected to, and not something enabling her to subject others to her personal free will. Grace knows that freedom is but a word, an image, a mirror in which people project their wish to be free. Only, this does not unmask freedom as simply a false idea. On the contrary, freedom is indeed but an idea, but it is at least that. More exactly, it is nothing than that, and as such, it has to be recognized and affirmed. Only if we fully assume freedom to be first of all but an mere idea, we are able to become this idea's subject and, thus, to implement it, and to change it into something real.

This kind of assumption is strange to the logic of both Grace's gangsters and the former Manderlay slaves. In the eyes of the mafia, freedom is a mere idea and, thus, must be used and abused. Denying themselves to be subjected to freedom's law, they do as if the law is subjected to them, which in their case means that they carry on a reign of terror making any real freedom impossible. Slaves like Wilhelm know that freedom too is a law, but they are afraid of becoming the subject of that law. 'We are not yet ready for it' is his way not to take upon himself the mere idea of freedom in order to become its subject. Instead, he prefers to remain its object, which in this case means: remaining slave.

At the end of the story, Grace is surprised to hear that Mam's Law is written by no one else but Wilhelm and that a larger part of the slaves were all the time simply aware of it. They have in fact always already been free. If they are still slaves, it is because they have freely chosen so. And now, they will use the same freedom in order to make Grace part of their game: they have voted that Mam's law should become operative again and that she is the one to replace Mam now. Not to miss the appointment with her father, she decides to do *as if*.

Indeed, she takes a part in the game. She remembers her entrée in Manderlay, when an element of the fence was taken away in order to be used for the whipping of Timothy, falsely accused of theft. She intends to make use of the whole in the fence to escape. Furious at Timothy for having betrayed her personally as well as for having stolen the money of the entire community, she decides to punish him, but on false grounds. Being the new Mam, she repeats the scene of her entrance in Manderlay. But instead of really whipping Timothy who once again is tied to the fence, she throws her whip on the ground and gives vent to her disgust with regards to the free slaves of Manderlay.

GRACE: Timothy, you can stop being proud and silent. Cry and shout, and beg for mercy. Let the Mansi you are, be the Mansi who you despise so much. And it is that hatred, Timothy and the rest of you, that hatred against yourselves, that you will never make me accept. You are a cheat of the lowest kind, and Wilhelm and all of you who follow him are nothing but traitors to your race. I hope that your fellow Negroes one day discover your betrayal and punish you for it. You make me sick.

TIMOTHY: Sure you got it right, Miss Grace. Most likely, it is impossible to revile us negroes enough. But what I don't get is why it makes you so angry.

GRACE: What do you mean?

TIMOTHY: Aren't you forgetting something? ... You made us.

The next moment, Grace picks up again the instrument of torture from the ground and, outrageous, starts whipping Timothy over and over again. It is the reason why she misses the appointment with her father, and has to run away from Manderlay, lonely and in total despair, in the direction of the North, of Washington (the title of the third film, be it without h: Wasington), so the last images of the film suggest.

4. The Mirror of Love

Why Timothy's reply makes Grace so furious? Where deep inside is she touched by that little sentence of his: "You made us"?

It is here that the mirror procedure underlying the film reaches its acme. For the scene in which she whips Timothy not only retakes the scene the Manderlay story starts with, Timothy's words also reflect one of Grace's first words expressing the very 'raison d'être' of her engagement towards the black slaves of Manderlay. The very first moment she was on the verge of entering the cotton plantation (she was called by Elisabeth who, in despair, told her they were going to whip Timothy), she quarrelled with her father.

GRACE'S FATHER: Listen, Grace, this is a local matter. It is not for us to poke our noses in.

GRACE: Why should we not? Just because it is a local matter?

GRACE'S FATHER: It is certainly not our responsibility.

GRACE: Do you think the Negroes wanted to leave their homes in Africa? Was it not us who brought them to America? We have done them a great wrong. It is our abuses that made them what they are.

Back in her father's car after the first meeting with the Manderlay people (having freed Timothy, seen Mam dying and heard about the 'book'), Grace repeats it once again: "we made them what they are". And further on in the film, talking to Timothy about her engagement towards the former slaves, she says: "Manderlay is a moral obligation because we made you". This is why the cause of the former black slaves is not simply a local matter, so Grace argues. So, it our responsibility to give them back what we have stolen from them: freedom.

As we know, this is in fact what Grace does. At least, it is her intention. Until she discovers that the freedom she tried so hard to give them, was already theirs. In the end, she finds out they have always been much freer than she ever could have thought. Only, they used that freedom in order to remain slaves. Grace is perplexed: how can these black people behave with such self-contempt? How can they hate and despise themselves so much? Have they really lost any self-respect?

After having discovered that Timothy betrayed his own people (he lost the entire yield of the harvest by gambling), she decides to leave, and in her "verbal farewell salute" to the gathered people of Manderlay she spares no one: 'You are all false and cheating like Timothy, you hate yourself to be a negro and that hatred makes you an all too easy victim of the white oppressors. Because you hate yourself, whites can hate you all the more easily. I myself, I now cannot but hate you too. You disgust me: it is your hatred towards yourselves I hate.'

It is at then Timothy dares to ask if she is not forgetting something. 'You made us, you, Grace and your white fellows.' Timothy, again, handles the 'mirror', which this time will not work the way it has done so many times before. 'When you talk about us, you talk about what you made; so, you talk about yourself. You are rightly disgusted by our self-hatred and by our misuse of freedom which only worsen that self-hatred. But it is the whites who made us so. And so it is your own self-hate you mercilessly analyses in us. Expressing your disgust with us, you express the disgust with yourself.'

At that moment, the mirror breaks for Grace. An inconsiderate 'acting out' of the purest kind follows. Yet, to understand why it happens like this, we must take into account that this particular mirror is but the last one in an unfolding of mirrors spanning the entire

story. For Timothy is not only just one of Manderlay's slaves, it is the one whom she admired most, whom she desired, and whom she made love with. She admired him, if only because he was the first to talk back to her in her first meeting with the Manderlay slaves. A few minutes before, he was saved by Grace from being whipped, and now he declared that "we", blacks, do not need to say thanks to anyone. When Grace declared not to know what to say, it was Timothy who replied that she "need to say nothing at all". Indeed, he did not need any 'G/grace', for he already was a free person.

It is true that he was in fact the only free black person at Manderlay. When, at noon, the other slaves still gathered as before under Mam's balcony, Timothy was the one to ride freely his horse then. If freedom could have a chance at all at Manderlay, it would only be possible thanks to him. Grace literally says it the first time they talk to one another in private:

"Although our ideals differ, you have a pride within you that I believe one day will be the salvation of everybody at Manderlay".

He was what Grace wanted all the former slaves to be: frank and free, always ready to object to the commandments of the white masters. And, thus, always ready to object to what *she* commands. Timothy did not need people like Grace to be free. And this is precisely what she admired so much in him. This made him the mirror in which she recognized herself the most.

And this is why she began to *long* for him. "In a flash, his exotic pride almost took Grace's breath away", the off-screen voice comments when, at noon when everyone gathers under Mam's balcony, she watches him riding his horse. What Grace loves in Timothy is first of all that he is, so to say, of her kind. He is free like she is free. And he, too, is willing to fight for it. During the dust storm, he is the only one to mount his horse and to go to battle against it. And, after the storm, he is again the sole one not paralyzed by despair, but proposing to go on further with the miserable fifty little cotton plants left. In Timothy's fighting spirit, Grace loves her own fight at Manderlay. He is the mirror in which she loves herself. Surely, Timothy is the one who refused to thank her when she had freed him from being whipped, but was this not precisely because of his freedom? He was right. Grace don't want to be thanked by him, *but to be loved*.

And love surely has the shape of a mirror. Though it is a strange shape: one imagines he recognizes himself in that mirror while he already is losing himself in it ... in order to, finally, re-find himself as lost, radically lost.

When, finally, after Timoty's suggestion they should go on with the few plants left after the storm, the entire community starts to collaborate, Grace not only enjoys a first success at Manderlay, she also feels that, precisely now, she becomes useless. Right then, a strong desire for love overwhelms her. In her daydreams she starts seeing naked black male bodies inside the bath house and at night she dreams about "women in exotic costumes and man in turbans". Indeed, about a "harem", as her father has mentioned at the beginning of the story. The off-screen voice describes her dream as follows:

A group of black slaves appeared bearing a huge charged pile with dates. And in a twinkling, Grace lay among the dates, trembling with pleasure, as a flock of Bedouins satisfied her one by one with their noses. And it was even more confusing when Timothy appeared, and was both slave bearing wine, handshaking, and sheik himself, whose authoritatively hands tested the size of Grace's most intimate orifices.

Both slave and king: this is the Timothy Grace desires. She loves the king in him, the "Munsi" as he said he was: a descendant of African kings, known for not drinking, not gambling, and being immune to money and profit. Men of honour, men of freedom. The opposite of a Mansi, a descendant of African slaves: drinking, gambling, and crazy about money and profit. Grace loves the Munsi, the king, not the Mansi, the slave. But what does this mean? That she loves the king, because he is able of making slaves? Or, worse, does she love to become the king's slave herself? Satisfied by "a flock of Bedouins", tested in her intimate orifices by a king, part of his harem, Grace dreams herself to be enslaved, to be freed from her freedom by the one she admired precisely because of his freedom. Recognizing herself in his freedom, she recognizes herself in the one who subjected her to his free will, the one reduced to the object of his games and his gambling.

Here, the mirror turns out not to be immune to breaking. As long as Grace mirrors herself in the free subject named Timothy, there is no problem. But here, she recognises herself in his free will's *object* in the extreme sense of the word. Her love for him makes her recognize herself in his being a slave and makes her wishing to become *his* slave. Then, and only then is she what *he* is: a slave. Then, she shares freedom exactly the way he does: as a slave. She wants herself to be 'taken' by his free will, she wants him to free her from her freedom, and she does so for the sake of her mere enjoyment.

5. Slavery, the Support of Freedom's Enjoyment

‘Enjoyment’ shows what freedom finally is about on the level of sexual desire, or of desire in general. In its ultimate shape, freedom is desire to be free even from freedom or, more precisely, from being freedom’s *subject*. As Lacan points out (and it is in fact his most important contribution to modern to modern thought⁷), desire’s satisfaction is not to be defined as the moment its subject *wins* (conquers, reaches) the object, but the moment that subject loses itself in the object. The supreme good – the ultimate good desire longs for – is to be considered from the principle, not of profit (as the entire tradition since Aristotle says), but of loss. Which goes for freedom as well. From the perspective of the primacy of desire (which is the paradigm of Lacanian theory), freedom’s highest state is freed from freedom itself. It is freedom having lost itself in its object of desire.

“Happiness in slavery” – “Du Bonheur dans l’esclavage”, as Jean Paulhan entitles his introduction to *L’histoire d’O* – is in fact ‘jouissance’ in slavery, ‘enjoyment’ in the Lacanian sense of the word. It is not ‘happiness’, i.e. the way one satisfyingly manages his desire in daily life. ‘*Jouissance*’ is a phantasmatic state, a state escaping reality. A state of fantasy in which the subject imagines itself to be lost in the ultimate object of his desire. This is why books as *L’histoire d’O* are perfectly readable, although they tell about the most unbearable humiliations offending any sane sense of freedom. In such fantasies our freedom can dream away and imagine itself to be freed from being the subject of any law, even the law called ‘freedom’.

This is the fantasy that the black slaves, and in particular Timothy, arouse in Grace. Timothy stands for the freedom she desires. Lead by desire, it is in that freedom – i.e. in Timothy as ‘object’ of her desire – she wants to get lost. It is with him that she wants to be freed from being a subject and of being subjected to a law whatsoever. This is why she literally dreams of being annihilated as subject, of being reduced to freedom’s – read: Timothy’s – object, to his slave.

Yet, this is what she *only dreams* – in dreams pushed away as fast as possible. It is not what she says she wants in real life. If she would do so, it would just be indefensible. No one is more aware of that than Grace. Defending a desire to give up freedom, to become one’s slave, to be annihilated as free subject in order to become the object of one’s absolute freedom, to assume all this as an enjoyable thing desirable in real life: it would be mere self-betrayal, self-hatred. It would give evidence of having lost the tiniest remain of self-esteem. To replace this kind of enjoyment (in the Lacanian sense) from the level of fantasy to the one

⁷ Citeer passage waar hij zegt dat jouissance zijn enige bijdrage aan de moderne theorie is.

of every day life makes it the acme of humiliation and violence. Accepting this kind of violence in our everyday world would change the latter into a sadistic universe.

And yet, we should never forget that this is exactly what happened to the black people in the US. They were forced to simply accept this, to consider it as norm and as normal. Blacks had to accept, as their nature, that they were not freedom's subject, but only its object; that it was their very 'essence' to be the object of the other's free *jouissance*. They were not simply working slaves, i.e. unpaid manpower assisting free men's labour. What made someone to be a slave is ultimately neither the involuntary and gratuitous daily work he does for his master nor the fact he is the object of the other's economic exploitation, but the fact that he is the *object of the other's desire in its transgressive shape*. This is where any kind of slavery at the end works up to: the enslaved must be broken in his capacity of being a subject. He must be objectivised in a most extreme way and become the object of the other's *jouissance*. The slave is ultimately put on the very place where his free master loses himself in his own gesture of enjoyment and (thus) transgression. There, the object/victim of the master's enjoyment is supposed to be the support of the master's enjoyment, of his transgression and his self-loss. At that point, the slave is supposed to bear his master's freedom on the very moment his master gets lost in that freedom. So, it is ultimately the object/slave which is the last support and proof of his master's absolute – i.e. transgressive – freedom. At least, this is the fantasy driving the master. He wants his slaves to freely chose for and to enjoy the slavery he humiliates them with. It is his attempt to turn that fantasy into reality which makes the master of slaves so limitlessly cruel.

Sir Stephen, the main character's lover in *L'histoire d'O*, is a real sadist abusing and torturing O in the cruelest way. However, what guides him in his attitude towards O is his preoccupation concerning *her* love for him. Maltreated by him and his friends, she particularly has to accept this willingly and out of love for him: this is where Sir Stephan is after in his relation with O. She is the absolute victim of his criminal transgression, she is denied in her slightest capacity of being a subject, but in that position she nonetheless is supposed to be the free support of the entire event. Even reduced to a mere object, she has to hold the complete situation in her hands and to be freely and wittingly its ultimate support. While losing himself in his cruel transgression, while sacrificing his beloved by lending her out to others, the latter is supposed to remain the solid rock holding both Sir Stephan's desire and his transgressive *jouissance*. This is at least the fantasy underlying the male protagonist in *L'histoire d'O*.

A similar fantasy guides the attitude of the white master with respect to his black slave. It is that fantasy which made slavery to be so deeply rooted in the mentality of the people creating their *Land of Freedom*. What the black slave enabled in the US was the white's freedom in its 'absolute' shape, i.e. in its shape of transgression and *jouissance*. Thanks to the former, the latter could live his freedom even on the level of enjoyment. And this is why the white's intention was never simply to use the black as a cheap aide assisting him in his economic labour. The nigger was the hidden, ultimate support of the white's fantasy imagining he was really and absolutely free. The slave gave the transgressive side of the white's freedom a support.

After centuries of being the subordinate of nobles and other superiors in Europe, the white immigrant was given an immense freedom in America. It was, however, not the immense size of the country that gave him that feeling. This was given by a transgression that was institutionalized by officially allowed slavery. It gave the white free citizen the opportunity to lose himself in transgressing the law of freedom which he had himself established. It was indeed the victim/slave who enabled and supported the transgression of the white. Similarly to what happens in *L'histoire d'O*, the white's oppression aimed at the point where the blacks simply accept their victim-position as their very nature.⁸ They were in the end supposed to be full of respect for their white master precisely for oppressing, punishing and torturing them. That respect given by the uncivilized '*bon sauvage*' proved, in the eyes of the white, his absolute freedom to be something 'natural'. It was a way to approve that the freedom of taking the freedom to transgress freedom's laws was in fact freedom's 'real nature', since the most 'natural' human being – the human who was in fact less more than an animal – approved that thesis by the way he 'enjoyed' how the white treated him.

6. *Mandingo*

Nowhere else is this shown more powerfully than in Richard Fleischer's 1974 movie *Mandingo*, based on a novel of the same name by Kyle Onstott (1957)⁹. It tells the story of the decline and fall of a 19th century white family in the South, named Maxwell and owner of an

⁸ This is why it is not simply an exaggeration when in the beginning of *Manderlay*, when Grace is for the first time confronted with the gathered community of black slaves, Victoria states that "the negro is vile by nature". The fact that this sentence is uttered by the first to say thanks to Grace act of liberating them, makes it even more sarcastic. Victoria repeats the ultimate fantasy supporting the attitude of the whites: that the blacks say thanks for whatever the whites do or say. This is their 'vile nature', and it is in the quality of that 'nature' that they are "made" by the whites.

⁹ Kyle Onstott (1957), *Mandigno*, Richmond: Denlinger.

impoverished cotton plantation. Hammond (Perry King), the only son of the family, marries for financial reasons “cousin Blanche” (Susan George), the daughter of one of his rich uncles, while in fact he keeps on living together with a black slave girl whom he really loves and with whom he got a child. One day, Hammond buys a strong black slave named Mede (“from Ganymedes”) (Ken Norton) originating from the Mandingo people in Africa. He lets him engage in man-to-man combats with other black slaves so that white spectators can stake their money on one of them. Earning a lot with such a ‘winner’, Hammond gets very attached to Mede, who developed a quasi limitless loyalty to his master. Hammond’s spouse, still childless and angry of being neglected by her husband, one day, forces Mede to secretly make love with her. When Hammond discovered that ‘his’ son is black, he kills the child, his wife, and Mede. In the fight at the end (and unlike the end in Onstott’s novel), the father gets killed by a black slave and Hammond is left all alone, ruined and mentally broken.

The crucial point to notice in this movie is the fact that, during the entire story, the slaves are never explicitly shown in a context of labour. Of course, their economic exploitation is supposed in every image or sentence, but what we see and hear refers almost exclusively to the *libidinal* relation between masters and slaves. Blacks are shown as the object of the white’s pleasure. Put under the feet of the father, a black male child is supposed to heal the father’s rheumatism; young black girls are used to introduce adolescent white boys into sexual enjoyment; black male slaves are punished for having learned to read (even if what they read is the bible); Mede is exempted from labour in order to train himself for of gambling games in which he has to figure.

And last but not least, the main character’s attitude with regard to slavery, which he in fact feels all too uncomfortable with, is emblemized by his tender love relation to Ellen (Brenda Sykes), the black slave he is in love with. In a way, it is only his black slave who gives him a real feeling of freedom, if only because she enables freedom to him in its shape of transgression. Thanks to Ellen, Hammond escapes the kind of freedom regulated by rules and laws as it is for instance supporting his relation to his spouse, “cousin Blanche”. He married the latter, basically because his father wanted him to have a legal son in order to guarantee the future of the family property and, thus, the future of their economic freedom. Hammond’s bond to the law, ruling his relation to his wife, is emphasized in yet another way. When, during their first night together, Hammond discovers that Blanche is no longer a virgin, he immediately considers it as his duty to kill his wife’s violator. And since she continues to deny any violation (in fact, as she later tells, she was deflowered by an other cousin of hers when she was 13), he refuses to touch her at all.

At the same time, however, he lives a tender love relation with a slave girl knowing that, like any slave girl, she too has been offered to male visitants to spend the night with. Yet, with Ellen, this is no problem at all, just because she is only a slave, which means she is not bound to be the law's subject. She is only the abject object of freedom's law, and in this sense, she enables more freedom than a subject who is subjected to freedom's law. Hammond's relation with her is mere freedom. Nothing bounds him, he can do with her what he wants; but he loves her, and so anything his sovereign will does to her is meant to do good. The son of his, for instance, Ellen is carrying under her heart and who, once born, is supposed to be sold as quick as possible, is promised not only *not* to be sold, but even to be declared free. So, with Ellen, Hammond really lives freedom. With her, he is no longer under the pressure of the father who wants him to act in favour of family purposes; his slave enables him to be finally as free as *he* wants, and to free himself from freedom's laws and rules he is subjected to in real life. Which, however, will end in the loss of freedom at all.

The greatness of the *Mandingo* scenario lies in the precise way it shows slavery's reality on the level of every day's family life. It shows how deeply it can be interrelated with the most intimate love and family relation, not only in its unbearable cruel shape, but at the same time also in its tender and positive shape. Yet, here again, one should notice the mirror procedure which is also underlying the development of this movie: the cruel relation of the white masters with regard to their slaves is formally not different to the tender relation Hammond has to his black slave lover. Both attitudes formally mirror one another. In both cases it concerns a relation transgressing the law, i.e. a relation so free that it is no longer bound to the laws of freedom but, instead, gives man the impression that he is himself free to such an extent that he can make that law himself, that he is the law's absolute master. The way this kind of masters live freedom takes away the freedom of others, more precisely their capacity of being the subject of freedom. This 'master freedom', be it cruel or tender, reduces the other to a mere object of desire and deprives the other to act and react as desire's subject. In other words, it denies the other to be a subject of desire and to make him the object of a phantasmatic *jouissance*.

So, it is clear now why it is important to understand that, at the time of institutionalized slavery, the cruellest thing for the blacks in the US was the fact that they were the object of the white's *fantasy*. A fantasy which in fact was more than simply a daydream or a fictitious story like *L'histoire d'O*. It was a *collectively denied* fantasy, a fantasy taken for natural reality itself and forcing the backs to play for real in that game. The latter had to accept as his

'nature' to be the object of the other's free *jouissance*. Accepting this equals giving up any subject position. Those black slaves who have gone that far cannot but hate the subject they have been and still could be. To go that far requires self-betrayal in the strongest sense of the word. This is what America's black people were forced to. They were to hate their hatred against the whites. This is how they were 'made' by the whites.

Now we understand a little better the reality as shown in *Manderlay* and have a more precise idea of what Grace understood – or did not want to understand (which does not differ that much) – when she was surprised by Timothy's reply to her severe "verbal farewell salute". Precisely the self-betrayal of the black people, their lack of self-esteem and their inclination to cheating disgusted Grace. By saying "you made us", Timothy showed that this self-betrayal was *her* product; it was made by the whites. The whites have forced the black people to make self-betrayal their life style. But what Grace understood now, is that this self-betrayal is not simply something of the blacks, it is not even simply something we have forced them to; this self-betrayal is our deepest wish, a wish supporting our fantasies about freedom. In the self-betrayal of the black slave, we see ourselves as supported by the object of our desire. He acts in a fantasy made by us, a fantasy of which we have forced him to be both the object and the support at the same time, so that we can lose ourselves in that fantasy, living our freedom as *jouissance*.

Many critics mention that Lars von Trier has never been in America and that, if only for that, he does not understand anything of its society. How dare they?