

Žižek and Cinema - IJŽS Vol 1.3

Signifying Grace: a reading of Lars Von Trier's Dogville

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Toward the end of Lars Von Trier's *Dogville* a stunning and unexpected act takes place. The female protagonist, Grace, shares in the brutal slaughter of the townspeople via the hand of her father's gunmen. This act is unexpected due to the way Grace is portrayed throughout the film as the embodiment of goodness – composite of all the hallmarks of tolerance, forgiveness, and understanding. The question that animates this essay is whether or not her brutal and violent act is simply an instance of revenge or whether her act exemplifies the Lacanian notion of 'the act'. Grace's act is transgressive – but is her act one of 'inherent transgression,' wherein her relation to the symbolic is engaged but left fully intact, or is it representative of a more radical transgression that goes by the name 'the act,' wherein her relation to the symbolic is violently undone, leaving her radically changed? The difference here is between a revenge killing that

plays heavily on the emotional and pathological sentiment of restitution and a destructive, even evil act that is nevertheless *ethical* in the Lacanian.

Dogville, the film

Von Trier continues his exploration into the difficult and problematic relation between form and content by filming the entirety of *Dogville* on one set. The stage resembles a giant green chalk board surrounded by white walls that recede into the background. The houses that line Elm Street are distinguished only by lines drawn in chalk. And just as there are no actual Elm trees in this mountainous town in Colorado, there are no actual homes for one to disappear into. This Brechtian-like technique of manipulating the relation between form and content by divesting the former of most value has the effect of charging the narrative content with dramatic suspense. Certain dramatic scenes in the film, which otherwise would have been far too ridiculous to stomach if they were accompanied with Hollywood-like special effects and musical scores, are rendered palpable. This has the peculiar effect of compelling the viewer to accept the simple, matter-of-fact narrative content as utterly consistent with the outrageous dramatic action that unfolds.

The town of Dogville is a sleepy, economically depressed, and isolated town populated with good, honest country folk, who mind their business and yet stand together. One of the central characters, Tom, is an aspiring writer struggling to find material to support his theory that despite the U S of A being known for its hospitality, its safe haven for the free and the brave, its people are

in constant need of “moral rearmament.” Prone to search the depths of the human soul to find answers, he concludes that the only way to rearm the moral principle of acceptance and tolerance to what is outside or other is to provide a tangible illustration. On the same evening that Tom holds one of his weekly town meetings to discuss the imperative of moral rearmament, Grace appears in Dogville. Awakened by the barking of the dog, Moses, Tom meets the frightened Grace, who is on the run and needs shelter and protection from, as we learn later, her gangster Father. Tom seizes this opportunity as a golden moment to provide him with the power to illustrate and he convinces the town the next day, after much trepidation and suspicion on their part, to accept her for a trial period. What then follows is a series of chapters that chronicle the adventures and misadventures of Grace’s interactions with the inhabitants of this town, all of which dramatically capture an impressive range of emotions that squarely revolve around Grace’s position within the community.

Essentially, there are two movements that split the film in half. The first meditates on how an initial suspicion of an outsider slowly evolves into an acceptance, one that evokes a certain *jouissance*. That is, once an outside (Grace) becomes inside (Dogville), or an exclusion is suddenly included within a symbolic regime, the anxiety of this outside now becomes an object of enjoyment, especially when its inclusion is secured by an insoluble debt. The second half meditates on what becomes of this object once it begins to act on its own, once it challenges the coordinates of the debt structure. Grace, the once promised figure of a gift, becomes utterly abject, subject, towards the end of the

film, to repeated humiliations and violations, like having a chain attached to an iron wheel secured to her neck, culminating in her being repeatedly raped. In the last chapter of the film, she is rescued by her father and his gunmen, and after much deliberation with her father over the question of ethical responsibility, she orders the townspeople to be executed.

Inherent Transgression

Žižek argues in a footnote in *The Parallax View*, that Grace's decision to exact revenge on the townspeople is an instance of an inherent transgression.¹ There are three crucial movements to Žižek's argument. The first is that unlike the first two films of what Žižek calls the "feminine" trilogy, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Breaking the Waves*, where the female protagonist, after a tremendous "masochistic acceptance of suffering," ends up dead, in this, his third film in the series, the female protagonist strikes back with a vengeance (Žižek 2006: 397). While perhaps satisfying for the viewer, "all the wrongdoers certainly get their comeuppance, with interest," this vengeance killing is ethically problematic. The second move is how this satisfaction is given a feminist twist: after three excruciating films in which feminine suffering is dragged out, seemingly creating a Sadeian theatre of male domination and feminine submission, the feminine strikes back, "asserting herself as a subject regaining full control over her predicament." Here the Sadeian theatre is ethically inverted via a feminine Dionysian-like catharsis -- "our thirst for vengeance is not only satisfied, it is legitimized in feminist terms" (ibid: 397). Žižek's third movement, however,

brilliantly loops back to the Father to demonstrate how it is paternal authority itself that is the condition for the possibility of the feminine act of self-determination. In other words, there is no final heroic feminine act of restitution without the presence of the law. The “feminist” counterargument is essentially hijacked by paternal authority. That is, what makes the revenge possible is precisely her re-entrance into a symbolic regime that is fully supported by her Father, or “her active role indicates her renewed submission to paternal authority.” The significance of this support is heightened by the fact that it is this authority and support from which she had escaped. In the opening of the film, she is literally running away from his gun fire, and in the end of the film she is using this very same gun to kill her ex-lover Tom.

An inherent transgression works by way of the subject disavowing the part of the law that one is both committed to and structured by so that he or she can perform an act that stages the appearance of transgressing the law itself. The best example of an inherent transgression is the fetishist, who intimates what he or she is doing is wrong or immoral in the eyes and ears of the big Other, but does it anyway. More precisely, Žižek writes: “they do not know it, but they are doing it: the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion.” (Žižek, 1998: 32) In this sense it is not knowledge that deludes or tricks us into doing something that we know is not in keeping with our morals, it is the way doing itself is structured by the distortion of knowing, or the way of doing is symptomatic of an essential

misrecognition. The disavowal (I know what I am doing is wrong, but all the same I must do it), therefore, creates a minimal distance from the law such that we can enjoy what the law itself must conceal in order for it to function. What the law conceals is the arbitrary and nonsensical show of power that marks its own founding gesture.

Does the symbolic gesture of wanting to make the world better enable Grace to disavow the pathetic enjoyment of exacting revenge on the townspeople? And does her reliance on the law of *her* father to exact revenge and make the world better merely reintegrate her into the same symbolic regime that she sought flight from? If we respond, like Žižek does, in the affirmative, then we may be overlooking some of the details within the film that lend themselves to a different reading, one that actually situates the act of killing the townspeople as an example of the Lacanian act. It is a difficult claim because, after all, it is Žižek himself who has been the author *par excellence* on the ethical and political dimensions of the act. But why be so quick to reduce this horrific act as a simple expression of vengeance when there are a whole host of hints to suggest otherwise?

So the question becomes does Grace's active role of finding the strength to strike down the townspeople indicate her renewed submission to paternal authority? Or does her act effectively punch a hole in her symbolic order, changing the symbolic coordinates that structure her universe? In other words, is her subjective authority renewed or does it come up against an impasse that demands from her something more than herself? This is the crux to an effective

reading of the Lacanian aspects of this film. There is much at stake. Not only does Grace's act compel us to examine the fine distinctions between an inherent transgression and the Lacanian act, it also has us consider the relation between psychoanalysis and politics. On the one hand, 'the act,' in contrast to alternate leftists modes of political practice, such as identity politics and the performative gesture of transgression, becomes a politically charged and relevant way to consider the possibility of something new, something completely alien to the current socio-symbolic regime of global capital. And yet on the other hand, the Lacanian act finds its origins in the therapeutic side of psychoanalysis, from the point of view in which an analysand moves toward the traversing of the fantasy and uncovering the void at its heart. Because the subject's symbolic coordinates are changed, the subject loses what had been most precious to him or her, and this loss engenders a subjective destitution. The point is how do we think the relation between the psychoanalytic cure and the political act, which is the psychoanalytic cure writ large on social and historical phenomenon? If the film *Dogville* stages this problematic in an exemplary way, it is because Grace's act of having the townspeople executed *is* utterly violent and destructive. Thus, if we are to endorse the inherent violence of the Lacanian act, we need to be extra attentive not to confuse this act with the totalitarian gesture, one which would take such an act to be representative of the thing-itself.

the act

The Lacanian act is a complex philosophical and psychoanalytic concept. But in order to provide some context for the way in which we might examine this concept alongside Grace's act at the end of the film, we might begin by defining a few of its characteristics – characteristics that not only affirm the condition for its possibility but also safeguard it from becoming identified with the thing-itself. In effect, the act is not something that can be described in positive or definitional terms; its emergence onto a scene is measured by its effect, by how it destroys a certain regime of thought or perspective, therein fundamentally altering one's relation to oneself and the world. It is negative in the sense that it restages a constitutive misrecognition, that is, the way identity, or the truth of one's identity, is grounded in a misrecognition, an error. The positive terms in which I narrate my life are exposed as utterly false, an event that evacuates the support of my subjective and symbolic coordinates. In this sense, the act carries the force of trauma, indeed a certain violence, in that it radically changes the coordinates that frame a situation. Thus from the standpoint of the symbolic, the act is unethical and violent.

Furthermore, the act is external to the subject, involves no intentionality, and is thus completely non-strategic. It is for this reason that the subject has to do it, recalling to mind the forced choice that a subject must make when he or she enters the symbolic in the first place. In a word, the act is something that just happens, indeed a kind of miracle in which what was deemed impossible suddenly happens. The significance of the act, therefore, is rendered after the

fact, retrospectively. That is, an act in one context can be merely an empty gesture, whereas in another context that same act can be revolutionary. Lastly, the act operates as a future anterior; it already exists as a possibility because the symbolic itself is founded on an act. All of this is to say that the act is never the thing-itself; it rather releases the idea of the thing-itself to its original status as no-thing.²

As mentioned briefly above, the Lacanian act has both a therapeutic application and a political consequence. How we interpret the therapeutic side and then apply that structure to political examples is problematic. And one could say that this has been a persistent theme in all of Žižek's writing. In terms of reading Grace's act as properly Lacanian, we should examine the relation between the act and the master signifier, specifically how the master signifier becomes a crucial feature in grasping just how one passes to the act, that is, how the passage to the act is synonymous with the notion of dialectizing one's master signifier.

Master Signifier

There are two crucial words or signifiers that repeatedly arise in the text of this film: arrogance and illustration. The word 'arrogance' functions precisely as a master signifier for Grace, and that one way to approach the stunning conclusion to the film is to understand how the master signifier is released from its capture in the symbolic by becoming dialectized over and against other signifiers. It thus loses its hegemonic effect on the process and production of signification -- or, in

related terms, the object of her fantasy loses all support and is evacuated of significance. This movement describes both Lacan's 'traversing of the fantasy' and 'the act.' Again, the point here is that Grace is not simply the embodiment of goodness; her goodness is an effect of the hegemonic functioning of her master signifier. Lacan's notion of the master signifier is essential in terms of how a subject is situated within the signifying chain. In itself, a master signifier is arbitrary, nonsensical, and void of meaning. It is the conversion of the arbitrary and nonsensical into the regular and natural that makes possible the master signifier, and which then has the effect of halting the infinite sliding of other signifiers so that sense and meaning can be determined. The subject comes into being, literally appears, retroactively, because of this signifier, an appearance precipitated by what Lacan calls the 'forced choice.' We choose to enter the symbolic not because we want to but because we must. It is only later when, as Rex Butler says, "this implicit order and performative act becomes the description of a pre-existing state of affairs and constative of our being."(Butler, 2005: 33)

Now the question is how does this master signifier, this pure *and* empty signifier, come into some kind of relationship with another signifier so that its status is revealed as being arbitrary and nonsensical? The master signifier functions in the similar vein in which a Father's "no" marks the child with a certain traumatism – in that the signifier is violently received and necessarily assumed. The trauma is, therefore, the effect or affect of the arbitrary and the nonsensical, and the concomitant inability of the child to metabolize its message. This double movement of receiving *and* assuming an opaque message has the singular effect

of lording over a chain of signification -- the way one makes meaning and interprets the world. To release the way the master signifier refers only to itself (hence both pure and empty) is to put it into play with another signifier – that is, for it to become dialecticized so that it may become other than itself, its own self referencing. Bruce Fink describes this passage quite well: “Dialectize’ here is the term Lacan uses to indicate that one tries to introduce an outside, in some sense, of this S1, that is, to establish an opposition between it and another signifier, S2. If we can bring this S1 into some kind of relationship with another signifier, then its status as a master signifier subjugating the subject changes.” (Fink, 1995: 78)

The process by which a master signifier is dialectized is another way of understanding just how one is able to pass to the act. In other words, the act of dialectizing one’s master signifier describes the passage by which one is able to hear a word as though it were for the first time.

For Grace’s master signifier ‘arrogance’ clearly means something; it constitutes being in a negative fashion, providing a description for how *not* to be or behave. Throughout the film we can see just how faithful Grace is to her master signifier, how her goodness can be understood next to her fidelity to unmasking the pretension of arrogance. Early in the film, after stealing the dog Moses’ bone, she is offered a piece of bread from Tom. Her reply is telling: “I can’t. I don’t deserve that bread! I stole that bone. I haven’t stolen anything before. So now, now, I have to punish myself. I was raised to be arrogant. So I had to teach myself these things.” And a few scenes later when Tom is complaining to her about the often ungrateful and petty ways of his neighbors,

she, relieved to be out from under the power of her father and optimistic that she can cultivate a new life, says “all I see is a beautiful little town amid magnificent mountains, a place where people have hopes and dreams, even under the hardest conditions.” This is a crucial moment early in the film because Grace is not simply the embodiment of goodness. Her goodness, rather, is not only measured against the negative description of arrogance but also materially supported by the fantasy she has of the town – indeed a fantasy that helps her get out from under the law of her father.

It is actually her Father who best describes how Grace’s relation to the signifier arrogance organizes the fantasy frame through which she makes sense of the big Other. During the last act of the film, Grace and her Father have a lengthy conversation about arrogance. This conversation acts as the pin that drives the entire course of events in the film. Grace was running from the gunshots of her Father due to an argument. In the heat of that argument Grace accuses him of being arrogant. The Father has come back to get his daughter so that he could defend himself against that claim and make the counterargument that it is in fact she who is arrogant.

Grace: “So, I’m arrogant. I’m arrogant because I forgive people?”

Father: “My God. Can’t you see how condescending you are when you say that? You have this preconceived notion that nobody, listen, that nobody can’t possibly attain the same high ethical standards as you – so you exonerate them. I can not 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 for yourself.”

Earlier Grace acknowledges, almost as if it were her gift to humanity, her little piece of treasure, that everything that she has taught herself has been to

safeguard herself against arrogance --specifically the arrogance associated with her Father – who uses his power to assert his will and judgment over others. Indeed arrogance is the negative consequence of power, particularly a mode of power that is self-referential. Grace’s goodness does not give her the right to pass judgment on the behavior of others; but it is this suspension of judgment that shields her from the nonexistence of the big Other, of having to assume how her ideal of forgiveness is merely a narcissistic subjective position. Her Father’s take on her arrogance is made all the more clear when we consider the persistence of the goodwill she extends to the townspeople even when things began getting out of hand. A scene towards the middle of the film with Chuck, just after the town decided to double her work load due to the sudden feeling of debt they felt owed to them for their kindness, further demonstrates this point.

Chuck: “Why do you find me so repugnant?”

Grace: “I don’t find you repugnant. Don’t be upset. I’m sorry if I doubted you. It won’t happen again. I promise you.

Chuck: “I wouldn’t make that promise if I was you. When you fended me off a thought came into my mind that made me ashamed -- a thought that you would hate me for.

Grace: “I would never hate you. Never.”

Chuck: “What?”

Grace: “Chuck, I have treated you unfairly. It’s alright to have angry thoughts.

Chuck: “I thought of turning you in! I thought of blackmailing you into respecting me.

Grace: “It means that much to you? It does, doesn’t it? 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 ...”

This is a rather stunning exchange when you consider what is soon to unfold for Grace, and yet it is totally consistent with the naiveté of her fantasy that humanity, at its core, is good – and that what corrupts it is the weakness of the

human being to succumb all too easily to the force of power. Arrogance essentially mistakes this weakness for strength.

These constellations of terms are consistent with the way Grace's master signifier provides the arbitrary and insistent point of reference that lords over an entire field of meaning. Žižek writes: ". . . the multitude of floating signifiers, of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning." (Žižek, 1998: 87) The 'fixing' of meaning has the effect of a totalization, of being animated by a certain surplus of meaning, indeed a kind of authority that dictates a doing beyond the doer. A bit later in the film when Chuck blackmails her into quietly submitting to him raping her, Grace excuses Chuck's action, when describing it to Tom, as being weak, too weak to do the proper thing. The point here is that Grace's fantasy of goodness, forgiveness and non-judgment functions as an ideological supplement that sutures the gaps and fissures in her symbolic regime, a regime that is stitched to the regime of her Father's authority. Or, in another register, goodness, forgiveness and non-judgment act as utterly contingent signifiers quilted to her master signifier. Because her fantasy frame produces a constant point of distortion, Grace fatefully misrecognizes how she is actually being treated by the townspeople.

So how do we explain the distinct and sudden mood changes towards her? Žižek's answer would be that something adheres to the symbolic that stains it with a certain surplus, a surplus that exceeds meaning and produces

jouissance. In a word, the townspeople are happy throughout the course of events because they have power over that which is animating them, a power that they have *received* without having to give anything up. To be more precise, the tension between obedience and enjoyment, or law as signification and law as an exception, explains how the townspeople's extreme mood changes towards Grace, from caution, to pleasure, and to cruelty, are consistent with the workings of ideology. A crucial feature to ideology, one which is perfectly illustrated in the film, and described above when discussing the fetishistic inversion, is the way ideology functions by creating a certain distance from itself that enables the superego's injunction to enjoy the little pleasures derived by inherent transgressions, but, and most importantly, transgressions that do not overturn the fantasy frame that supports an ideological position. For example, the pleasing sensation of power that the townspeople derive off the labor of Grace enables both a bit of distance from the strain of the material impossibility of their own ideological position (it's trying and burdensome to be so good and honest), while keeping their fantasmatic support and symbolic coordinates completely in tact (but, you see, at the end of the day, we are good and honest).

The townspeople's initial cool resistance to Grace, followed by the enjoyment derived by her labor, to the cruelty and vengeance visited on her body, never truly affects or disrupts the symbolic in any way. If anything it demonstrates, by means of an exaggeration that forces the viewer to respond in some way, how the superego's injunction to enjoy saturates the symbolic with perverse and guilty enjoyment. Moreover, we can think of these three

movements in the film analogous to the Lacanian triad: Need – demand – desire. When need is subtracted from demand you have desire (Recall how the word need appears consistently early on in the film when the townspeople consider Grace's offer to help out with chores). In the film, the subtraction takes place when Grace is seen taking the hand of Tom, which is immediately followed by an out-of-town sheriff coming by to post the Grace 'wanted sign.' At this moment, a moment in which Grace expresses a desire of her own, she threatens her own status as an object of desire domesticated and controlled by the dictates of demand (we can enjoy your labor because you are indebted to us; we are rightfully your master). Feeling their power slip away, and thus their enjoyment exposed, the townspeople hold a town meeting to decide that they must reclaim Grace's debt to them. In other words, their *need* of her is exposed as being empty. Therefore to retain their power, they literally reduce her, via the rightful supports of the law, to an abject-object, which only manages to reaffirm her status as a desirable object – or, better, *objet petit a*.

Up until this point in the film, however, Grace is not able to discern this inter-subjective power dynamic. For Grace, power is not something that is arbitrary or nonsensical, and thus not something that can be used or willed in a positive or negative way, nor is it something to be confused with honesty and goodness or even best intentions; it is rather a signifier already situated against her master signifier – arrogance. Power is negative because it is precisely the agent that leads one to become arrogant; or it is negative because it is the agent that corrupts the good. So at what moment in the film is Grace's master signifier

dialectized? At what point does the cloth of her regime of signs become frayed enabling her to not only reconsider her subjective position but also to radically change it? While there is the hand-holding scene to point to, there are also two other earlier scenes that are of significance.

Von Trier says something in an interview that cannot help but remind one of a Žižekian-like reference to the real. He says “A good film is like having a stone stuck in your shoe.” There is so much in the film that sets up the classic revenge scenario. In particular:

1. the repeated rapes
2. the powerful scene in which Vera systematically smashes each one of Grace's hard earned and symbolically valued figurines, a scene that has Vera taunting Grace to have the courage to practice the lesson of stoicism by not crying after she began the smashing.

Later in the film Vera gets her medicine back with interest: Grace instructs the gunmen to shoot each one of her children, only stopping the bloodshed if Vera can hold back her tears. So how could Von Trier's film not be a moral tale about the value of vengeance? It has to do with this rock in the shoe. The idea being that Von Trier is actually setting up his audience, slyly placing in our shoe the very kernel that must be repressed in order to sustain the liberal fantasy of the inherent value of best intentions. More specifically, the 'set-up' being the fantasy space of liberal goodness that is so easily identified in the gift (of forgiveness, understanding) that Grace bestows on Dogville. Is it not the very dialectical play between a gift and grace, set up early in the film as Tom seeks out an example

for his illustration of moral rearmament and when Grace happens to fall into his arms, that is obliterated by Grace's order of execution? This surprising and even exaggerated show of violence not only one-ups the standard fare of the revenge genre, but situates the revenge itself beyond the pathological dictates of the pleasure principle and into a space that is horrific and evil. The question is what dies in Grace in order for her to pass to the act and perform the evil/ethical deed? In other words, what further evidence do we have that her master signifier becomes dialectized, zapped of its stubborn and persistent hold on interpretation, so that it might become other?

Let's turn to those two scenes, both of which are told by the narrator. The first told in conjunction with the figurines being smashed, and the second while she is enduring the repeated rapes and further humiliations.

In her lifetime Grace had considerable practice at constraining her emotions and would never have believed it would be hard to control them now. But as the porcelain pulverized on the floor it was as if it were human tissue disintegrating. The figurines were the offspring of the meeting between the township and her. They were the proof that in spite of everything her suffering had created something of value. Grace could no longer cope. For the first time since her childhood she wept.

It was not Grace's pride that kept her going during the days when fall came and the trees were losing their leaves but more of the trance-like state that descends on animals whose lives are threatened, a state in which the body reacts mechanically in a low, tough gear without too much painful reflection, like a patient passively letting his disease hold sway.

In the first scene, we have a strong intimation that her symbolic coordinates for making meaning, for assimilating the Other, are breaking down. And in the second, we see her giving herself over to a mere animal, machine-like survival, indeed a point of exhaustion that renders any care for the symbolic a mere afterthought. She is effectively between two deaths, occupying the strange and sublime beauty of one who is already dead, one whose automatic and blind insistence makes a mockery of the best intentions and value of any governing regime. At this point in the film, Tom becomes as silly as ever in his earnest pursuit to keep up the power of thinking to help solve the situation. But, of course, it does not end here. Her Father drives up in his Cadillac; she is freed from her ball and chain, and has her conversation with her Father about arrogance. She comes back from the dead to engage in an earnest conversation about morality and the proper use of force, and of then deciding what to do.

Herein lays the crux: the signifier 'grace' has up to this point functioned as a logical extension of the master signifier 'arrogance.' The gift of illustration that Tom initially sought to 'grace' the townspeople about the moral import of accepting strangers is fully realized in the person Grace. *But how was it to be realized!?* The liberal, more humanitarian response is for Grace to extend grace, to recognize how the townspeople's actions were an extension of their circumstances and to then forgive them. This would be utterly consistent with the person Grace. But the narrator says: "And if one had the power to put it right, it was one's duty to do so for the sake of the other towns. For the sake of humanity. And not the least for the sake of the human being that was Grace

herself.” Just prior to ordering the execution she asks her Father if he would empower her to not only solve the problem of Dogville but also to use power as she saw fit upon her return to home. Power, for Grace, is no longer a negative or corrupt signifier tethered to the righteous and superior mast of goodness. In dialectizing arrogance, power takes on a different *signifiante*. Žižek writes “it is the ‘subjective destitution’, the subject’s complete self-externalization, that makes the master superfluous.” (Žižek, 2005: 172)

Here the Master is not her Father, or the symbolic regime that he stands in for; rather it is *her* master signifier, the way she has singularly misrecognized her own identity over and against her Father, and how this misrecognition came to frame her own idea of herself, her ego-ideal. “The subjective ‘mistake’, ‘fault’, ‘error’, misrecognition, arrives paradoxically *before* the truth in relation to which we are designating it as ‘error’, because this ‘truth’ becomes true only through the error.” (Žižek, 1998: 59) The Father functions as the subject who is supposed to know; he embodies the knowledge that secures for Grace the proof of her own position – against which she must defend at all cost. So the Father is not representative of a paternal authority that acts as the cause of her act; he is rather the point of a transference, the dissolution of which allows Grace to traverse her fantasy and to pass to the act on her own. What is dissolved in the precise moment is Grace’s S1. Grace itself, the signifier that represents the subject for another signifier, is dialectized, becoming radically other than how it is “liberally” constituted in the big Other as that term which forgives and understands. Is this not the ‘duty’ that the narrator speaks to – an ethical duty to

herself not to give way on her desire, that is, to empty the signifier grace of all significance so that she can become more than grace itself? Is this not the 'true' definition of grace? Žižek writes: "Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another way, new way." (Žižek, 1998: 56)

It is, nonetheless, a strange claim to say that she is the author of the act because, of course, she could not have blown away the town without Daddy. But it also seems potentially cynical to essentially give this moment to the Father, to credit him for this passage. Arming herself with the Master's weapons does not necessarily keep her subservient to that authority. She is now armed to use power as she deems fit -- which recalls a small detail in this final scene, one that further indicates that Grace has surpassed something in herself, regardless of her Father's presence. He says: "We can start by shooting the dog and nailing it to a wall over there beneath that lamp as an example. It might help; it sometime does." Grace responds: "It would only make the town more frightened, but hardly make it a better place." The point here, one that will be taken up again below, is that Grace refuses the idea of making an illustration, an example. Of course, any act can be interpreted as an illustration, and hers certainly meets the mark ... but only after the fact. In this case, her illustration is the retroactive effect of a deadlock. At this moment she has assumed a choice, for better or for worse, that indicates the traversing of *her* fantasy.

So on the therapeutic level Grace is arguably changed; she has traversed her fantasy, assuming the void around which the signifier arrogance revolves. But this line of reasoning may not be enough. For, if she has assumed the void around which the signifier arrogance revolves, why must she kill the townspeople, using her father's gunmen to do so? (This might remind one of the argument, post 9-11 of why the suicide bombers did not fly the planes into the towers in the evening, when no one was there). In other words, why can't Grace simply walk away, assume the deadlock of her subjective-position and affirm that both courses of action are flawed? Thus a question remains, one that is political and strategic: by wiping out this town does she actually make things worse?

The Political

The way to approach this problem is to avoid what we would expect to learn from someone like Tom. Is not Tom, forever burdened by his impotence to enact his ideas, including his desire for Grace, the perfect example of today's liberal, tolerant thinker, one who champions the ideals of acceptance and tolerance, but only to the degree that this openness is not truly challenged? The horror and surprise of Grace's act is precisely that it passes beyond the constitutive limit and point of reference of today's predominant notion of democracy. As Žižek writes, ". . . democracy means avoiding the totalitarian extreme; it is defined as a permanent struggle against the totalitarian temptation to close the gap, to pretend to act on behalf of the Thing itself." (Butler, 2005: 144) It is, at first glance, ironic that Grace, who represents an apparent

unconditional goodness, would initiate an act that is ostensibly evil – in that it mirrors the totalitarian temptation to act on behalf of the Thing itself – that is, to act in the name of grace or of justice itself, without a symbolic mediation arrived at through due process. But this irony is merely a trope that a liberal democratic regime would cling to in order to wrest some sort of moral illustration from the film's ending.

One might imagine two standard liberal interpretations of the film: the first simply not liking the film, thinking that its exaggerated displays of violence are overtly didactic, and thus too unrealistic, moralistic, even arrogant; the second liking the film, arguing that Grace's final act must be read as an illustration, that is, that *if we* (America) do not admit our sins and own up to them we, like the town and its people, will get burned. In the second reading, the act of getting burned would merely symbolize the consequence of taking something like goodness or grace for granted. In the first reading the problem is the liberty taken with the illustration itself, a liberty that mocks a more politically correct view of the American landscape, one which would be more balanced and fair, or more representative of the goodness that actually exists in America's heartland. However, the point is that Grace's act not only traverses these respective liberal fantasies but more so demonstrates how the act itself is initially void of metaphor, that is, beyond illustration itself. Her act is not born from some strategic attempt to intervene from within the symbolic so that a moral lesson can be had.

There is a deadlock that Grace confronts: she recognizes, on the one hand, that the townspeople are a product of their environment, and that if she

lived in that town she would be no better (the merciful, sentimental and ultimately utilitarian response). On the other hand, regardless of her upbringing, if she had acted in the manner of the townspeople, she could simply not accept that kind of behavior from herself (the principled or Kantian response). But these illustrative positions, along with her father's suggestion that they nail the dog to the chapel, are inadequate because they do not suspend or rupture the symbolic in any way. Grace's impasse or deadlock leads to the act, which *is* the impossible, in the sense of the impossible that happens. As Žižek writes: "the 'Real as impossible' means that the IMPOSSIBLE DOES HAPPEN, that miracles like Love (or political revolution ...) Do occur. From 'impossible TO happen' we thus pass to 'the impossible Happens' – this, and not the structural obstacle forever deferring the final resolution, is the most difficult to accept." (Žižek, 2001, 84)

Isn't this precisely what happens at the end of the film? Far from enacting the imaginary satisfaction for revenge, or the symbolic gesture of penalty and restitution, this ending obliterates either sentiment. Here the unexpected or the impossible happens: the liberal democratic doxa that posits good as the absence of evil, of the absolute safeguard against the extreme totalitarian gesture, is radically suspended, enabling an intervention that exposes the very fantasmatic support of such an ideology. The intervention is neither about sacrifice nor strategy; its force lies in it being unexpected. Here goodness and grace are not complemented by brotherhood and forgiveness; rather they become the perfect dialectical coincidence of evil and violence. This dialectical movement describes how the real appears as an answer to the big Other, that is, how it acts as an

impenetrable kernel that resists symbolization *and* the non-place or chimerical entity that provides the starting point for the process of symbolization itself. (Žižek, 1998: 169) Žižek goes on to use this logic to explain the dialectical coincidence in Hegel's thinking around Being and Nothingness: "The *Real* is defined as a point of the immediate coincidence of the opposite poles: each pole passes immediately into its opposite; each already in itself its own opposite . . . The point is that Being in itself, when we try to grasp it 'as it is'. . . reveals itself to be Nothing." (Žižek, 1998: 172) It is in this precise sense that the film traverses the fantasy of democracy – specifically the one that holds up evil as the negative of the good, and which thus must be defended against at all costs. Or, the way the signifier grace, tethered to the hegemonic regime of signifiers that determine its meaning to be consistent with forgiveness or charity, is dialectized, such that it becomes the opposite of how it had been determined.

From here, we can see how the film succeeds at staging the relationship between the psychoanalytic cure (Grace traversing her fantasy and assuming the void at its heart) and the political (Grace shooting Tom, the embodiment of American liberal pathos, in the back of the head). As gathered from its setting in the mountains of Colorado, its ironic narrative voice-over that exaggerates the American ethos of tolerance, and the abrupt music of David Bowie's "Young Americans" that concludes the film, coupled with the brutally stark photography of the underprivileged in America, it is also about America itself. It is about the obscene underbelly of America, the America that is forgotten in the same utterance that proclaims it to be the most open and tolerant. It is about the

arrogance of America, not unlike that of Tom, one which disavows its own nonsensical and arbitrary show of power on the premise that such power is the consequence of a deeper and more just principle. Recall the two scenes Tom has with Grace directly before and then during the elimination of the town. On the first occasion he says “I am scared. Grace, I used you, and I’m sorry. I am maybe even arrogant sometimes . . . although using people is not charming, I think you have to agree that this specific illustration has surpassed all expectations. It says so much about being human. It’s been painful, but I think you also have to agree it has been edifying.” Grace’s response is “not now Tom, not now.” And then a few moments later, when the town is ablaze and all but Tom has been killed, he says “Bingo Grace! Bingo. I have to tell you, your illustration beat the hell out of mine. It’s frightening, yes, but so clear.” And then perhaps mocking himself, adds “Do you think that I can use it as an inspiration in my writing?” She then says goodbye to Tom and shoots him in the back of the head. Isn’t this the precise point to the Lacanian act?

Not only is the act a radical suspension of symbolic mediation, the power of thought to rectify or solve the situation, thereby disclosing its status as non-all, as well as its impotence to provide illustration itself with the force of revolution or real change, it also, to quote Žižek “always and by definition appears as a change ‘from Bad to Worse’ (the usual criticism of conservatives against revolutionaries: yes, the situation is bad, but your solution is even worse . . .). The proper heroism of the act is to fully assume this Worse.” (Žižek, 2000: 377) Grace’s act is indeed extreme, but without having assumed the worse, there is

no surprise, no miracle, no actual suspension of the symbolic, no trans-valuation of values, and no revolutionary possibility to alter the subject's relation to the law. And it is precisely both the arrogance and the complacency of the American Empire that can claim, without hesitation, on the grounds of democratic principles, that such an extreme act *is* totalitarian or terroristic. Grace's act, therefore, in direct defiance of this position, demonstrates how the therapeutic act of dialecticizing her master signifier doubles as a political act: the common denominator is that destruction is involved.

So while Grace's act is enabled by the very symbolic regime that she was initially attempting to escape, there is nonetheless something enacted within Grace that fundamentally alters her relation to this very regime. She is faced with a choice: to either stay in Dogville or return home with her father. The point is that her choice is not one of better or worse, or of right or wrong. As far as using the symbolic itself to reconcile the situation, she stands before an impossibility, a deadlock. Her choice, therefore, is properly a forced choice, one whose repetition constitutes the act itself. Sure, Daddy was there for her, but that doesn't mean that she was *there* for Daddy.³

¹ Žižek writes: “How are we to read Lars Von Trier’s “feminine” trilogy: *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, and *Dogville*? In all three films, the heroine (Emily Watson, Bjork, Nicole Kidman) is exposed to terrifying, if not outrageously melodramatic, suffering and humiliation; however, while in the first two films her ordeal culminates in a painfully desperate death, in *Dogville* she mercilessly strikes back and exacts full revenge for the despicable way the residents of the small town where she has taken refuge have treated her, personally killing her ex-lover. This denouement cannot fail to give rise, in the spectator, to a deep, if ethically problematic, satisfaction – all the wrongdoers certainly get their comeuppance, with interest. Should we also give it a feminist twist: after spectacles of masochistic feminine suffering dragging on at an unbearable length, the victim finally summons up the strength to strike back with a vengeance, asserting herself as a subject regaining full control over her predicament? In this way we seem to get the best of both worlds: our thirst for vengeance is not only satisfied, it is even legitimized in feminist terms . . . what spoils this easy solution is not the predictable (but false) “feminist” counterargument that her victory is won by adopting the “masculine” violent attitude. There is another feature which should be given its full weight: the heroine of *Dogville* is able to enact her ruthless revenge the moment her father (a Mafia boss) comes to the city in search of her – in short, her active role indicates her renewed submission to paternal authority. On the contrary, it is apparently the “masochistic” acceptance of suffering in the first two films which is much closer to the feminine *Versagung*”. (Žižek 2006: 397).

² It is important to reiterate that I am drawn to think through the act in Von Trier's *Dogville* precisely because of the difficulties it presents in reflecting these conditions. A recent film that more clearly exemplifies these conditions is *The Lives of Others*: I am thinking specifically of the actions of HGW to go against the ethical mandate of his duty to record subversive activity, an action that places him in grave danger of being accused of treason, thus the risk of life, and which fundamentally reorients his symbolic universe, completely undoing his passionate attachment to the Cause.

³ It is worth mentioning that the sequel, *Manderlay*, begins with Grace pondering how she can put to use her Father's promise to share his power. Now that power has been freed from its capture in Grace's old and outdated signifying chain, she can reconsider its use-value to instigate change and ultimately justice. So in the spirit of neo-liberalism, particular the use of human rights as a pretense to justify military intervention for humanitarian ends, Grace sets out to make the world a better place. If *Dogville* is about signifying Grace, then *Manderlay* could be said to be about how Grace learns a bitter lesson by confusing her new power with the thing-itself.

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