

VILLAGE WITH DOG

The 'gift' in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*

Marc De Kesel

There was once a community of scoundrels,
that is to say, they were not scoundrels,
but ordinary people.
At all times they remained faithful to each other.
[Franz Kafka]

She could have kept her vulnerability to herself, but she had
elected to give herself up to him at random. As...yes...a gift.
"Generous, very generous," thought Tom.
[*Dogville*, Prologue, off-screen voice]

En effet, ce qui distingue le troupeau humain du troupeau
animal, c'est que pour chaque sujet, comme chacun le sait sauf
les entrepreneurs en psychologie collective, l'ennemi du
troupeau, c'est lui.

[Lacan¹]

[T]his is the very word of the Lord of Hosts: "[...] Go now, fall
upon the Amalekites, destroy them, and put their property under
ban. Spare no one; put them all to death, men and women,
children and babes in arms, herds and flocks, camels and
donkeys."
[1 Samuel 15, 2-3]

1. 'Something' as a gift

If it is true that people living together have 'something' in common, it is not
necessary some ambitious project or exalted ideal. It is rather something indefinable
and hardly noticeable, which only becomes manifest when they stop giving each
other the time of day. Indeed, even then, there is a strange 'thing' connecting them.
And in times of peace, when it is completely unnoticed, it all of a sudden comes into
the mind some good fellow wondering out loud whether there is not something
missing – 'something' which, if they should do justice to it, would do good the
whole community.

Such one is Thomas Edison jr., one of the "good people" of *Dogville*, the
fictitious village where Lars von Trier's film with that title takes place. It is a

¹ Jacques Lacan (2001), *Le séminaire, Livre VIII, Le transfert*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Seconde
édition corrigée, Paris : Les éditions du Seuil, p. 431.

(fictitious) small American town at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in the midst of the depression of the early Thirties. No one is well off there, as each of the inhabitants is entirely occupied by the common sorrow and misery. Only Tom (Paul Bettany) is wealthy enough to be able to contemplate about Dogville as such and, especially, about what is missing there. Every week he gathers his fellow citizens in the ‘mission house’ to muse on this lack over and over again. Each time the villagers are told that they need “moral rearmament” and a higher thing taking them beyond Dogville’s stifled quiet. In the prologue, when Tom plays his daily game of draughts with a friend who never stops doubting the sense of those weekly reunions in the mission house, he replies that: “the people of Dogville have a problem with acceptance. What they really need is something for them to accept, something tangible, like a gift”.² Or, as he states in other conversation, they need a “problem”. A gift or a problem (the gift *of* a problem, a problematic gift): this would revive the village; this would be a true godsend, a blessing.

A few days later, that gift actually enters the stage. Yet, immediately prior to that scene, rifle shots resound in the remote evening valley, which does not exactly hint at a godsend. It is Tom who notices the shots and, after a while, is startled by an unusual barking. It is Mozes, the dog of the village, who, at the old mine, keeps a young woman in check. Apparently, she is fleeing from the gunfire and is about to take the dead-end road into the mountains. This is the moment Tom makes up his mind about what the villagers will have to learn to ‘accept’. This “beautiful fugitive”, whose name is Grace (Nicole Kidman), is the very gift Dogville needs. In the next meeting in the mission house, he successfully convinces all the villagers to offer Grace protection.

And, indeed, Grace happens to be a gift in the many senses of the word. For instance, in the sense she gives the people of Dogville a mirror of what they are. For, indeed, Dogville’s inhabitants have all been equally fugitives, each of them stranded on their way to the Far West and left to the mercy and the hospitality of similar equally stranded fugitives. Grace’s appearance gives them the opportunity to experience again the condition that made (and makes) them to a community. Thanks to her, they can remember how they, too, are *given* – how they are given to each

² Tom [addressing his draughts partner who asks him for the umpteenth time what the use is of these meetings]: “Mmm ... I don’t know. See if the people of Dogville have a problem with the acceptance. What they really need is something for them to accept, something tangible, like a gift” (scene 1).

other, and how they have to “accept” one another; how they are, for one another, the “problem” that makes a community to what it is. During the short time of her stay, Grace occupies the position of that “problem”, that ‘something’ which makes people to a community. She occupies the place of the ‘thing’ that makes life, including *common* life, worth living for. But it is at the same time the place of a highly problematic ‘thing’ that, precisely because it is *given*, can never be fully appropriated. That what makes Dogville a given, remains also beyond its reach – which in this case will cause a real tragedy.

Dogville is the story of *modern* society struggling with ‘something’ its modernity can no longer deal with: the gift. Modern society, denying the gift as its base, nonetheless keeps being harassed and messed up by it. Von Trier’s movie tells the story of modern – i.e. free – community getting ruined by its incapacity to deal with the fact a radical, non-appropriable gift underlies its freedom. In a sense, *Dogville* is a ‘theoretical’ movie³: it has ‘seen’ something and, therefore, performs a ‘theorem’, an insight, a statement. It is not by mere accident that von Trier refrained from any cinematographic realism. The camera does not introduce us into a real life-scene, but into a ‘*real scene*’ – i.e. a clearly fictitious, ‘theoretical’ scene. Indeed, a scene, a stage, is literally all we see. The entire story is played on one, and almost empty stage, representing, not the village, but solely *the map* of the village. Acting as if hidden behind the walls and the windows of their houses, everyone on stage is seen at every moment. The effect is, nonetheless, that of a horribly closed town.

The more the spectator follows the ‘logical’ line of the story (a logic as formal as the formal village plan on the stage), the more he gets in touch with the ‘theorem’ of the film, which is about the gift – the gift ‘giving’ modern society the thing it lives for and by, although it threatens modern society to become the cause of its own holocaust to come.

2. Freedom versus gift

Grace originates from outside; her habitat is the mafia milieu she has run away from. The moment Tom meets Grace, a black car with dark windows drive into the village. Immediately, Tom grasps what is at hands and tells the people in the car that, sorry,

³ ‘*Theorein*’ in Greek means ‘to see’.

he has not seen anyone. Politely, he accepts the visiting card from the one who is in the back behind closed windows. So, Tom has kept Grace out of the mafia's reach, at least for the time being. Soon, the mafia calls in the official authorities. Official police posters with Grace's photograph and name on it appear everywhere. She is wanted, and the reward that is offered is sufficiently high to tempt even the "good people of Dogville".

From now on, Grace has become a complete outsider: no longer protected by the law nor by those who defy the law (i.e. the mafia); she has become an absolute outlaw. From now on, you can do with her anything you want. More exactly, you can *only* do with her anything you want. In relation to her, there is no longer something you *have to*? To her, you are no longer bound by any law, but only by unlimited freedom. And from now on, her very existence depends on the freedom and the benevolence of others. She only exists in so far as she is given to others. She literally has become a 'gift'. So, giving herself (away) is the only thing she can do, as well as hoping that she will be received and accepted, being fully aware of the fact that she, a lawless gift, can be refused, used or even misused by any of them as they think fit.

In the beginning of the film, the abysmal nature of the situation is still a bit covered up. At least, the contrast between the sovereign villagers and the 'gift' that is Grace is tempered by the economical relationship that is established. What one party gives, the other tries to return. Discussing the affair Grace, the gathered villagers decide to grant her a two-week probation. She takes Tom's advice and attempts to convince the people into accepting something done in return. At Tom's instigation, the woman who has not yet worked a single day of her life, goes from door to door, asking people whether she can be at their service. She could look after Vera's children, give Chuck a hand in the orchard, visit Jack McKay (Ben Gazzarra), the blind man who stubbornly pretends that he can see, et cetera. Initially the plan is less than successful. The people at the village all assure her that others would benefit more from her helping hand. None of them seems to need her help. The tide, however, is turning and soon enough Grace is at work in every single house at the village.

After two weeks the community unanimously decides that she can stay. Even those who did not like her at first, the sullen Chuck (Stellan Skarsgård⁴), for instance, voted for her to stay. Her presence in the village means something. She had sensed as much when she was packing in case she was sent away. In her bags she had found numerous presents, small tokens of affection that would be of use during her journey. The voice off-screen states: “Grace had bared her throat to the town and it had responded with a great gift: with friends”.⁵ Every one in Dogville is happy that she has become one of them. She performs her tasks with increasing satisfaction and is even given some compensation. When the police distribute posters stating she is wanted, this does not affect Dogville’s or Grace’s state of happiness. Blind Jack McKay, in his annual speech to celebrate 4th July, states: “You have made Dogville a great place to live in”. For the first time McKay delivers the speech without the note he previously pretended to read from. The same day Tom professes his love for her, a love that she is willing to reciprocate.

Grace is at the mercy of Dogville and the villagers cover the radical nature of this ‘being given’ by fully and happily accepting this gift. However, that does not change the essence of the situation. Even when the gift – i.e. Grace – is accepted in a positive way, even when everyone enjoys the warm humanity that she injects the chill life with, the people of the village do so because they like it, because their sovereign will takes pleasure in it, not because they *have to*. Grace, after all, is not protected by any law whatsoever.

This was, as already said, her first ‘gift’: thanks to her, Dogville once again understands what it is to be free, i.e. to be free to accept or refuse someone, free to save someone or to send him to death. Grace realises this even better than Dogville does. As an outlaw she is at the mercy of the villagers at which she strongly appeals. Whatever the town grants her, she gets for free; it is not bound by any economical system. As a result, she is more indebted to the people of the village than when she would have been able or been forced to pay them. Even if she would shower her hosts with counter-gifts, as a lawless being, she still depends on *their* option to accept or reject those gifts. This is why it is so difficult for Grace to believe that people would actually accept her. When, at the beginning of the film, Tom proposes her to hide in Dogville, she retorts that she does not have anything to offer people in

⁴ He played ‘Jan’, the male main character in *Breaking the waves*.

⁵ Scene 14.

return.⁶ Moralist Tom, at that moment already head over heels, considers it another case in point of the fact that the village refuses to know ‘acceptance’, what acceptance is all about; what it means to receive a gift⁷.

3. Freedom takes what it gets

Some time later, however, the true meaning of such a gift does dawn on Dogville. It makes the town less enlightened than Tom would have hoped. During McKay’s moving speech a police officer enters the town and unfolds a new poster upon which Grace takes once again refuge in the old mine. The villagers are amazed to see Grace’s portrait, accompanied by the message that she is wanted for bank robbery. When Tom asks about the timing, the police office replies that the robberies took place some weeks earlier, thus making immediately clear to the villagers that the accusations against Grace are false. And yet, at that very moment things start to fall apart. The law can perhaps be wrong, but in the minds of the people of Dogville, it does not stop being the law. And whoever is accused by it cannot be that innocent.⁸ This is at least what, already the next day, Grace painfully must experience.

As always, now too, Tom comes up with a solution. The new situation upsets the balance; and so, some counterbalance is needed. Dogville would keep protecting the fugitive and maybe would become even more generous, if the countering gift should measure up as well. So it happens: Grace works harder and longer hours for less money.

However, in this, Sullen Chuck, who during the decisive meeting was the last one to vote in favour of Grace, was more close to the truth than Tom. At least, this is what one must conclude from his conversation with Grace a few days later. Chuck praises her for being the only person in Dogville who is genuinely interested in his apples and his orchard. What is more, she is the only one by whom he really feels appreciated. Thanks to her, he feels life is worth living. Yet, if she gives him so

⁶ Grace: “But I have nothing to offer them in return” (scène 3).

⁷ “And Tom had launched himself fearlessly into his endeavour to illustrate the human problem: to receive”, so tells the off-screen voice at the beginning of scène 4. Or, as Tom says in the same scene (just before he introduced Grace: “But the whole country would be better served with a greater attitude of openness and acceptance” (scène 4).

⁸ “Well, they couldn’t really argue that anything had changed. But by not telling the police they felt they were committing a crime themselves”, so Grace tells to Tom the evening of her first ‘working day’ after the 4th of July banquet (scène 21).

much, why then does she not *give herself* to him? In that conversation, nearly literally, he asks her why she does not allow herself *to be taken* by him. Instead of being offended, Grace, in her turn, admits that she understands him, and that, therefore, she cannot but forgive him. That she even should ask *his* forgiveness for her having taken offence at his request.⁹

Here, Chuck's train of thought touches at the heart of the tragedy. Grace has given the community "so much", as Tom never tires of stating¹⁰; her gift has made Dogville again a great place to live in. Why, then, does she not offer *herself*? Why does she exclude herself from the continuous flow of gifts she spoils and seduces the villagers with? Why are they not offered her very 'self'? As long as she is not part of the gifts she seduces Dogville with, she never will become one of them. In that sense, she proves the police poster right. Being literally an 'outlaw', solely a complete self-gift can give her full access to law and community. If she keeps on being unwilling to fully give herself, the people of the community that protect her against the law at the end have no option but to *take* her. If need be, they will lay violent hands on her.

Little Jason (Miles Purinton), smart and vicious, one of Vera (Patricia Clarkson) and Chuck's offspring of seven, fully grasps this. He understands that Grace, to return the hospitality shown to her, can only return good things. He knows his mother abhors every hint of physical violence in the rearing of her children – as she has an absolute aversion to her husband's acts of violence. So, Jason takes to 'infantile sadism' against Grace and continuously pesters her, explicitly soliciting a sound beating. He even goes as far as to shake the cradle in which his youngest brother (still a baby) is lying and, again, to demand a beating. I deserve to be hit, he says to Grace, because I am naughty. And even when you refuses, he adds, I will tell my mother you did, and there is no doubt that she will take my side and that you will be the scapegoat.

Being still a young boy, Jason is unable to 'take' Grace (as will do his father later on) and, therefore, reverses the roles. He forces Grace to take *him*, knowing that

⁹ "You've really been alone up here, haven't you? You haven't had anyone to comfort you and I should ask you for forgiveness... Still friends?" (scene 23).

¹⁰ As, for instance, in the next scene, when Grace complains that the people of Dogville have become too demanding and that now, also others, in casu blind McKay, make sexual advances to her. Then, Tom replies: "I think you're doing a wonderful job. You give us so much. What Mr. McKay said [in his 4th of July-speech], right on the button... right on the button." "He tried to put his hand on my knee today," replied Grace, and Tom's answer is: "Oh, he is blind, after all. Probably an accident."

by no means Grace can make this. The smart boy knows very well she cannot *take*, but only *give*. Catch me and you are caught: this is his deliberate strategy. At the end, Grace succumbs: desperately, she gives Jason the sound thrashing he asked for.

A few moments later, Jason's father enters the room. Sullen and confused as always, Chuck informs Grace that the police is in the village and that he told them of garment he found in the woods near the village – a garment that carries her initials. No, he had not still shown anything and can lead them to Tom's hat that was carried away by the wind into the woods. For that garment of her is here, in his hands. So Grace, he continues, it is no use for you to run away or to scream. Oh, how you tricked me into feeling that I meant something to you; that, finally, I was a worthy person. So, it is your bloody fault that I craves your respect ...¹¹

Chuck's perverse argument culminates in a brutal violation. This woman, unprotected by the law and yet refusing to *give* herself, will then cruelly *be taken*. Afterward his foul deed, Chuck leaves her on the floor at his house, walks calmly to the street and tells the police he found only Tom's hat.

Slowly but surely, the situation turns worse. Chuck's rape is the first of a whole series of assaults. Through Jason's intrigue Vera disfavours Grace whom she no longer considers trustworthy. When, later on, Chuck is caught by some villagers in another act of assaulting Grace, Vera immediately blames the latter: how dare she seduce her surely sullen but nevertheless good and innocent husband! Finally, a desperate Grace pays truck driver Ben to hide her in his truck's loading body during his weekly trip to Georgestown, which will allow her to secretly escape. Therefore, she has borrowed money from good old Tom who claims he got it loaned from his father. After a few hours drive, Ben holds his truck and spins a yarn about being at the Georgetown market that is meticulously guarded by the police. He demands a premium to smooth out the risks he took and rapes her on top of a load of apples. Then, without her knowledge, he takes her back to Dogville.

Back in the village, the humiliations mount up. She is accused of having robbed Tom's father and having tried to run away with the money. To prevent this and other of her criminal activities (oh, how the law was right about her!), she is fitted an iron collar, a bell and a long chain that is attached to a millstone.

¹¹ Chuck: "It wasn't me who wanted you here. You are far too beautiful and frail for this place. You tricked me into feeling that I meant something to you. It's your own damn fault I need your respect, Grace" (scène 25).

Furthermore, as such, Dogville is ensured that there is still someone to take up the chores, a situation it has come to rely on. Henceforth, Grace is nightly visited by the male villagers (except Tom) who give full rein to their desires. Even the bell, attached to the collar, does not refrain anyone. Their acts against that fallen woman, a she-dog, could hardly be regarded as sinful or, even, “sexual”.¹²

4. To give and to forgive

And yet, master Tom is not at his wit's end. Coward that he is, he never admitted to having stolen money from his father to lend it to Grace. But, so he argues to Grace, does this act not guarantee his neutral position which allows him to stand up for her in an unhindered way? He again assembles the people of the village in the mission house, where, as a last resort, he lets Grace simply telling the truth about the way she has been treated by Vera, Jason, Chuck, Ben and so many others; how they have blackened her name, have humiliated, abused and assaulted her. It is meant to be a genuine ‘truth-commission’ where the victim, faced with her brutes, is finally allowed to speak freely – a confession that might engender a salutary effect for all parties. The result, however, turns out to be the opposite: now, as one of the people turn against Grace and want to get definitely rid of this ‘problem’. To Tom, they ask him to make once and for all a choice: for ‘us’ or for this problematic refugee.

Tom leaves the mission house, visits Grace and proudly confess her he willingly chooses in favour of her and their love. Cautiously, he drops a hint that he wishes to (finally) make love to her. Grace’s reaction is friendly but decided: do not act like the others; do not take me by force when I am in chains. Please, wait until we are free. This is a blow that is harder to bear for Tom than he is willing to admit. Taking a little walk outside, he suddenly changes sides. When everyone considers Grace to be a threat to Dogville, she is a threat to him too, so he argues to himself. It can hardly be a coincidence that his ultimate attempt to generate a sense of forgiveness was rejected by the entire community. The beautiful fugitive who at first injected Dogville with a new spirit, turned out to be a poisoned gift. Once made this

¹² “But since the chain had been attached, things had become easier for everyone: the harassments in bed did not have to be kept so secret anymore, because they couldn’t really be compared to a sexual act. They were embarrassing the way it is when a hillbilly has his way with a cow, but no more than that.” (scène 39)

conclusion, Tom digs up the gangsters' card he had hidden in his drawer and gives them a call.

For five days the village is kept in suspense. When the mafiosi arrive, Tom welcomes the esteemed visitors, who brutally neglect him. Facing Grace's miserable position, they immediately instruct that she is freed at once from her chains. In the meanwhile they hold the village at point blank. The leader of the gang arrives, who turns out to be Grace's father. He invites her into his car to have the first meeting with his daughter since she ran away. No, he has not come to take her home with force, so he says; after all, she is free to act as she thinks fit. He has come simply to talk to her, or, more precisely, to wind up a discussion that was left unfinished when she, a few months before, had slammed the door shut. This new conversation, conducted behind the same tinted windows, has a devastating, murderous outcome. Grace gets out of the car and, like a true member of the mafia, orders to burn the entire village down and kill every single inhabitant. Vera, Chuck's wife, is given a preferential treatment: she must witness her children being butchered before she is finished off herself. Tom, who is saved for last, receives special treatment as well: for him, she leaves the car and shoots him in the head by her own hands. It is also Grace's direct order that the dog Mozes is the only creature to escape the massacre.

What crushing insight has made Grace change her mind so abruptly? Months earlier she had left that very car in an angry mood, determined to turn her back on the mafia milieu once and for all. In the mean time, many things have happened. She has come to know real life, the lives of "simple people" in an "ordinary" village. "Good people" who work hard, and who, despite of their awkward ways of dealing with each other, do not settle matters of love and disputes with guns. And of Dogville's awkward ways, Grace has come to know the ins and outs by now. Perhaps she had to suffer all this in order to get the message her father – the Godfather – was trying to get across at the time. On his part, he was hurt by the reproach she made during their conversation just before she escaped to Dogville. Then, she had called him "arrogant". Which, in the conversation they had now, she once again had confirmed: "To plunder, as it were, a God given right. I'd call that arrogant, daddy", she had answered.

But now, her father turns her argument around: he argues that it is Grace who has always been arrogant.¹³ She is not arrogant in that she judges people and deems herself God; that is his way of doing as well. She is arrogant because she does *not* do that, because she forgives people in advance. Her merciful nature, her kind heart, her compassion, her humanity; all those virtues make her the most arrogant person ever known. For she still does not deem the people of Dogville guilty of having used, misused and raped her. Even now, she still keeps bringing their humble and miserable existence into the equation. She still refuses to blame them for the crimes she was witness to and victim of. That attitude is immensely arrogant. “Rapists and murderers may be victims, according to you,” her father reproaches her, but this is precisely what makes “you the most arrogant person I have ever known”.¹⁴ For, so he adds, “you have this preconceived notion that nobody can possibly attain the same high ethical standards as you, [and] so you exonerate them.”¹⁵

Grace’s mistake is not that she too often forgives people, but that she *always* and *unconditionally* does that. This is the worst and most malignant thing one can do, for it ruins in the people she lives with any sensibility for guilt or value. Since Grace forgives what may be, people no longer feel any difference between law and crime, between obeying and violating social and ethical rules. This is the crime Grace is guilty of. By giving the people of Dogville everything they want, by offering even literally herself to them and by forgiving in advance their disgraceful, shameful behavior, she simply deprives them of any further moral sense as such. They no longer have anything to hold on to and are adrift in a desperate lawlessness. Worse still, the godfather continues, like a dark malignant god, you put yourself beyond life and law: as if, even in the moment they touch and rape you, you want to prove you are untouchable. Immortal, you pretend to reign among mortals.

¹³ Grace: “So, what is it? What is it, the thing... the thing that you don’t like about me?” The big man: “It was a word you used that provoked me. You called me arrogant.” Grace: “To plunder as it were a God given right. I’d called that arrogant, daddy.” The big man: “But that is exactly what I don’t like about you. It is you that is arrogant” (scène 48).

¹⁴ “You do not pass judgement, because you sympathize with them. A deprived childhood and a homicide isn’t necessarily a homicide, right? The only thing you can blame is circumstances. Rapists and murderers may be victims, according to you. But I, I call them dogs, and if they’re lapping up their own vomit, the only way to stop them is with a lash,” so the father says to his daughter in scène 48.

¹⁵ Grace: “So I’m arrogant. I’m arrogant because I forgive people?” The big man: “My God, can’t you see how condescending you are when you say that? You have this preconceived notion that nobody, listen, that nobody can’t possibly attain the same high ethical standards as you, so you exonerate them. I cannot think of anything more arrogant than that. You, my child ... my dear child, you forgive others with excuses that you would never in the world permit to yourself” (scène 48).

In a way, the argument of Grace's father was already made by Chuck. Grace gives, she isn't but gift, she gives people a sense of living, of giving themselves to her, but she does not give 'herself'. This is what Chuck has felt. Even when you take her by force, she escapes and remains the sovereign queen forgiving the "good people" their sins. Filled with the sense of giving and forgiving, she withdraws herself from her own gift and remains immune to it. At all times, she remains the Virgin, the *Immaculate Conception*. Untouchable, she never stops giving you more than you can take or give back. No counter-gift can neutralize the abundance of her gift (and, thus, the humiliation of feeling dependent on it). This must have driven Chuck – and others – crazy. Not even the 'counter-gift' of violation and rape can touch her. Before having given your counter-gift, whatever dirty it might be, you are already overwhelmed by the new counter-gift of her forgiving goodness. You have no life outside her majesty's goodness. Even when you rape her, you are nothing. So nothing that you can only rape her again to forget how nothing you are.

This was Chuck's experience. The raping scene he had set up was perfect. There was that compromising piece of clothing, there was the police looking for her all over the village, and the place of crime – his own house – was the less suspect. But if he had known that Grace had already pardoned him even before he assaulted her, his poor and vile deed would have been even more ridiculous. And yet it would not have stopped him; it would have driven him to a lawless frenzy. Only Chuck's surly nature, barely literate as he is, has kept him (and her) from a worse fate.

5. Given: Apocalypse now

Has Grace, at the end of the film, finally understood her father, and Chuck, and all those other "good people", i.e. ordinary rapists? Is this the result of her little walk in the village just after she has stepped out of her father's car? Did his word bring again to mind the powerless look in Chuck's raping eyes? Does she now *really* recognize herself in his maddening gaze? Is it through facing her own powerlessness that, finally, she understands that this bunch of people can no longer be forgiven? That, now, she can only turn to punishment and have her revenge?

Indeed, in those decisive moments, she must have dropped her understanding of the "difficult circumstances" the villagers live in. She finally must have become

one of them: a human among humans, that is to say: a scoundrel among scoundrels (as Kafka put in the story of the same name¹⁶).

But that is not all. Once back in the car, she asks her father if the sharing of ‘responsibilities’ he had promised a few moments ago, are meant to take a start right now. Of course, he replies, all power is yours, immediately: you are a godfather in your own right now. And like it always happens in the ‘milieu’, the new godfather starts his career with violating the power he just has inherited. A few moments ago her father had explained that the mafia breaks the rules of the law in order, not simply for the sake of mere enjoyment, but for the sake of installing and protecting laws, more precisely *their* laws. People need and respect the law, just as they need and respect the ones who by power – and even brutal, violating power – install the law. Yet, this is the basic rule that Grace, in her quality of brand new godfather, boldly violates. She decides not to reprimand the village and make it feel that it is guilty of intolerable sadism. She does not want to give the village the beating that little Jason himself had asked for the time he was tormenting her. Nor does she want to cure the people of village. She realizes that Dogville is simply not worth the effort. “If there is any village the world would be better without, this is it”, she says and, at once, suit the action to the word.¹⁷

Yahweh, in the sordid story recorded in one of the Bible-books, ordered: “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.” (1 Sam. 15,3) In the same way, Grace anathematizes Dogville.¹⁸ More scrupulously than Saul’s troops seduced by the loot to haul in, Grace’s men meticulously do as they are ordered: they entirely destroy the village. No stone escapes the fire; no life is spared. Nobody will remember the story of Dogville and

¹⁶ See Kafka’s story “A Community of Scoundrels” (***). The first sentences form one of the motto’s of this essay

¹⁷ Scene 48.

¹⁸ Cf. one of the mottos at the beginning of this essay. The story from the Bible is a fragment from the cycle of stories about Saul, first king of Israel. It recounts the first of a series of mishaps that make that Saul loses Yahweh’s protection. Yahweh comes to favour David, Saul successor. It is remarkable that it is Saul’s first lapse that he does not order his troops in the war against Amelek to burn everything down, to cause a holocaust, that he does not order the total destruction of the city (*holocaustos*, Greek for ‘all-scorching’). Instead, his men looted the place, for economical reasons – soldiers need payment after all. The story recounts how Saul and Samuel, Yahweh’s prophet, argue over this. After numerous evasive manoeuvres on Saul’s part, Samuel, by Yahweh’s command, will personally kill king Amelek, main trophy and war booty. The text is transparent in a macabre way: “Samuel said, ‘Bring Agag, king of the Amalekites’. So Agag came to him with faltering step and said, ‘Surely, the bitterness of death has passed.’ Samuel said, ‘As your sword has made women childless, so your mother will be childless among women.’ Then Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord at Gital” (1 Sam 15, 33).

its beautiful she-dog, except Mozes, the male dog of the village. He, and he alone, will be the mute survivor of Dogville's holocaust.

6. Given: an outside

Chuck was right: at no point in time, Grace has been one of them. Continuously giving, she never has given *herself*. She has always remained the daughter of a mafia boss. Has she now then returned to the bosom of her mafia family? Not exactly. Her order to execute a *holocaust*-verdict goes too much against a logic that even the mafia cannot ignore. Grace's crime will not re-establish the law in Dogville; it will even destroy the very possibility of establishment any law. This will be disastrous even for the mafia, since its power actually exists by grace of a law, in that case a law established and protected by its own criminal power. In this sense is Grace simply undermining the mafia's basic rationale. So, she does not side with the mafia, nor does she side with the people of Dogville. What Grace refused to do when she lived in Dogville, she now refuses as well: she definitely does not want to join the circle of "ordinary people", which, one way or another, is always a 'circle of guilt'.

In Dogville she refused to be guilty like all "ordinary" – and thus guilty – people of the village. This was the reason for her infinite sense of forgiving. She was full of understanding for those people, but she never was one of them because she never was guilty like them. She, instead, kept forgiving them, and, so, proved herself to be holy. And even when she felt herself guilty (which indeed was the case), she refused to do so *in a guilty way*. She refused to lie, even when saying she was lying. And this is what "ordinary people" do. They live by the law they respect, and already while performing that respect, they stain it, lying about their secret wish to live beyond any law, lying about the thousand times they already tried out that desired beyond.

It is this kind of dishonesty Grace despised in the people of Dogville. Her all-forgiving attitude was one more way of hers to stay outside the guilty circle of ruses that each of the villagers shared with one another, and that formed the real base of their community. And precisely because Grace refused to join that circle of guilt ("community of scoundrels"), Dogville felt 'rightly' betrayed. The villagers saw no option but to increase their degree of betrayal towards her. Coming from outside,

forgiving everyone out of an incomprehensible position outside, Grace remained forever an outsider to the Dogville community and its 'circle of guilt'.

Even now, when she returns to the real 'community of scoundrels', i.e. her father's mafia gang, she still does not use her power to enter Dogville's 'circle of guilt'. She wants to break that circle and to cleanse the world of all crime and guilt. She does not avenge herself neither does she repay Dogville in kind. That would make her enter the guilty circle of the wretched villagers. Instead, she remains definitely arrogant; she despises the Dogville people because they live by mercy of a law they secretly defy. To preserve the world from that, she literally uses apocalyptic force. She only returns to the mafia in order to wipe out and demolish Dogville as a sign for the world. At that moment, her father does not realize that, of this 'holy' revenge, his own mafia is logically the ultimate object.

7. Given: an object

Although Grace *gives* herself to Dogville in all – even in the most horrible – senses of the word, she nonetheless remains immune to its 'circle of guilt, and, therefore remains outside the "community of scoundrels". At the end of the story, being the executioner of the holocaust, she keeps the same position – at least formally. During the entire film, her position remains definitely outside. In a way, she is also 'outside' in that the film is not really about Grace. Her person is not the film's *subject*. We never are introduced into who she really is, in what she feels and thinks and in how she lives all those humiliations. She is performed as an abstract, even flat character and we are never allowed to have a real insight in the way she suffers her mistreating. This enforces the idea that the true subject of the film is Dogville, the village. Grace's sole role is to be Dogville's *object*, the object of its aspirations, its desires, including its sadistic desires. By accident entered Dogville, she became the object of Dogville's hospitality and its renewed sense of freedom. More precisely performs the film her as an object that animates again each one's desire: Tom's desire, the desire of all the villagers and of the entire village as a community and even the desire of her father (the godfather). Thanks to Grace, all these people get a renewed sense of life and (which amount to the same thing) desire. Yet, she does this not so much as a subject (as someone depicted in her own aspirations and desires), but as the object of the desire of other.

During the entire film, she never leaves this object- position. It is the main logical line of the screenplay: she remains Dogville's object in all senses of the word: the object of its fascination and its depreciation, of its exploitation and extortion, of its sexual perversions, et cetera. She is reduced to what Dogville thinks/fantasizes she is or has. For she is supposed to possess the object of its desire, and it is because, unconsciously, this object always remains 'outside' – because desire (and, thus, life) only is possible thanks to such an unreachable, for ever outside object that, therefore, keeps desire ongoing – that she herself, during the whole story, remains outside.

So, *Dogville* is about Dogville, the village; it shows the village's life, i.e. its desire. And in order to show this, it focuses on its desired *object*, i.e. on Grace.

If Grace's stay in Dogville turns out to be a tragedy, it is due to the fact that the people of Dogville deny the *fantasy* structure of their desire, and suppose Grace *really* to possess what they long for. For this is what the people of Dogville think/fantasize: that she has got the 'thing' making life again worth living for; that she has the ultimate object of desire, i.e. the 'thing' activating desire and promising full enjoyment. And when she is supposed to possess 'it', she is supposed to be able to offer it. So we can demand it, just like we can be angry if she refuses to give it. This is what Chuck and all other villagers think – which, here, means: wish. Their incapacity to deal with this kind of unfulfillable wishes makes them confused and leads them to the cruelties they commit. Just as it leads to the fantasy that she, despite her unlimited generosity, refuses to give *herself*.

Yet, even when she would give 'herself' (what, at least from her own perspective, she does indeed), she would never give what she is really asked. For (as for instance the core of Lacanian theory teaches) no one can *really* possess the object others long for. The ultimate object of desire can only be possessed *in fantasy*. Such an object stimulates and even supports desire, precisely in so far it is out of desire's reach. Only in this quality, it keeps desire ongoing, sustaining, supporting and stimulating it. This is to say that the object of desire is nothing but fantasy and that, indeed, such a 'fantasmatic' object is desire's very ground.

In the film, Grace is the one who, by accident, occupies the place of the 'fantasy'-object of Dogville's desire. It is in this quality that she should have been sacrificed, were it not that she, in that same quality, finally sacrifices Dogville.

This is to say that, in fact, Dogville has been sacrificed by its own object of desire. Or, which amounts to the same thing: the village is sacrificed by itself, by its own desire – by a desire that has been denied in its impossibility of being really satisfied (i.e. of really enjoying the object its desire longs for). *Dogville* (the movie) performs Dogville’s desire, the desire of that “community of scoundrels”: a desire circling around its impossible object which, by accident, Grace occupies. It shows Dogville’s incapacity to deal with that object and – thus – with its own desire (being the desire for an impossible object). In Grace’s apocalyptic deed at the end, the film shows desire’s impossibility of making full circle, of really enjoying the ultimate object it longs for. There, that finally mastered and conquered object, destroys the subject only existing thanks to its desire for it.

Dogville is about the tragic structure of a self-grounding free society. It shows how also this kind of society grounds, not in itself (in its own self-assurance), but in the inaccessible object of its desire, an object that ‘gives’ life (and desire) to the society. *Dogville* is about the impossibility of modern society to fully appropriate itself, to really conquer the ground of its own freedom. For that ground is a gift; a gift given from the outside, which is not a transcendent outside, but the outside-dimension of the ultimate object of our desire. We are given to ourselves out of a point that no-one of us can ever make his own.

In Dogville, society’s impossible relation with itself (or, which amount to the same thing, society’s desire for itself), is elaborated with the metaphor of the gift. It wants to give itself to its object of desire, in this case to Grace, and it wants its object (Grace) to give herself to the society. The radical character of the gift-metaphor reveals the impossibility of this relationship. Exacter, it reveals that this relationship is build upon its impossibility. The tragic figure of Grace illustrates this perfectly.

8. Pasolini’s theorem

The position that Grace takes up in Dogville is in many respects similar to the position the unnamed “guest” takes up in Pasolini’s *Teorema* (1968).¹⁹ This film, too, features a character who happens to enter the lives of a modern community and, unintentionally, causes ruin and disaster. In this case, the community is a well-settled

¹⁹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Theorem*, Translation T.S. Hood, Quartet Books, London, 1992.

bourgeois family in Milan, and the disaster is a profound existential confusion striking each of the family members. Embraced by their hospitality, the “guest” re-activates each of them on life’s most fundamental level: desire. In the guest, each of them finds a new ‘love’. When, however, at the beginning of the second part, the “guest” leaves as unexpectedly as he arrived, each one is left in a complete state of confusion and the family itself entirely breaks down. Each of them, apart from the others, fails - desperately - in overcoming his or her lethal mourning.

The gift of the ‘guest’ in *Teorema* is of the same unmanageable and disastrous nature as Grace’s in *Dogville*. His, however, takes a different setting. The members of the family - an industrialist, his wife, their son and daughter and the servant - are all captivated by the young guest’s beauty and fall under the spell of that person who, unconditionally, gives himself to them. In this case, however, the blessed ones are not making the moves; they do not take possession of the young man as did the villagers of Dogville with Grace. Here, it is quite the reverse: it is the guest who takes them – also sexually – with full consent of the ‘victims’ involved. In this screenplay, the gift is more *actively* directed than was the case in von Trier’s film. And it is done by a man (which is – as we will see further – not a mere coincidence). The gift is given by an active subject that takes initiative, i.e. that (sexually) ‘takes’, while precisely in the act of ‘taking’, he *gives* himself away. The ‘guest’ gives them what they want by ‘taking’ them – which is, as we know, the strange marvel of the erotic gift.

In Pasolini’s films, references to religion are never far away, and *Teorema* is no exception in this. Here, the ‘guest’ can easily be interpreted as a kind of secular Christ figure. Christ, too, being God’s revelation, came from an unknown outside and entered people’s lives with a love beyond limits. Not only did he grant people a new and eternal life, he literally gave himself to them – not in an erotic way as is the case with the guest, but in an even more physical or ‘real’ way. He allowed himself to be crucified for them, which – so his followers claimed – crucified death as such. Resurrected, the Christ installed an Eternal Life that was no longer touched by sin, mortality and death. This was, at least, what they believed. In spite of their faith, however, death kept reigning as inexorably as ever. Yet, this did not temper the *desire* underlying their beliefs. Mortal as before, they kept *longing* for another, eternal life – a longing that not only comforted the faithful, but tormented them as well. This is why even the songs of praise for the resurrected Lord particularly echo

always a complaint that he was so cruel to leave us and, despite promises, had so far refused to come back.

The intrusion of the guest in the Milanese family has a similar structure. He enters the constrained bourgeois milieu with such an endearing innocence that the accepted coordinates no longer hold. When he makes love to every single member of the family, much against the rules of propriety and morality, his innocence remains intact. And what is more, each of them now is infected by an intense and renewed sense of innocence. More than ever, in the family members, the hope is aroused for a life that is not defiled or blemished by guilt or compromises. Yet, when the guest leaves, that hope turns to desperation and his revelatory love becomes an inexhaustible source of agony.

Pasolini replaces the exalted metaphors of religion by earthly eroticism. God's revelation and its effects are replaced by erotic revelation and our impossibility to deal with it. Yet monotheism itself was never without erotic connotations. Consider, for instance, the prophet Jeremia's words: "You have seduced me, Lord, and I have been your seduced; you have outwitted me and prevailed".²⁰ This confession is in the eyes of each of the family members, the moment they succumb to the erotic charms of the guest.

Pasolini interprets monotheistic religion as the articulation of the sense of being overwhelmed by a gift that one draws strength from, but that makes that person equally helpless and 'overpowered', 'violated'. If there is sense to our existence, it is anchored in the grace implied by an overpowering gift. Religion's intelligence is based on that insight. Of course, religion provides us with a fable, but its core is less to be found in the fable's content than in the gift it performs. It explains life to be a gift, a gift from God; and religion always hints at the fact that man cannot cope with that gift. Whatever counter-gift he comes up with, through offerings and donations, prayers or good deeds, the gift from God cannot be bid against: the discrepancy between the divine donator and the human receptor is forever irreconcilable.

This is very much true for monotheistic tradition. In one of the founding stories of this tradition, God renames Jacob, the patriarch of the Jewish people,

²⁰ Jeremia 20, 7. Pasolini quotes this biblical verse in *Theorema*, in an alternative, less explicitly erotic translation and he adds the comment: "You have duped me, Lord, And I have been your dupe (Pasolini adds: in a physical sense as well); You have outwitted me and Prevailed." Pasolini, op. cit.***

‘Israel’. So, ‘Israel’ is both the name of the people descending from Jacob and the name of the oldest monotheistic tradition. Jacob is given his new name on a night during his ramble escaping the revenge of his brother Esau.

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What [is] thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked [him], and said, Tell [me], I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore [is] it [that] thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. (Genesis 32, 24-29)

So, it is only after Jacob fought the Nameless one – God – that he receives his blessing. Only from then onwards, he is blessed by God’s grace and this gift makes his twelve sons to be the founding fathers of the twelve tribes making up the ‘people of Israel’.²¹

In the story of Jacob and Israel, man is seized by a gift that upsets him and leaves him filled with questions. Man is a question there is no conclusive answer to. He is a burning desire that, like the burning bush²², is fuelled by his own fire. This tragic structure of human life is present in every religious discourse, if only because of the positive or favourable alternative that is performed there. God is the name for the gift that ‘assaults’ and ‘violates’ us. However, it is in this very quality that he overwhelms us with his almighty mercy. God is *terribly* good, because he keeps in check the primal ‘terror’ – the ‘gift’ – in which man rests. The terrible and tragic gift upon which we rest is mastered by the ‘good terror’ of Gods grace. This explains God’s infinite forgiving nature, which puts him beyond the law, i.e. in a position similar to the one occupied by the criminal. Since, however, he is more powerful than the most powerful criminal, he cannot only fight crime, but absolve it as well. Precisely because he is God of revenge, he can be a merciful god as well.

In *Teorema*, Pasolini erases the religious top layer from this narrative: he uses the grammar of the gift in purely human terms. It is not God who gives, but man; and

²¹ Genesis 32, 23-32.

²² Exodus 3, 2.

so is the love he gives human, and consequently erotic in nature. Like the ancient Christian God, he gives himself to the people in a way that breaks all existing laws and rules. As a man, however, he no longer has the power to give that transgression a positive turn. He can no longer transform the poisonous aspect that is inherent of the gift into the stamp of a supreme grace. Death by crucifixion can no longer be turned into resurrection and salvation. The prosaic erotic overwhelming feeling the guest generates only ends up in a tragic failure to come to terms with this.

9. Lars von Trier's theorem

In spite of Pasolini's intention to dispose of the religious aspect of that infinite gift, his film is more religious than he may like. This is due to a kind of 'humanist' remainder in *Teorema*. Since, in this movie, the giver is a beautiful young man, the gift of love is explicitly performed as *human*. The question, however, is if this human image does not rather conceal than reveal the basic structure of the gift at stake here. It is the gift giving human life (back) both its sense of living and its threat of self-destruction. The question however is if this gift can be considered to be a *human* gift, i.e. a gift given *by a human*. Of course, it can no longer be considered as a gift given by God or any other transcendent entity. But it nonetheless must be thought as coming from *outside* and marked by radical *alterity*. So the question is if the alterity the gift hints at can still be considered *human*. Is there, first, some kind of perfect innocence, incarnate in a perfectly beautiful human being, who, then, breaks open our settled life to confront us with a gift that 'takes' and overwhelms us with an unknown and at the end tragic enjoyment. A gift that gives us back the sense of life as a gift we both cannot deal with and have to deal with. In short, does the gift come from a 'giver', i.e. from a *subject* giving that gift?

Here, von Trier's screenplay makes a point and performs a theorem that surpasses Pasolini's *Teorema*. *Dogville* suggests that gift does not come from a subject (the 'guest' in *Theorema*), but from an object (Grace, performed as the object of *Dogville*'s desire); that the true source of the gift is not so much a human being (being the subject – bearer, support – of the gift), but an object, the ultimate, unreachable and 'fantasmatic' object humans desire for.

In this case, the difference in sex between the givers is maybe not insignificant. Pasolini's giver is a man, in the traditional sense of the word: someone

who *actively* gives and takes. Von Trier's giver, on the other hand, is a woman, who is equally traditionally performed when it comes to sex roles; she is the one who *is* taken and when she gives she does so *despite* herself, despite her direct intentions as subject; she is giving the way a *source* gives, as the traditional metaphor suggests. Both films turn to stereotypes of staging man and woman to state their theorems as clearly and acutely as possible. What Pasolini sketches with the grammar of masculinity, von Trier in a sense repeats while drawing a conventional feminine setting. Yet, the function that both directors ascribe to beauty reveals their different approach of the gift.

Grace may be a "beautiful fugitive", yet her beauty operates in a different way from that of the intriguing guest in *Teorema*. Consider in *Teorema*, for instance, the scene in which the guest is being spied on by Pietro, the son of the family. The guest is given the son's bedroom and the latter cannot resist the temptation to stand at his bedside and, upon considerable hesitation, remove the blankets to stare admiringly at the stunning naked body. When the guest wakes up at that precise moment, he immediately senses the voyeuristic intentions of Pietro, who almost dies of shame. In the eyes of the guest, however, there is not a single trace of reproach. Instead, we can read in them "that fatherly light full of maternal trust". Already, he reaches towards Pietro to 'give' himself to him.²³ The guest pours out his love on Pietro, in the same vein that Yahweh pours out his spirit on a person, that is: wonderful and upsetting at the same time.²⁴ The guest's beauty is blinding, just as Yahweh's spirit is blinding, or as the darkness blinding Jacob. The guest's beauty rather conceals than reveals the origin of the gift. It embraces the overwhelming and upsetting nature of the gift with a smooth and dazzling mercy that covers the origin of the gift.

In *Dogville*, Grace's beauty works in a different way. She is not an awe-inspiring revelation that people recoil from for respect, fear and shame. It is rather Grace who, appearing before the villagers, is filled with fear and shame. Her beauty generates desire, but, unlike the guest in *Teorema*, she does not mercifully embrace that desire. Or rather, Grace can only do that for a mere fraction of time - and *despite* herself. Contrary to the guest, she visibly is not capable of giving what is expected of

²³ Pasolini, op. cit.***

²⁴ After this I shall pour out my spirit / On all mankind; / Your sons and daughters will / Prophesy, / Your old men will dream dreams / And your young men see visions (Joël 2, 28).

her. As a result, the idyllic scene set in the countryside becomes sheer hell for her as well as for the people in the village, whereas Pasolini's guest escapes the hellish situation the family experiences when he leaves it to its own devices.

Grace's fortunes hint at what the guest would have experienced had he stayed and continued his fivefold erotic relationship. The aura of a Messiah that surrounded him would not have lasted very long. He would have turned from a person generous enough to 'take' them into someone who would *have been* taken, as happened to Grace. The amazing innocence that stood tall in its transgressions would soon have been caught in the banal treadmill of guilt and payment. The subversive lover would have become the everyday beloved. Even when he would have remained a source of subversion, he would no longer have controlled that subversion. He would instead have become its victim.

Here we touch upon the limits of Pasolini's erotic metaphor. That metaphor can only work through the religious association it offers an alternative to. The film shows how man, through an overwhelming erotic experience, is confronted with the gift he is based on and yet cannot appropriate. Or, which amounts to the same thing, it shows how he is based in a desire for something that 'takes' him without being able to take it himself. This is *Teorema's* theorem. Pasolini turns the giver into *someone* who escapes the paradoxes of eros and gift since he masters them. This makes the metaphor of the gift lose its subversive power. The fatal discrepancy that is inherent in the gift – the impossibility to be fully appropriated – does not seem to apply to the giver. If it is the role of the guest to be an *absentee* (he is not even fully part of the love he makes), then it is not the role of an absent *human being*, but that of an absent *God*. Yet, ever since God's death this role no longer holds: no one can be the possessor and donor of the gift man lives off. There is no longer any sovereign subject that distributes the gift man lives by, consciously and freely, as a true 'Lord', and does not tragically get ruined by it.

The (in fact monotheistic) metaphor of the masculine, 'seignorial' giver does not touch the centre of the gift. In this, the female metaphor of *Dogville's* Grace is more successful. In this film, the gift that makes the village (re-)vive and gives the inhabitants back their 'raison d'être' is 'given' to them in the strictest sense of the word: it is given from 'outside', it appears out of nothingness, and is entirely free. Yet, in that place *beyond*, where the gift originates from, there is no innocent and perfect transcendent subject. Whatever is 'outside' is nothing except the

(fantasmatic) ‘object’ of our desire. Our existence is all about desire; we *are* desire, a desire which is given to us by a fantasmatic thing that never will be ours. We receive what we are from desire, i.e. from its impossible object, from what we dream outside of our world, from a purely fantastic ‘something’ which we hope once will lift us from the drag of daily life.

For centuries we have fantasized about an immortal god who gives us that ‘something’. In *Teorema*, Pasolini thinks up a beautiful mortal god, a wonderfully godless young man, to give ‘it’ to the bourgeois. In Von Trier’s film the gift is equally imaginary: the film shows that the gift that makes Dogville ‘a great place to live in’ is given by something that is a figment of Dogville’s imagination. That gift is not embodied by a god or a godlike youth, but by a woman. She is that ‘something’; not because a woman cannot be ‘someone’, but because she only acts in her quality of *being* desired and taken, i.e. as the *object* of other’s desire. Only as the object of desire does she give the Dogville inhabitants back their real identity, i.e. the desire they *are*. This is why the gift she gives is strictly never hers. ‘Her’ gift consists of the people’s desire that she returns to that people, who never really possessed it and never will possess it either. And, as already been stated: it is not she who is doing this; she is not the subject of ‘her act’. It is only by accident she takes the position where Dogville puts that ‘something’ that it believed is its origin, the ground of its identity or, more exactly, the source of the desire it *is*.

Dogville is the first part of a trilogy that shows Von Trier’s view of modern ‘free’ society. It shows freedom its long forgotten foundation, i.e. its *given* nature. Since the beginning of modernity (since 17th century Cartesianism), we define freedom as a state of being in which we master and control our being. We suppose ourselves free to decide for ourselves what we think and who we are. *Dogville* shows what is behind that popular – and in fact ‘modern’ – idea of freedom: our freedom is *given* and is a desire to give. Freedom is what is given by – and *received* of – something we only suppose we control. And, similarly, it is a desire to *give* ourselves away, even if this gift goes beyond our self-preservation.

Von Trier’s film is great in that it keeps the gift, a pre-eminent religious metaphor, entirely outside the religious atmosphere. In the tradition of the strictest enlightenment (it is no coincidence that the tone of the film resembles that of the late 18th century novel), it analyses the fundamental structures and mechanisms at work

right beneath the religion's surface. At the same time, it lays bare the structure of our current fascination for – and flirt with – religion. This will further become clear in the following episode of the trilogy that we can only look forward to seeing.