**HOW I DECIPHER "DOGVILLE"**

**A personal view by Johannes Scolasticus**

The film "Dogville" by a Dane director Lars von Trier became one of

the most sensational pictures not only in Cannes but also in Moscow this

season. The synopsis that one can find on the site "www.dogville.dk"

tells you about the film in the following way:

The beautiful fugitive Grace (Nicole Kidman) arrives at the isolated township of Dogville on the run from a team of gangsters. With some encouragement from Tom (Paul Bettany) the self-appointed town spokesman, the little community agrees to hide her and in turn,

Grace agrees to work for them. However, when a search sets in,

the people of Dogville demand a better deal in exchange for the risk of

harbouring poor Grace and she learns the hard way that in the town

goodness is relative....



In this article, I would like to expose my impression on "resonance

phenomena" between "Dogville" and Greek tragedies. I shall restrict

myself to the expression "resonance" by the reason to be explained

afterwards. By the term ``resonance'' I don't mean direct borrowing

of Greek motives by von Trier. It is less probable that von Trier read

through Greek tragedies before beginning to write the scenario (though

he filmed a TV production "Medea" in 1988). He speaks rather about

influences from Bertold Brecht (Dreigroschenoper) and Nicolas

Nickleby. He confesses that he was motivated by the idea to make a

film on America without experiences to visit there. I would say that

the motives presented in this film are of quite universal characters

and no *a priori* reason to interpret this or that motive in the context

of Greco-Roman civilization or Judeo-Christianity. None the less,

everybody of us lives in a concrete cultural context and everybody

perceives a film *nolens volens* in the framework of the concrete

context surrounding him. In the aspect of love, for example, any

European (including Russian) behaves and feels in the context of the

above mentioned two foundations while a Chinese or an Indian are

outside of this context. Therefore what we call love may have different

features from what they call love. But once a story mentions love, it

is almost impossible for us to imagine another way of love than ours.

Being formulated by reading of Greek classics and Bible from the childhood, I cannot help seeking for keys to decipher Dogville based on these grounds of my formulation.

In critics, many of journalists wrote about an anti-American mood of the film. I ask, however, where America in this film exposes its substantial features. The national holiday 7th July? Its replacement by any other holiday would not damage the main line of the story. I don't see here not only America but also any appearance of national culture of any kind. This story could happen anywhere in the world. Denmark, France, China or Siberia. Exactly in the same way as the scene of "Malentendu" by A.Camus could take place in any countryside distant from the sea. The inhabitants of Dogville are deprived of any cultural contexts. They are so poor that one could call them almost "naked".

They have no wall to protect themselves from the exterior intervention

(as the set itself lacks walls). They use almost no fruit of civilization of the century except electricity and a truck in possession of Ben. They have no tradition. They have neither material nor spiritual room necessary to keep culture alive in a society. Chuck

does not even cultivate, he simply collects apples from orchard. They

are almost on the level zero of culture that makes them nearer to the

personalities of the Greek tragedies (or any of literature appeared at

dawn of the human history) who lived without railways, electricity,

vehicles, Roman law, Newtonian physics and chemistry of Lavoisier etc.

Their life is nothing but a survival under merciless conditions imposed

on them. In order to survive, one must make engage himself in toilsome labour. In the film appears the theme of labour that has never been seriously coped by Greeks.



Simone Weil (1) pointed out in an article on Homer's Iliad that almost all important questions of life have been set and studied by Greeks except that of labour. The demand of the villagers to duplicate the duty of Grace for a wage twice less than before. Ben's minute calculus on the supplementary charge for a dangerous load. These episodes show a parody on the

principle of the market economy that considered to be *sacrum sacrorum*  not only in the USA but also in any capitalistic country.

They claim that after this principle the exchange between labour and

wage is always made according to a fair treatment (2). It promises

an economically flourishing society balanced by the politically

correctness in contrast to a socialistic regime where only the equal

distribution of poverty is guaranteed. The villagers are captured in

the trap of idolatry of this faith so deep that they don't realize

absurdity of sayings like "We don't want to hurt you Grace. You can of

course go to sleep with your wheel and chain around your neck" (Tomas

Edison the Older). "Grace, don't think that you are free from your duty

to sit with children if I scolded you about Jason" (Vera).



This aspect hints that Dogville is not and cannot be a collage of motives from

Greek tragedies. None the less, I see its resonance with Greek

tragedies as the most powerful side of the film.

Like Oedipus the Tyrant, Grace produces suspense around the uncertainty

of her origin. Neither the audience nor the villagers get an answer

to the question "Who is she?" At the beginning Oedipus was sure that

he is a son of the king of Corinth. Tom presented Grace to

villagers as a fugitive from gangsters. Both Oedipus and Grace

bring welfare to the community in which they play active role while at the beginning they were totally unknown and alien to the aborigines. In the course of the process, Oedipus accused to be the very reason of the epidemic sent by gods that harasses the city of Thebes. The villagers

accuse Grace that she brings danger to Dogville.

Gradually Oedipus' faith in his identity trembles until its entire

crash caused by the recognition that he killed his father and married

his mother. At the end the audience comes to know that Grace is

the daughter of the gangster boss of whom they are afraid of more than

of the police.



Let us remember that the very beginning of her acquaintance with Tom, Grace

acknowledges that she was too arrogant before and now she must redeem

it. In receiving a loaf of bread, she says that she does not deserve

the bread. "I tried to steal a bone from dog. I never stole anything

before." At the end, the Father (gangster boss played by James Caan)

accuses her of arrogance to be too condescending toward those who

accomplished disgustful deeds for which she would not pardon herself if

she herself would have accomplished them. This theme of arrogance/human

dignity is one of central themes of two tragedies written by Sophocles:

Antigone and Oedipus.

Despite these correspondences, there exists certain differences between

von Trier and Sophocles. In Sophocles human arrogance in front of gods

(laws= νόμοι, divine oracles = μαντεία etc.) is in question while

von Trier lets the Father speak of the arrogance of condescendence.

Does your condescendence toward your persecutors mean that you consider

them so inferior to you that from these inferior beings you can even

not expect elementary particle of virtue taken for granted among you?

That is to say, the direction to accuse somebody of arrogance is

reflexive in von Trier while the direction is transitive in Sohopcles,

if one makes use of grammatical terms. Of what kind of arrogance does

Grace accuse herself at the scene of bread? It would be reasonable to

distinguish the arrogance minded by the Father from that minded by

Grace. In Oedipus, Teiresias the prophet accuses the king of

arrogance. The choir sings that the Tyranny begets arrogance= hybris= ὕβρις

(Oedipus Rex line 872).

**ὕβρις φυτεύει τύραννον· ὕβρις, εἰ πολλῶν ὑπερπλησθῇ μάταν,ἃ μὴ ᾽πίκαιρα μηδὲ συμφέροντα,**

In the above mentioned site, von Trier writes in short "Power corrupts" in connexion

with his mention on the power of the USA. Herodotus noticed that

wealth=κόρος gives rise to arrogance=hybris (History 3.80)

while he makes reference to a Persian orator who in contrast to the

tyranny claimed direct government by the people (ἰσοδυναμία).

Thus this idea was quite common to ancient Greeks. We may assume that

the arrogance mentioned by Grace may mean lack of gratitude to the

welfare (or even luxury) which she enjoyed until her escape to

Dogville. As a matter of fact, the words of Grace that she does not

deserve a loaf of bread are almost identical to those of a Zen Buddhist who finds his everyday spiritual progress unsatisfactory. Any monasticism cautions the danger of excessive welfare in daily life either that of Saint Basile of Cappadocia or that of 13th century Japanese

Zen Buddhist Dogen.

The beautiful Rocky mountain (that the audience has to reconstruct by means of his force of imagination) surrounding Dogville reminds us of the Caucasian heights where Prometheus was attached waiting for daily visit of falcon that eagerly devoured his lever refreshed after yesterday's torture. The downhill part where Grace begins to step to ascend to the Rocky resembles to the set of *“Prometheus Bound”* by Aeschylus that we can watch at nowadays in Delphi or in Epidaurus during a modern Greek theatre representation. The circumstance that Grace is obliged to bear chain around her neck after her trial to flee from the village bring her destiny nearer to that of Prometheus.



The almighty Zeus (through his herald Hermes) accuses Prometheus of an excessive self-esteem = authadeia= αὐθαδεία. The Greek word authadeia may also mean self-awareness. According to Aeschylus one shall pay expensive for the self-awareness. Prometheus

accepts his torture as such in throwing disdainful words to Hermes "the

servant." Prometheus even possesses knowledge on the future, on the

destiny of Io, Zeus and himself. He is completely self-aware. If Grace

would have failed to escape from the Father, their relation would

remind us of that between Zeus and Prometheus. The escape of Grace from

the Father hints her protest against his way of life. The Father

accuses Grace of self-esteem: so highly minded to forgive hideous deeds

against her. Both Grace and Prometheus had to pay for their

self-esteem/self-awareness = authadeia. In spite of the external

coincidence of these two self-esteems one notices the difference

between substantial characters of them. By his extraordinary (intellectual)

capability and morally justified position, Prometheus feels himself not

inferior even to Zeus in certain respects. Grace wanted to join the

life of villagers with her conviction of a saint that she can redeem her

arrogance through her suffering and condescendence.

Andromache and other Trojan women become mistress or simply objects of sexual amusement of Achaean conquerors whose nature is less noble than that of Trojans (cf. Andromache -Menelaus, Polyxene-Polymestor). For example in Hecuba by Euripides, Thracian king

Polymestor slaughters Trojan prince Polydoros after having robbed him of gold that he received as a guarantee (or wage) to protect the small prince. In the film, Ben receives 10 dollars to help Grace to escape while he brings her back to Dogville after raping her on the truck. There is a resonance of theme " unjustified trust-sexual misuse- betrayal".



As for a parallelism with Andromache, I can even point out the presence

of theme of jealousy from the side of wives. Hermione is jealous of

Andromache of whom her husband made a mistress. In breaking down

hysterically ceramic dolls on the floor, Vera expresses her hatred to

Grace whom her husband Chuck violates in the apple orchard. Despise of

Liz to Grace expressed in the words "I expected something more from

you" is akin to the hatred of Hermione because a particle of jealousy

is also present in them. Euripides wrote a tragedy on the theme

"love-passion-dignity-hatred-revenge" named Andromache. Jean Racine wrote Andromaque (1667) that is considered to be a more successful piece on this theme than

the Euripides' after opinion of certain critics. In Euripides, Neoptolemus=the violator is absent on the scene and only his name is pronounced by other protagonists. The prints of unwholesome human nature are mainly laid on Spartan personages: Hermione and her father

Menelaus i.e. the persecutor of Andromache does not violate her. In Racine, Pyrrhus=the violator plays a central role who is cruel but noble and full of royal dignity. In Racine, the persecutor of Andromaque rapes her. Of course this setting is more effective than that of Euripides. In the film Chuck=the violator is nothing but a crude dreamer who demands from Grace mutual comprehension and shared joy of collecting apples in a totally egocentric and egoistic way. The setting of von Trier is a combination of the most effective features of the violator of Euripides and Racine. Chuck is as cruel as Pyrrhus and so vicious as Menelaus.



During the entire film, we listen constantly to a passage from

"Stabat Mater" of Pergolesi. This moving sequentia located at one of

the sublimities of religious music written in the 30's of the 18th

century hints at the sacred character of the suffuring of Grace

with the very naming and words: *Stabat Mater dolorosa juxta curcem lacrimosa dum pendebat Filius* (2).Before the verdicts on the fate of Grace is pronounced in the chapel,

the music begins to sound with its full strength of implied spiritual

force. During her painful and cruel travel amid apples on the truck of

Ben, during her talk about tortures and deeds of Dogville villagers

after having suffered so much from them it begins to sound repeatedly

as if it wants to remind us of something....

Thus we feel temptation to interpret this story as a *Passio*

*Christi*, Passion of Christ. Say, the divine Grace descended to the

earth while people did not understand the meaning of Her presence among

them and tortured Her. Grace talked to the children (named Pandora=wife of the brother of Prometheus, Jason= husband of Medea, Achilles= rival of Menelaus in raping Trojan women etc.) of Chuck and Vera on stoicism.

Simone Weil writes "Expressing in terms of Logos and Pneuma, Saint John

indicates the profound affinity that connects the Greek stoicism (to be

distinguished from that of Cato and Brutus) with the Christianity."

She also writes "The history of Prometheus, it's the very history of

Christ projected in eternity. There lacks only the localization in

time and space."

None the less it is impossible to interpret Dogville as a paraphrase of

the *Passio Christi*. It is explained at least by the fact that

Grace speaks constantly on her arrogance. It is impossible to imagine a

Son of God accusing Himself of arrogance. Grace is a human being and

it is impossible to interpret her as a divine descendant.

Now I can formulate the meaning of the term "resonance."

Anybody who learned physics at the university, college or institute

knows that both the description of electromagnetic field around a cable

with electric flow inside and that of the flow of water without vortex

is assured by a single mathematical model (4). The so

called conformal mapping originated from a very simple rational

function in one complex variable describes two phenomena different by

physical nature. You simply must replace the parameter **E**

used in the first case by parameter, say, **ρ** in the second case

in order to get the solution to the second case from the first.

What I all "resonance" between von Trier and Greek tragedy is of this

character. No one says that the electromagnetism borrowed its rules from the hydrodynamics, none the less both of them are governed (or at least are described) by a single mathematical law coming from another hierarchy (hierarchy of mathematical nature that exists independent of our physical world) than physics itself. In this sense, physics of electromagnetism is in "resonance" with that of hydrodynamics.

There are so much coincidences as differences between motives in

Dogville and in Greek tragedies. I could make several episodes of the

film meaningful on associating them to Greek tragedies. They got

another dimension than if they would have been presented simply without

resonance effect. From the film, I got an image of complicated lace of

motives elaborated in Greek tragedies. But they are rather

archetypical motives that shall be distilled from any

story on the persecution, the power and the human dignity.

The Greek tragedies vivify the perception of Dogville, while the film

sheds a new light on Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as if they

would have narrated a history of America in 1930's.

**Remarks**

(1) Catholic thinker of French-Jewish origin (1909-1943). Sergei S.

Averintsev characterizes her as a "thinker to be discovered in the 21st

century as S.Kierkegaard has only been discovered in the 20th century."

After having got agrégé in philosophy at l'Ecole Normale

Supérieure, she begins to work in a factory as a simple worker. She

wrote an illuminative note "La condition ouvrière" in trying to

capture the metaphysical sense of labour. She pondered on the

"resonance" between Greek tragedy and the New Testament.

In connexion with Dogville, it is worthy to remember "L'Iliade ou le

Poème de la Force." Her premature death in England was caused by

anorexia.

(2) See a witty article by Emmanuel Pasquier "Dogville: Defense et

illustration" available on the site

"www.cinelycee.com." It analyzes the

"economical" aspect of the film. Pasuquier writes on Dogville in the

ocntext of Kant, Hegel and Marx besides that of Judeo-Christianism.

(3) Sorrowful Mother in tear stood by the cross as her Son was hung.

The music to sequentia written in 1735 by a Napolitan composer Gian

Battista Pergolesi a year before his death at the age of 26. The

Latin  *sequentia* itself originates presumably from Franciscan

order in the 13th century. *Sequentia* appeared as a decorative

phrase that followed (the etymology is thus explained) so called

jubilatio (the word Alleluia sung extendedly) with which ends

every canonical hymn text of a prayer.

(4) See for example the Feynman lectures on physics vol. III Chapter 13

"Analogies with static electricity."