

## **"Dogville" – Humiliation, love and politics**

A film review in dialogue with Hannah Arendt

Wolfgang Heuer

„Dogville“<sup>1</sup>, like all the films of the Danish director Lars von Trier, has led to controversy. The film is a parable in the style of Bertolt Brecht, which describes in the style of a didactic play the fall of civilised coexistence in a township. A woman fleeing from gangsters appears unannounced in a township called "Dogville" and asks for help. She is given refuge and treated kindly until doubts build up about her identity and the township attracts the attentions of both the police and the gangsters. The upright townsfolk find themselves subjected to external pressure, and pass this on to the woman they are hiding, humiliating her in a more and more shameless way until they finally deliver her up to her pursuers.

This painful decline in civility in a town raises the question of what is happening between the people of the township, between them and the stranger and also the role played by morals and politics in a crisis situation. The film describes this process without providing explicit answers. We are familiar with such conflicts with strangers and minorities. The wars in the former Yugoslavia or the massacres in Rwanda serve as a reminder that the 20th Century was not only a century of totalitarianism, but was also characterised by civil wars and refugees.

Humiliation is one form of expression of simmering conflicts, which totally undermine civilised conditions. Humiliation is generally regarded as relating to behaviour between individuals, rather than as a political problem. It would only seem to be political when there is national humiliation that is a matter between states or an inter-ethnic phenomenon. In this sense it is quite frequently misused, most recently perhaps by ideological movement in the Arab world. Humiliation in internal politics, on the other hand, is only rarely a topic, either as a feature of dictatorial oppression or more recently

the more or less unintended side-effect of institutions of the democratic welfare state, as in Avishai Margalit's book "The Decent Society".<sup>2</sup>

"Dogville" shows us that inter-personal humiliation can have an eminently political significance, comparable with the more accepted political forms of humiliation (by another nation, by a dictatorship, or by the institutions of the democratic mass society). The humiliation in "Dogville" is not the result of an inadequate welfare state, and it is not limited to a sociological or socio-psychological viewpoint, but rather it grows in importance to the extent that the townspeople do not react politically to a political challenge, but rather individually and egoistically. Humiliation here becomes a direct challenge to the political.

One of the strengths of the film is that it also considers another inter-personal theme, which could have prevented the decline of the community, namely love.

I would now like to provide a brief synopsis of the film, before considering the role of humiliation in the erosion of civilised relationships, and then the importance of love in preventing this erosion process. Finally, I will discuss the failure of political action in view of the crisis depicted in this film. Particularly because of the way this film presents us with a representative example of the development of a catastrophe, the political-philosophical writings of Hannah Arendt on love, friendship and politics seem almost to be an indirect reaction, or a contribution to a dialogue.

## I. "Dogville"

The film is set in a remote township somewhere in the Rocky Mountains in the United States during the Great Depression. But we never actually see the mountains or even the town. The whole film is acted out on a bare soundstage, with the houses and windows indicated by chalk marks on the floor, in a style inspired by the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. As a parable, the story-line is reduced to a minimum. There are fifteen townsfolk, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Dogville, 2003, Lions Gate Films, directed by Lars von Trier, starring Nicole Kidman

<sup>2</sup> Avishai Margalit, The Decent Society, Cambridge/Mass. 1996

main protagonist Grace, a beautiful, young stranger, and then three policemen, who come in from the next city from time to time, and a gangster boss with his henchmen. A narrator guides us through the film's prologue and its nine chapters.

Dogville is a well-ordered, friendly but isolated township. One day, gun-shots in the distance disturb the tranquillity, and a little later Grace appears and pleads for help. Tom a young writer, who is self-appointed town spokesman, hides her when gangsters come looking for her. The people of Dogville are prepared to harbour Grace for two weeks. They are tolerant and willing to help, although it is difficult to find work for Grace at first, because they do not really need her. Gradually, all the townspeople come to give her useful tasks. Grace is obviously not used to menial work, but she tries hard and the people are satisfied. After two weeks, they vote unanimously to let Grace stay on in the township. Grace says a number of times that she would be willing to leave whenever the townspeople wanted her to.

Then the police appear looking for a missing person, and bringing a picture of Grace with them. Because they are agreed that the gangsters must be behind this, the townspeople are ready to continue to shelter Grace. The residents are disturbed by the growing affection between Tom and Grace. But the climate soon changes radically when the police come back again, this time with a wanted notice implicating Grace in a crime. The townspeople are still prepared to let Grace stay, but they demand something in exchange for the risk they are running. She will have to work twice as hard, and for half the money, even though they had repeatedly said before that nobody needed her to do any work.

The mood becomes unfriendly and the township begins to "show its teeth". Grace works frantically, there are mishaps and she draws increasing criticism. Mistrust grows when Grace loses her nerves and hits a child who has been provoking her, and as a result the mother no longer leaves her alone with the children. When the police come round for a third time, the fruit-grower threatens to betray Grace unless she sleeps with him. Grace has no choice but to give in. She wants to leave the village, but now the townspeople will not let her go, because they have got used to benefiting from her work. The fruit-grower now abuses Grace regularly during the work.

Grace looks for an escape, and the truck driver is prepared to smuggle her out of the township. Tom helps her by stealing money from his father to pay the truck driver, and promises to meet up with her when she has escaped. But as soon as they are out of the town, the truck driver takes advantage of the situation to rape Grace. Then he claims that the police have put up a road block and they will have to turn round. Back in Dogville, Grace finds out that the truck driver had been telling all about the escape the evening before. When Tom denies stealing the money off his father, the suspicion falls on Grace. To stop her trying to escape again, she is chained to a millstone with a dog-collar round her neck. Now most of the other men feel free to go to Grace's room and rape her, and their behaviour is tolerated. Grace loses all dignity.

Tom wants to free Grace, but does not know how. At the same time, he is fascinated by the events and wants to write about them. He wants to love Grace but she refuses him, because she wants to be free first. Tom feels rejected and together with the other townspeople decides to get rid of Grace. He informs the gangsters, using a telephone number he had kept. When they arrive, it turns out that their boss is Grace's father. She had always refused to follow in his footsteps, and had finally run away. But now she was prepared to come back. She no longer sees such a big difference between the world of the gangsters and that of Dogville. In a final dialogue she agrees with her father that the crimes of the township should not go unpunished, and that there are no grounds for clemency. Grace orders the gangsters to shoot the townspeople and burn the village down, and she herself shoots Tom. The world, she says, must be freed of this town.

## II. Stages of humiliation

Humiliation plays a key role in the decline of the civilised behaviour of the townspeople in this film. At first they tolerate the presence of the stranger because they are prepared to protect her against persecution. But their willingness to help is limited, because they actually only have to agree to aid which Tom has already provided. Tom directs things, he believes that he can improve the community spirit of the townspeople if they face a common challenge. Tom says that Grace is a "gift" for the town, but nobody questions

where Grace has come from, who she is, or why she was being hunted. They are prepared to behave civilly towards her, as long as nothing more is required. The fact that nobody needs her work also means that her presence is superfluous, they do no more than tolerate her. Grace does all she can to fit in with the customs and the tastes of the residents. It soon becomes apparent that there are benefits from having Grace in the township, and that the benefits outweigh the costs. The first visit from the police does not change anything, because it is not an offence to ignore the search for a missing person.

However, with the second visit of the police and the growing affection between Grace and Tom things change. Now the townspeople are hiding a criminal, and they also feel increasingly jealous. This sets in motion an escalating series of eight forms of humiliation:

- The first form of humiliation is the exploitation of Grace, when she is required to work twice as much in exchange for being given further refuge. It is only a matter of time before this first humiliation also leads to the destruction of the friendliness between the townspeople and Grace;
- The second form of humiliation is self-humiliation. The mutual respect that had initially existed is destroyed when the external pressure is passed on. As Grace becomes more irritable, the criticism and provocation of the child lead her to hit him, which she herself finds degrading;
- The third form of humiliation is being blackmailed into having sexual intercourse with the fruit grower;
- The fourth form of humiliation for Grace is the destruction of her property. When the fruit-grower claims that he had been seduced by Grace, his wife comes to take revenge on her. One by one, she destroys the things that Grace had bought with the wages for her work, saying that she would only stop when Grace showed that she could keep back her feelings about this destruction. Grace actually found the objects in very bad taste, but they represented her ties with the townspeople, and their destruction was an expression of the final break of the residents of Dogville with her;
- The fifth form of humiliation is the town arrest to which she is subjected;
- The sixth form is being chained to the millstone after the failed escape;
- The seventh form is the repeated rape by the men of the township, her degradation to the level of mere cattle;

- The eighth form, finally, is betrayal: by the truck driver, who only pretends to be liberating her in order to abuse her, and then by Tom, who lets her take the blame for having stolen the money from his father, and then betrays her to the gangsters. And his love is also marked by betrayal, because he first sees Grace as a useful pedagogic instrument, then as a subject for literary exploitation, and finally as an object of sexual desire.

How does a civilised community come to abandon mutual respect, ignore personal integrity, and put itself outside the law?

The process in the film shows us how thin the covering of civilisation can be in a community. There are various factors in this story, which account for the fragility of the civilisation, all of them affecting the relationships between people. These are primarily the liberal reserve, the priority given to personal gain, and the lack of political interest in the welfare of the community. This is expressed in the following four aspects:

- Firstly, in the status of the stranger, in the tolerance
- Secondly, in the increased emphasis on personal interests as a reaction to the increased risks
- Thirdly, the instrumentalisation of the relationships and the destruction of Grace's dignity, and
- Fourthly, in a dubious love and in betrayal.

It could be argued that there is a fifth aspect, namely interpreting the reaction of Grace and the murder of the townspeople as an act of revenge. But as I shall explain later, I see this more as the attempt to find justice.

Regarding the first factor, the status of the stranger, it is interesting to consider more closely the nature of tolerance, which we regard as the key characteristic of public relations in liberal society. Tolerance is characterised by passive endurance and indifference. It does not affect other values or personally beneficial relationships. On the contrary, self-interest dominates, and all other actions are assessed in terms of personal advantage. Friendliness, willingness to help and the conception of communal welfare are

also defined in terms of the realisation of self-interest. The communal welfare in liberalism, as in *Dogville*, consists of maintaining a state in which a community of individuals can successfully pursue their own self-interests.

The equality that Grace seeks exists only at the level of work and wages. There is no protection against arbitrary changes, and as a newcomer in the township, Grace has no rights. The majority opinion decides whether the relationships are changed, and there seems to be no limitation to its arbitrary nature.

It only requires some external threat to this self-interest in order to disclose the character of this tolerance and the insecure status of Grace. Here a second factor comes into play, the increased emphasis on self-interest as a reaction to fear. The townspeople find themselves in a twin moral dilemma: firstly, their initially charitable act of providing Grace shelter from persecution has transformed into a purely practical, material relationship. So should they continue to keep her in *Dogville* because they had promised to do so, or because they can personally benefit from it? Secondly, the townspeople could find themselves facing punishment for assisting a criminal; should they stand by what they are doing or not? In both cases the townspeople decide against the moral considerations and for their personal interests. In both cases the initial situation has changed: Grace is no longer being hunted by criminals, but is obviously a criminal herself. But she is useful, and since she has done nothing wrong in the town they would like to keep her. But the risk involved in hiding a criminal from the police is much greater, and it must be worth for the townspeople. From their point of view, it seems fair to expect Grace to work more in return. Of course, this is anything but a fair deal. On the contrary, they are exploiting the situation in which Grace finds herself, and are therefore exploiting Grace herself.

This brings in the third factor, namely the instrumentalisation of the relationship to Grace, and her degradation. From the start, the friendliness and what academics refer to as the significance of mutual respect are subjected to utilitarian considerations. As a result of the external pressure, the question of how to react to the increased risk is decided predominantly by cost-benefit analysis. Grace is now regarded exclusively as an

economic factor and thus as an object - all the more so because she is obviously a criminal and had concealed this from the townspeople.

At the same time, the townspeople are willing to jointly break the law and to harbour a criminal. In this combination of maximum benefit and illegality they seem to lose all sensibility for legal and moral transgression. They develop their own yardstick for right and morality, for the just and the good. If Grace only has value because of the work she does, why bother with friendly phrases? If she is an object that can be used, then why not also used sexually? And why not extend the claims to cover the whole person, her property and her liberty? The townspeople each feel themselves to be individually innocent for what they do collectively. They only do what somebody else has already done, and that individual feels guiltless because the others all go on to do the same. Above all, the community tacitly feels an entitlement to some sort of recompense from Grace for her supposed misdemeanours: hitting the child, the adultery, and the theft of the money.

The fourth factor, love and betrayal, introduces an additional aspect relating to the aid extended to a helpless stranger. When the townspeople degrade Grace to an object for their use, the only thing left to her which does not seem to be tainted by such considerations is Tom's love. It could offer the alternative to inhumanity for Grace, but even this love offers no protection. On the contrary, Tom remains loyal to the other residents, because his love is also marked by considerations of utility. As the disaster runs its course, he even toys with the idea of writing a play about it from the perspective of an outside observer.

### III. The flame of love and active neighbourly love

This is the point to introduce the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt. A dialogue is possible between her and the film, not only because she concerned herself with the decline of civilised society, but also because she regards politics, that is joint actions for the common good, as a crucial precondition for the maintenance of the civilised community. The fateful thing in Dogville is the absence of politics.



Interpersonal relationships form the central focus of Arendt's work. Totalitarianism, freedom, and politics are all discussed against the backdrop of these relationships. Totalitarianism is not characterised solely by its apparatus of power, the political movement and the use of ideology and terror, but also by the lack of relationships and people's feelings of leading a senseless existence at the inception of totalitarian movements. The movement and its ideology seem to offer a new orientation. Freedom, from the view of inter-personal relationships is nothing abstract, but only arises, according to Arendt, when people enter into active relationships with each other. This is the opposite of the lack of relationships in totalitarianism. Politics is therefore not an administrative act, and not a struggle for power, but joint action and discussion, by means of which freedom is generated. This 'between' is synonymous for Arendt with the world, and any limitation on relationships, whether the introduction of violence or the instrumentalisation of the Other or the displacement of politics by administration, reduces the common world, allows violence to spread and in the end risks ruin, as in *Dogville*. Liberalism, for Arendt, is based on a series of such limitations on freedom and political action.

The only assistance there seems to be in *Dogville* is the love between Tom and Grace. Apart from the fact that this love failed, we must ask whether, in the egoistic and humiliating community of *Dogville*, love would be able to offer protection against inhumanity, lack of empathy and the absence of inter-personal ties? Could it save people in the absence of political action?

No doubt it could have played an important role if Tom had found the strength to defend Grace with all available means. This could have led to a discussion about the state of the community. But to act against humiliation and betrayal out of love only places the fate and the concerns of the two lovers in the foreground, not the fate of the community. Love can defend the dignity of one person, and oppose degradation by the townspeople, but cannot focus on the cares about the status of the community. Love and politics differ in that the one is concerned with the welfare of two people and the other with the common welfare.

Love is exclusive, but the regulation of public affairs requires relations between many people. Because for Arendt the human condition in a civilised world depends on this plurality, that is the multiple relationships between people, it is very important for her, as she notes in her recently published philosophical notebooks, to differentiate between "the elementary human activities as modifications of plurality". She identifies five such elementary activities: labor, work, action, thought, and love. And she also defines interpersonal relationships: labor taking place in solitude as an activity involving strength; work in isolation, involving the creation of objects and works of art and based on strength, actions based on communality, the shared world, thought which takes place alone, but which knows the inner dialogue and the imagination of the Other, and finally love which consists of being together but at the same being out of the world, encapsulated from the others.<sup>3</sup> In labor, according to Arendt, people are also isolated and driven by worries and fears, in work they are alone in the freedom of spontaneity and inspired by the work as creativity, in action they are together with others in political responsibility, and only in love "there is real mutuality, based on needing each other. Being a human also involves needing another human".<sup>4</sup> In love the one needs the other, in plurality, in contrast, one is dependent on many others. "In the case of love, the one seeks a match, in the case of plurality one has to expect the mis-match, the foreign, differences. The fundamental difference exists between the customs that arise from the two-gender constellation or at least are indicated by it, and the inter-dependence that lies in the plurality." She concludes that labor – thought – love are "the three modes of sheer living from which a world can never arise and which are therefore actually opposed to the world, anti-political."<sup>5</sup>

The difference between duality and plurality also becomes plain in speech. The thing which characterises politics as a relationship between active people in their plurality is speaking: "All speech with others is always speech about something shared by both parties", whereas "the speech of lovers is free from this 'about'". Speaking with You is like speaking with oneself. ... The speech of lovers is therefore in itself 'poetic', it is neither reflective *dialogesthai* (speaking with each other, W.H.) nor 'speaking about'. It is as if it

---

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, Munich 2002, p. 459

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 203f.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 493

is only in this way that people become what they appear to be as poets: they do not talk, and they do not speak, they resound."<sup>6</sup>

In Dogville speech has no meaning, neither in the moralising monologues at the town meetings, in the socialising of the residents, or in the blackmailing and humiliation of Grace.

Nowhere in her published work has Arendt written a declaration of love about love comparable with that in her notebooks. When she declares that love does not come from the heart but is divine in origin, a universal power comparable with fire and a bolt of lightning, describing the love that only knows poetic language with poetic imagery: "Love burns, like a bolt of lightning it crosses the between, that is the world-space between the people. This is only possible between two people. If a third comes along, then the space is restored again."<sup>7</sup> Therefore this divine love differs so much from earthly actions, and the absolute worldlessness from the relative world of the interrelations.

Love which burns up the Between - Arendt's bolt of lightning - feeds on itself and is of limited duration. Love could perhaps save Grace, but could hardly save the township.

In contrast, neighbourly love is more durable. The active good has partially determined the political sphere since the rise of Christianity. But neighbourly love is also not political, because in view of the discretion generally involved it has a negative relationship to public actions and to responsibility for the common good. In her book "The Human Condition" Arendt points to the insights of Machiavelli that goodness as a consistent way of life and as the rule of the city by the Church becomes a factor of power which exercises a corrupt and destructive influence.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV. Politics, public friendship and institutions

---

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 214

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 372

What does politics mean for Dogville? The answer is: a necessary alternative to the apolitical liberal world of the 'enlightened self-interest'. Because this self-interest is not limited by law enforcement, public debate, and worries about the common situation, it can turn under external pressure into a sort of demagogic common interest.

There is an obvious hidden dialogue here between the director's criticism of liberalism and the republicanism of Hannah Arendt. Politics, in this context, means three things for Arendt: firstly, the rule of law, second action for the common good and thirdly the paradox of maintaining moral principles by keeping them out of the political sector.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, the rule of law, this means the existence both of specific laws and also an effective separation of powers, with checks and balances to prevent the development of lawlessness and the proliferation of centres of power. In Dogville, law and justice vanish, and the townspeople create something like a dictatorial *volonté générale*, which allows a new rule of interests, passions and demagogy. Similarly, state legality disappears in the political reality and arbitrary local rule as for example in some African states and in parts of democratic states such as Brazil. The rule of law and the separation of powers show their importance here in limiting uncontrolled individual and collective power.

As far as action for the common good is concerned, a precondition for it is the rule of law. But this does not make action superfluous. Indeed, Dogville shows how in a liberal society which is based on the rule of law, the constitutional basis and also the liberality can be undermined and removed if there is no political action. Politics in Dogville would mean that the townspeople see themselves not just as individuals but as citizens, and understand their community not just as a supply unit, but as a *polis*. This citizen would ask Grace about her history, instigate a public discussion about why and how they should help Grace, and finally also consult about how they should solve the conflict between helping Grace and avoiding punishment. Such civil behaviour requires a public-communal discussion, information, the political faculty of judgement and action. In Dogville there

---

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1998, p. 68f.

was no discussion, but arrangement, no information but uncertainty, no judgement and not even prejudice, no action but reaction, and no clarification in public, but only in hiding.

The townspeople of Dogville had not experienced two things which are associated with responsible, public actions: the satisfaction of acting sensibly, and the experience of a public friendship, in which the townspeople know that for all the differences, sympathies and antipathies, they have in common that they appreciate and want to preserve the existence of their civilised town. These are the experiences that Hannah Arendt seeks to revive as what she calls the 'treasure' of a republican tradition and to re-establish under the aspect of inter-personal relationships. Dogville demonstrates that politics and society, or the interest in the common good and the sum of individual interests, are indeed not the same thing.

Turning to the third aspect, the maintenance of moral principles by keeping them out of the political sector, Dogville clearly shows that morals cannot replace politics. Tom's moral appeals cannot withstand external pressure and inner temptation. Even a community with a strict moral code would probably not have protected Grace from humiliation, because such a community would be based on a restriction of freedom, and would generate hypocrisy and corruption. In comparison, a community of active citizens would much sooner be in the position to take the pressure of the individual by means of public regulation of their common affairs and in this way to protect their every-day morality.

It is surprising then, that although these insights about the basis of the civilised *polis* have been familiar since ancient times, and examples of catastrophes like Dogville are also known, in these liberal times this threat to society and the necessity for self-binding still feature so little in public awareness.

However, the film does not offer such a civic alternative. The screenplay of the film differs in two respects from the way which Arendt proposes:

- Firstly, regarding the institutions, that is the structure of power. Lars von Trier pleads more for the strong hand of a Hobbesian state, or at least for the Machiavellian

defence of the republic against inner corruption, as when at the end the gangster – and Grace - act with an iron fist;

- Secondly, the restoration of justice is based more on religious grounds rather than political ones.

This religious aspect is already apparent at the start of the film, when Tom refers to Grace as a 'gift'. Her appearance has the character of a test. In her grace, beauty and vulnerability, she embodies a super-human purity, which prompts comparison with the appearance of Jesus in the world. Both Jesus and Grace were not of this world and nor could they be, because they have found no place in it. In both cases the people failed the test. The conclusions which religion and politics have drawn from this are diametrically opposed. Christianity interpreted the death of Jesus as a sacrifice to redeem humanity, and his life as an example of purity. Politics, on the other hand, cannot redeem people from their sins, but must secure them a place in this world which at the same time can prevent a catastrophe like that in Dogville. That does not require compassion, but political justice.

Hannah Arendt illustrates this difference in her book "On Revolution" by reference to the story of the Grand Inquisitor of Dostoyevsky and of Billy Budd by Herman Melville.<sup>9</sup> Dostoyevsky writes that today nobody would recognise Jesus; Melville describes how the absolutely good man unintentionally becomes a murderer. Arendt uses these examples to highlight the necessary limits which the *polis* must impose, not only on the Evil but also on the Good.

The justice which Grace seeks in destroying Dogville, so as to free the world of evil, does not consist of self-sacrifice, but in vengeful punishment. It appears as the opposite of the death of Jesus and is intended to be political, but it is more like an unpolitical, quasi mystical act of purification, affecting both the guilty and the innocent. For Hannah Arendt, politics does not consist of an arbitrary action of an iron fist, but rather the joint erection of a new Dogville. She used a somewhat similar justification when she agreed to the execution of Eichmann, but one which is free off revenge and mysticism: because Eichmann and his ilk had presumed, writes Arendt at the very end of her book, to want to

live in a world without the Jewish people and various other groups, and that therefore "that no one, namely no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, why you must hang."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Harmondsworth 1990, p. 82

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report On The Banality Of Evil*. New York 1963