



## Power, command and violence in von Trier's *Manderlay*: A political and philosophical analysis of pseudo-democracies

Sara Marino, sara.marino@kcl.ac.uk

Volume 5.2 (2016) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2016.132 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

### Abstract

Alabama, 1933. A caravan of limousines carrying gangsters arrives in Manderlay, a small village where slavery still exists as an institution. Mam (Lauren Bacall) rules the plantation assisted by her foreman Wilhelm (Danny Glover), a slave who believes his people are not ready for the responsibilities of freedom. Driving up to the gates of the plantation, Grace (Bryce Dallas Howard) declares that the slaves must be informed how to enjoy freedom and thus becoming good citizens. Drawing on a textual and visual analysis of *Manderlay*, the article explores how democracy arises from the exercise of violence and power, as well as the inability of Western societies to deal with the dogma of difference.

**Keywords:** von Trier, *Manderlay*, power, violence, democracy, citizenship.



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

# Power, command and violence in von Trier's *Manderlay*: A political and philosophical analysis of pseudo-democracies

Sara Marino

## **Dogville and Manderlay: A manifesto for Western' hypocrisy**

It was their wonder, astonishment, that first led men to philosophize and still leads them.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*

This article originates from a principle that, according to Aristotle, is at the core of human knowledge: the astonishment. But the object of this astonishment, and therefore what is at the center of this article to investigate, is not what we might define an 'happy ending'. Is humans' ability to destroy other human beings; is the omnipresence of human violence and the very concrete eventuality of its triumph, to a point that 'killing others' is probably what we love, and we are addicted to, most (Canetti, 1962; Author, 2009). This article is about violence or, to say it better, it is about the relationship between violence and democracy, violence and citizenship. But it is not just that. It is also about a specific message that controversial Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier spread through his *USA: Land of Opportunity* incomplete trilogy: *Dogville* (first chapter, 2003) and *Manderlay* (second chapter, 2005). Yet *Manderlay* is a complex film that has produced multiple interpretations, together with enthusiastic or merciless critics. Some called it racist and anti-American; others claimed that the film was a cinematic condemnation of Bush's war in Iraq. Yet, as I would argue, *Manderlay* is a lot more, it is a cinema that becomes theatre that becomes literature; but also, more importantly, it is a public statement of how Western morality is ideologically contaminated by hierarchies of power and mechanisms of social exclusion. *Manderlay* is, first and foremost, a reflection upon abstract

notions of humanity, a critique of American liberal politics, a public condemnation of conservative racial politics. In this respect, it works as a mirror of past and present attempts to colonize parts of the world that Western societies described as uncivilized, in the name of human rights and using violence as a mean of communication.

*Manderlay* explores, as we will see, the development of an individual's moral idea in a democratic system of power. In some respects, *Dogville* already launched this long run towards the commercialization of human rights. Grace, the female protagonist, embodied this political theology since the very beginning of von Trier's manifesto. Acting *from below*, as a prey caught in a liminal status (Fitzpatrick and Tuitt, 2004), Grace explored the various forms of unconditional dedication to others by offering herself to the citizens of *Dogville*, without asking for nothing in return. As Tom (Paul Bettany), a young self-appointed intellectual has hoped since he met Grace for the very first time, she had to unravel humans' capacity to embrace otherness and sustain the town's morale re-armament (Author, 2013). 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 is to provide a tangible illustration, meaning the accommodation of a fugitive. In *Manderlay*, Grace acts *from above*: she becomes a lawgiver, she controls the law, and she has the power to decide for the life of the inhabitants. And yet, both experiments equally and miserably fail. At *Dogville*, Grace must face the truth: people are not naturally good, as she wanted to demonstrate to her father, but intrinsically merciless and depraved. She feels that, on her body and soul: during her stay she has been continuously raped and abused, she has been treated like an animal, forced to work for less money and more hours, with no voice or right to claim her needs. An escalation of violence that reached the *grand finale* when Grace was forced to walk in chains and to announce herself through the sound of a bell, attached to her neck after

an attempt to escape (Author, 2013).

At *Manderlay*, it is democracy that ultimately fails. The moral lessons, through which Grace should have taught the former slaves how to become good citizens and enjoy freedom, do not teach anything; on the contrary, they worsen what was, we should admit, a rather stable situation. We should have not expected anything different, after all. If it is true, as we will see, that Grace teaches the Afro-American slaves the rudiments of democracy, we must not forget that she does so while escorted by a bunch of armed gangsters. In other words, what Grace does is to replace what she considers an unacceptable violence with a more 'legitimized' violence, as it were; she exercises the right to impose some sort of 'justice' from a position of power and white-race superiority - the same she believes she is fighting against. Moreover, nobody has elected her; she did not even ask the slaves what they wanted and what their opinion was. Dogville's lesson has not been learned: physical and morale slavery is hard to eradicate.

This brief introduction is to say that, by looking at how Grace establishes her definition of democratic power over people that did not ask for it, I aim to demonstrate that at the bottom of the foundation of every social order lies a more or less visible amount of violence, which supports the exercise of power and the definition of law.

The current analysis is set within a very specific political and philosophical framework that calls into question René Girard's philosophy of power and Arnold Gehlen's theory of human nature as deficient and intrinsically sick, as main references. Inspired by the idea that democracy does not mean 'government by the people', as its traditional definition says, but it is instead a form of legitimate coercion that hides traces of primitive violence, this article will also take into consideration examples from political theology and critiques of liberalism in order to spoil one of the main messages that *Manderlay* conveys: that democracy, ultimately,

reveals aspects of an enlightened dictatorship, and that Western societies are nurturing this magnificent fabrication under the name of human rights.

According to Girard, human beings are generated in violence, and violence is the first symbolic language with which individuals define themselves and their relation with nature and others human beings (Girard, 1987). *Dogville* and *Manderlay* should therefore be seen as social and moral experiments that reflect humans' social and cultural conditions: ultimately, the secret humans' addiction to violence and power. *Manderlay* is all about violence: as spectators, we see violence since the very first scene, when a woman cries for help as a black man is about to be whipped inside the plantation. We see violence when we realize that slavery still exists - something we cannot tolerate as citizens living in a free world; we see violence when things start going wrong, throughout the storm, the harvest, the famine. It is constantly, repeatedly, a circle of violence and counter-violence that never stopped since *Dogville* was shut down in an apocalyptic destructive force (Author, 2013).

Similarly to the first chapter, even *Manderlay* does not give hope a chance; even the dream of a liberal democratic polity fails, to a point that after the initial adversities seem resolved, the community self-destructs. Set off by the theft of the harvest profits, *Manderlay* reveals its inability to live without rules, in a coercive situation of predesigned roles and responsibilities.

The aim of the article is to understand *Manderlay* as a sociological and analytical experiment that penetrates at the heart of the foundations of our contemporary social institutions. The film exposes, critiques, and offers a valid alternative to the generalized hypocrisy that dresses up present attempts to democratize some parts of the world, in the name of human rights. Democracy is not without consequences, and cannot be taught to people that are not ready for

that. After all, what we call ‘democratic’ is the result of centuries of wars, deprivations, genocides, internal fights, bodies covered in blood and artificial peace (De Simone et al., 2007). We should have learned that social construct is not social consent, and that in order to be free we need someone to decide what is right and what is wrong, who can be accepted and who cannot, who can die without no one claiming for his/her death, and whose bodies are more *relevant*.

In this respect, *Dogville* and *Manderlay* can be said to explore the ways in which moral liberalism and enforced democracy might, in pious forms, lead to exploitation and dictatorial vengeance. In *Dogville* von Trier explored the idea that power and cruelty are mutually reinforcing the interdependence of charity and exploitation, credit and debt, cruelty and revenge. In *Manderlay*, issues of power and command are intertwined with concepts such as citizenship, human rights, and democracy.

Few questions remain to be answered. Is *Manderlay* the symbol of something we are still doing today? Are we similar to Grace’s noxious stubbornness in our attempts to teach the new generations how to become good citizens in a free world? How to claim for legitimate rights? How to become morally exemplary? Perhaps democracy is not the best political system in a free society; perhaps democracy must be supported by the use of guns in order to be effective. This article does not intend to reach a conclusive understanding of the issues here under investigation; instead, it raises some kind of awareness and reflection over the commodification of the cinematic medium.

### **Manderlay: a brief history**

Before entering the political analysis of *Manderlay* and its social manifesto, I will briefly introduce the storyline of the place and its inhabitants. Following *Dogville*, von Trier

replicates the same architectural and temporal sequences that characterized the first chapter as a unique in cinematic productions. Once again, the external voice-over (John Hurt) speaks to us while leading the spectator in a theatrical *mise-en-scène*. His voice -strong, masculine, mid-Atlantic, and authoritative- stands against the sterility of the plantation set. When shot from above, we recognize the attention to few minimalist details: a two-dimensional map come alive, with cars crossing thick black borders and bodies congregating in textually demarcated spaces. Inside *Manderlay*, there are only the most minimal props on the stage: Mam's bed, the pillars representing the plantation house, a few pieces of wood representing the slave cabins; and one or two other props. The locations are designated with labels that are written on the floor in white lettering. Even the space tells us that a scientific experiment is on set; in this respect, it is not just the Brechtian configuration of space that makes this place a theatre, but also the fact that everything happens in a circumscribed space: it is a cancellation of the world as we are used to see (Koutsourakis, 2013).

In this second chapter of the USA trilogy, set in 1933 Alabama, Grace (Bryce Dallas-Howard) is travelling with her father and a group of gangsters when suddenly a woman appears crying for help, as one of the inhabitant is about to be whipped for having stolen a bottle of wine. Once again contradicting the orders of her father, who argues that what is happening is 'a local matter' that they should respect, Grace enters the plantation and realises that slavery still exists, roughly 70 years after the American Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, and that a community of African-Americans is living under the control of white owners. Grace informs the slaves that they are free by law and, with the help of a few of her father's gangsters, takes up residence at the plantation to facilitate the transition to freedom.

There is no question, any discussion or mutual agreement: *Manderlay* is 'a moral

obligation' that has to be *fixed* as rapidly as possible, hopefully in the smoothest and effective way. Shortly after Grace's father and the remaining gangsters depart, Mam, the master of the house, dies, but not before asking Grace to burn a notebook containing the Law, a code of conduct for the plantation and all its inhabitants, both free and slave. The whole *Manderlay* system is based on a psychological division of the slaves, a bondage that speaks the language of psychology: each variety has its own description, which accounts for different amounts of food and different levels of privileges. The slaves are categorized as follows: the proud nigger, the talking nigger, the weeping nigger, the hitting nigger, the clowning nigger, the loser nigger and finally the pleasing nigger -the most dangerous figure, 'also known as a chameleon, a person of the kind who can transform himself into the type the beholder would like to see' (John Hurt). Mam's law decides on everything that happens within the village, thus providing a time/place for the every day's living. Among these rules, it is stated that the slaves must line up in a particular part of the plantation each day because that is the only part of the plantation that has shade during the hottest part of the day; paper money is prohibited so it is not gambled away by the slaves, and it is also prohibited to cut down the trees of the Old Lady's Garden, because they block the wind from covering crops with dust. Grace refuses to burn the law, as she wants to make the slaves aware of the principles contained in it. Before revealing it these rules though, Grace orders her lawyer to draw up contracts for all the inhabitants, institutionalizing a communistic form of cooperative living in which the former employers now work as slaves and the blacks collectively own the plantation and its crops.

Socialism enters the plantation: there will not be salaried workers, but the land will be owned in a communal ownership. A dream in theory, the redefinition of roles and responsibilities in fact complicates the situation even more. Grace expects 'the bourgeoning



change of character that freedom ought to bring', but she sees the former slaves carrying on as they had before, regardless of who holds the power. Nevertheless, Grace carries on with her mission: unlike the character we met in *Dogville*, a prey begging for the gift of acceptance, this Grace is an unfiltered idealist: she is strong-willed, smart, transparent, talkative, and a believer (Author, 2013). Ultimately though, she must accept that the shift towards democracy is not as easy as expected. The slaves fail to conform to the democratic social norms; in one word, the empowerment fails when she disempowers the community. Without no rules, without no one telling them what to eat, at what time, in which order, the slaves loose themselves, to a point that Timothy -the pleasing nigger Grace fells is love with- gambles the community's profits from the harvest. The experiment fails completely. First, the community turns in on itself, with its newly 'liberated' members using the democratic processes just established to their own advantage and in inappropriate ways (voting on when a jokester can laugh at his own jokes or sentencing Wilma to death, accused of stealing food). Finally, the community self-destructs. Set off by the theft of the harvest profits, *Manderlay* goes up in flames. Finally admitting her failure, Grace contacts her father and attempts to leave the plantation only to be stopped by the plantation's blacks. At this point it is revealed that Mam's Law was not conceived by Mam or any of the other whites, but instead by Wilhelm, the community's eldest member, as a means of maintaining the status quo after the abolition of slavery, protecting the blacks from a hostile outside world. As this revelation was not enough, in the film's last sequences the community asks Grace to be the new Mam, and therefore to punish Timothy for his 'anti-democratic' behaviour. She refuses, at first, but a final lesson has to be given. She punishes Timothy, who shouts back to Grace: 'Aren't you forgetting something? You made us!' The failure is complete, Grace misses the appointment with her father, who left the plantation after seeing the daughter whipping Timothy and thus re-

stabilizing the order. Liberalism has failed. Empowerment did not end oppression; it merely transfigured oppression.

### **Democracy is governed by power and every form of power is ruled by violence**

The idea that violence is antithetical to democratic principles is not just seductive; it is also very critical. Recent attempts to untangle the relationship between violence and democracy have generally assumed the contours of a link between violence, security, and democracy. After all, the increased degree of closeness between war and democracy, and their potential symbiosis, has recently been brought to life by the fact that virtually all democracies are today caught in the threads of a permanent war against ‘terror’ (Keane, 2010). In the name of ‘democracy protection’ and ‘democracy promotion’, armies have been sent to foreign countries, more than a few democratic institutions have been militarised, and all over the world a permanent obsession towards security is washing out dogmas of stability and certainty. Having said that, the topic I am here investigating is not merely a question of security and safety; on the contrary, it deals with certain embodied characteristics of political power, namely violence, coercion, and destructive force. Each of these aspects will be analysed in the following pages.

When she enters *Manderlay*, Grace is confronted with oppression: a community of black people is living in slavery, and a man is about to be whipped. She decides that a new democratic system has to be introduced, which would guarantee worth and dignity to every single member of the community, despite their past. ‘They can now enjoy the same freedoms as any other citizen of this country’, Grace proudly announces. She creates a forum for democratic participation in the governance of the community, complete with a system for

voting. In Grace's plans, the transition towards democracy should have been natural and straightforward, as a gift we intrinsically possess as human beings.

Following this perspective, the link between human condition and democracy as a system of power have been investigated, amongst others, by Arnold Gehlen, a conservative German anthropologist whose works have recently become important in the debate about the relationship between the abstract qualities of humans and their environment. According to this author, one of the most fundamental characteristics that human beings possess is the uncertainty of instinctual life, the under-determinedness of human drives and the unpredictability of human behaviour. Such uncertainty and indeterminacy have been responsible, in Gehlen's theory, for an intrinsically-typically human' need for institutions and patterns of behaviour. Humans, he goes on, are 'deficient being' unprepared by their biology to survival, as the animals are by virtue of their nature: they owe their existence to institutions and cultural/moral norms that sustain them, *supra institutions* capable of making decisions, controlling the world, establishing what to do and how to behave.

Having said that, I would like to stretch this theory a bit further, and include René Girard's theory of political power, which seems to constitute a follow-up of Gehlen's theory. According to the French philosopher, institutions emerged as a result of the first communal hunting, during the dividing-up of flesh and bones between the primates and with the first, rudimentary, differentiation of roles -and leadership- within the group.

A more detailed analysis is here needed, as we are moving in a rather complicated scenario. We are not talking about democratic power yet, but -and more specifically- about what power means and how it became such a fundamental, historical, milestone. According to Girard, the establishment of power has emerged as crucial in stopping a never-ending circle of

violence among early humans, who were primarily hunters. In Girard's words, during the early stages of human evolution, hominids copied one another's violence in a frenzy of retaliation and mimicry that can best be described as the violence of all against all. At some point, instead of being directed at everyone in general (animals and other human beings) and no one in particular, this violence became focused on a specific, targeted, victim. How was the victim chosen? According to the author, the hominids started to persecute those who presented any sign of distinctiveness or weakness outside their group of 'acquaintances'. Girard calls the targeted victim a *scapegoat* (1986), the symbol of the shift from the violence of all against all to the establishment of the first, properly 'human' community, a community of individuals able to organize themselves in order to fight the danger. He goes on arguing that the communal killing of the victim is at the basis of human society and culture, for two main reasons. One the one hand, because the death of the scapegoat gives back a sense of peace and ends the indiscriminate violence. On the other hand, because killing someone else outside the group prevents from killing someone inside the community: the community is safe, defended, protected against any other explosion of violence.

More to the point, how is this violence related to our reflection on democracy? Despite Girard does not specifically mention the word democracy, I argue that his theory intersects the political meaning of democracy at the point of violence. In other words, the scapegoat establishes key in-group/out-group distinctions that maintain the community's structure and cohesion over time against any act of internal crisis, which I believe resembles similar mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion that inform our policy-making strategies nowadays. Drawing from Girard, at the beginning of the political there is not a contract or a mutual agreement but an act of profound violence: a collective murder. Moving further,

societies are not the result of a peaceful agreement between lawyers and politicians, but an unstable and variable consequence of human's instability and intrinsic chaos.

More poignantly, Michael Mann argues that violence is still a measure of the perversion of our modern aspirations to democracy in the nation-state (2005). Democracy, he goes on, means *rule* by the people, and as people 'naturally' contain the germs that Girard identified in the inclination to violence, democracy itself presents a 'dark side' that sups with the devils of political violence. Collier (2009) and Hawksley (2009) argue that democracy 'kills', and that the heart of democracy is essentially violent.

To explore these points more in detail I aim to analyse three specific characteristics that are generally considered as synonyms of power: violence, coercion, and destructive force. At the same time, the visual and textual analysis of *Manderlay* will allow me to locate such characteristics with its narrative and performances. Finally, I intend to draw some conclusions on the connections between von Trier's productions and the present attempts to debate issues of human rights in contemporary democracy.

### **Violence in *Manderlay***

In emphasizing the *contingent* character of violence, this article aims to remind the readers that violence is 'natural', a deep-seated predisposition in every individual as a heritage we acquired from our ancestors. Girard sets aside the several ways in which democracies 'democratize' violence. But what does violence mean? The meaning of the term itself comes to be seen as contestable, as well as flexible enough to be extended to actions that are then described and/or condemned as 'violent', which mean that they violate the norms of democratic civility. And yet, even for Girard the term is quite vague and left undefined: sometimes it

seems to be synonymous with blood, and it is not always clear whether it is only human or even the environment has some part in it. There are times, says Girard, when violence surfaces in terrifying form; other times, violence steps forward as a peacemaker offering the restorations of justice and peace. In its own essence, violence is something humans cannot, and would not dare, to escape. In this respect many observers (Girard is just one among many) conclude that all political orders naturally rest upon violence, whose ‘real’ or ‘ultimate’ purpose is to contain the violent capacities of others (Keane, 2004). Democracies, of course, are no exception. Furthermore, democratizing states that have yet to develop more accountable mechanisms to control official violence are particularly prone to violent responses, especially when facing internal turmoil (Diamond, 1999; Derdzinski, 2006). It might even be said that a distinctive quality of democratic institutions is their subtle efforts to draw a veil over their own use of violence. There are also plenty of cases, says John Keane, where democratic governments hurl violence against some of their own populations. Such violence is often called law and order, the protection of the public interest, or the defense of decency against ‘thugs’ and ‘criminals’, or ‘counter-terrorism’ (Keane, 2004).

*Manderlay* does not escape from this mechanism. Grace is not the only explicitly theological word that plays a central role in *Manderlay*. But, more interestingly, violence is intertwined with another, very specific, characteristic of democracy: Law. This relationship is quite ambivalent: most of the times, the ‘legitimate’ use of these two instruments goes hand in hand with an imposition of violence over specific categories of people. In history, as we are all aware, violence has been often justified by virtue of ‘returning a sense of order and justice’ in places where, supposedly, there was any.

In *Manderlay*, we first encounter the law when the dying Mam asks to speak privately with Grace. She asks Grace to destroy the book, which contains the rules by which the plantation operates. Grace refuses, asserting that any decision should be made in public, in front of the community, because: 'It's my view that anything, no matter what, is best served by being brought out into the open'.

By bringing it out into the open, Grace wants to demystify the Law, destroying its authority -through her own authority. This is a point we should not forget, as it recurs several times during the film. As Grace encounters difficulties guiding the plantation, she considers revealing the book of Law to the community. She is convinced by Wilhelm to wait, as the community might not yet be ready. After the community has gone up in flames, and Grace is departing, she finally delivers the book to the community as a parting 'gift', not before realising that Wilhelm, the elderly former slave who had seemed most sympathetic to Grace and her project, had written the Law, 'for the good of everyone'.

By looking at the relationship between Grace and Law in *Manderlay*, we can begin to understand what the underlying political theological project of the film might involve. Before Grace arrives, the plantation is ruled according to a law that for years have guaranteed a perhaps inconceivable, but indeed 'stable' differentiation of roles and responsibilities. Grace overthrows the Law. She thinks each slave, regardless of his or her category, should receive the same amount of food and the same privileges. The results are catastrophic, and activate a sequence of misfortunes. First, a dust storm destroys most of the crops, which the community had planted because, in violation of the Law, Grace encouraged the community to chop down the trees in the Old Lady's Garden. Second, with no money coming in from the harvest, as the former slaves refuse to do any kind of manual labour, the community suffers an unprecedented

situation of famine. Starving to death, Old Wilma steals food from a dying baby and the entire community -by virtue of democracy- votes on her life. Grace will execute her, as a form of public punishment because the vote has to be respected, despite ‘accommodating’ such violence within a system of compassion, shooting her when she fell asleep.

The exercise of democracy spills absurdities all over the place, generating even more violence and chaos.

Walter Benjamin has explored the linkage between violence and law, allowing us to extract a philosophically sophisticated and politically interesting declination of this relation (1996). According to Benjamin, the law hides law-making violence and vice-versa: when law is suspended, law-making violence is exposed. In some respects, and quoting Girard, that is to say that when a crisis is perceived -whether economical, political or institutional- violence emerges with a more destructive force, claiming for a target to be killed in order to restore the peace as soon as possible. In *Manderlay*, Grace perpetuates a double violence: on the one hand, she supports the transition to democracy within a securitized system, made of gangsters and guns. On the other hand, violence assumes the forms of an imposition over people who did not ask for it. This is not freedom; it is just a different law, which perpetuates the same mechanisms of violence and counter-violence. The paradox becomes even clearer when Wilhelm argues that under the conditions at *Manderlay*, his people will meet a better life by consenting to the old social structures; after all, that is the system they were used to, something they can understand, something that worked out in the past, and quite successfully. Beside, the fact that armed gangsters must enforce the redistribution of social roles on one piece of property with guns and a written declaration is not just also paradoxical, it is also pointless.



Again, it does not end oppression, it transfigures it, with different words and methods, but with the exact purposes: establishing an order.

Moreover, it has to be stressed that violence is not only functional, it is also aesthetical: it affects the bodies of *individuals* with asymmetric force and racial twists. This is evident when Grace, in order to punish Mam's family members for their discriminations, orders to get their faces painted in brown. Is this really necessary? Is it functional for the transition to freedom? We should question how our contemporary attempts to embrace otherness through public manifestations of tolerance or declarations of acceptance 'despite the color of your skin' or 'despite where are you coming from' are truly genuine and, more importantly, effective for the people involved.

### **Coercion and destructive force**

A democratic order protected and supported by institutions implies the existence of speaking and peacefully interacting subjects; this is simply not happening at *Manderlay*. There is no cooperation, and even when little steps towards mutuality are on their way, they are destined to fail, such as when, after the dust storm ruins most of the cotton, and the community works harder in order to reap the harvest, all the profits are gambled by Timothy. Even in this occasion democracy cannot really help: while Grace has sex with Timothy, chaos in fact ensues: the workers discover the money raised from the cotton harvest has disappeared and kill a man who they wrongly believe to have stolen it (the scapegoat). Grace then discovers that it was Timothy who stole the money, and that some of the cotton workers themselves colluded in the continuation of slavery at *Manderlay*. In some respects, this is exactly what Girard said about the replication of violence: when a crisis is perceived and the control is lost, violence

emerges in even bitterer rivulets, with the purposed of defending the community from the threat. Even in *Manderlay*, when control over the plantation is lost, and also the innocents, such as little Claire -who dies because there is not enough food to eat-, fall as a consequence of a new order, than the first, and most reasonable, reaction is to recover a previous *status quo*, the slavery in this case.

Coercion and force are often used as synonyms of power. Hans Morgenthau offers a definition that is representative of the existing literature in the field: ‘Power may comprise anything that establishes and maintains the control of man over man. Thus power covers all social relationships, which serve that end, from physical violence to the most subtle psychological ties by which one mind controls another’ (1985:9).

In *Manderlay* coercion and force are not, eminently, physical; in their own essence, these two elements are expressed in the authoritarian imposition of democracy and morality: it is the power of authority, a legitimate form of violence that remains in Grace’s hands until the very end of the film. Backed by the gangsters, Grace plays the Leviathan, a form of vertical force, ‘one-to-many’. This is, ultimately, what social order is all about, where it comes from and how it survives.

As a Leviathan, Grace ‘boils down diffused violence into that bundle of concentrated violence that is the State. Whereas interpersonal violence is horizontal and one-on-one, the State introduces a new monotheist type of violence, which is vertical’ (Brighenti and Castelli, 2008:5). Authority is not less violent than visible violence: lying underneath the umbrella of democracy, this declination of power keep the slaves in a state of dangerous coercion, a state that they cannot grasp or understand, resulting in Timothy saying to Grace ‘you made us’. After all, Grace’s portrayal as the beholder of a destructive force is, I would say, perhaps the most important *fil*

*rouge* in von Trier's trilogy, both depending on Grace's personal status, as daughter of a gangster, and as a result of the violence she was subjected to, especially in *Dogville*. In this first chapter, Grace destroys the community, returning back the violence with no mercy, no hesitation, and no chances for a final redemption. The same happens in *Manderlay*, with Grace whipping Timothy (the same slave who was being whipped at the beginning of the film) with fury and anger.

What a relief, at the end. When Grace denudes herself from the tiring implications of teaching morality and she finally becomes a public executioner, then she seems to find back the comfort of the routine. An ambivalent, inconvenient comfort, being violent just because of an emotional burst of hate, or lust, just like anybody else. It is not clear what will happen to Grace at the end of the film, perhaps she had to run away because of the painful awareness that she, as the gangsters, is addicted to violence. Grace, despite the Christian implications hidden in her name, is made of violence, and no lesson of morality, no transition to freedom could have changed that. At the same time, it is not clear what will happen to the remaining former slaves, who seem to have internalized some democratic values (voting for example), but who remain tied to the old customs of Manderlay (Lloyd, 2011). At the very end, von Trier gives the audience the opportunity to decide the finale, and no wonder if any of us would decide, ultimately, that it is probably better to leave the things as they are, without worrying too much about the future of such a small, and probably insignificant, community.

### **Inconvenient implications**

There is not such community in the world as *Manderlay*, where objects are painted on the floor and characters move as puppet in a theatre of absurd. And yet, every society is like

*Manderlay*, replicating its nature and emphasizing its purposes. It is not easy to deal with the fact that democracy is made of violence: as the slaves in *Manderlay*, we are not ready to tolerate such a ‘primitive’ assumption that goes against the supposed civilization of our structures of power. What is the final lesson we can learn from *Manderlay*? Uninterested in playing the role of a policymaker, von Trier leaves the audiences to argue about the problem and, hopefully, to think about new solutions. The ultimate merit of the film is, therefore, to shock the audience and, through this shock, to force us to reflect upon some very popular concept at this time: humanity, human rights, citizenship, and liberalism.

Let’s ask ourselves then. Is there such a thing as ‘human rights’? We should be honest with ourselves, and this honesty should come, at first, by avoiding any kind of morality that we do not, as the slaves, understand. Caught in our morality while watching *Manderlay*, we immediately emphasize with Grace and her mission to bring freedom through democracy; first of all, because slavery is not good, not right, and because this is what we have been told to say. But we should really look beyond the plantation, and question the truthfulness of concepts such as humanity. After all, in the most recent campaigns against illegal immigration and for the securisation of Western borders, we can immediately recognize that there are categories of individuals that are not considered as part of our notion of humanity. Therefore, this notion is not as comprehensive as our morality would like it to be. How could it be? For centuries our political systems, democratic as well as anti-democratic, have been supported over mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that, more or less legitimately, have taught us who to consider part of *Us* and who to consider *Them*. It always happened and it will always be; this differentiation between who can cross the border and who cannot dare to is embodied in our social and political institutions.

Beside, the growing consensus that human rights are universal has been fiercely opposed by critics and scholars in different disciplines. Beyond the more general, philosophical questions of whether anything in our multicultural world is truly universal, the issue of whether human rights is an essentially Western concept is ignoring the very cultural, economic, and political differences in other parts of the world, which cannot simply be dismissed. The philosophical objection asserts that nothing can be universal, and that all rights and values are defined and limited by cultural perceptions (see Tharoor, 1999/2000). If there is no universal culture, then the idea of human rights becomes an unconvincing construct.

Needless to say, the complexities and multiple nuances that this debate is bringing to the fore cannot be resolved only through the analysis of a cinematic text, and neither it was the purpose of this article of doing so. Nevertheless, *Manderlay* invites us to reflect on humanity by considering not simply the issue of rights and their unequal distribution, but -first and foremost- he invites us to reflect upon the idea of human morality, and its fallacy. There is no morality in the attempt to end slavery with a democratic regime that reveals traces of an enlightened dictatorship. There is no morality in the imposition of power, whether for ‘democratic’ or anti-democratic purposes. In itself, the fairytale of liberalism, both socially and economically, does not end oppression; it simply replaces one set of values with another while the masses remain subordinated to an aristocratic, white, elite.

This new set of values is possibly even more dangerous than slavery, because it advances under the label of universalism, providing a ‘tolerant’ and convenient umbrella for all points of view. It is a transformation, not a suppression of conflict, a performance of goodwill that von Trier ridicules through the theatrical *mise-en-scène* and the catastrophic consequences of Grace’s wrong decisions.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, von Trier was charged with a lacking humanism and an anti-humanistic perspective. It has been said that the liberal, humanitarian response of *Dogville* is a manifestation of extended grace, an apparent unconditional goodness that clashes against the final, apocalyptic end. But this perspective is not anti-humanist; on the contrary, it is a trope that a liberal democratic regime would cling to in order to wrest some sort of moral illustration from the film's ending. Now that power has been freed from its capture in Grace's old and outdated signifying chain, she can re-consider its use/value to instigate change and ultimately justice. If this is a lack of humanism, than we should interrogate ourselves, and all the historical and present attempts to make the (third) world a better place with the use of diplomatic and no-diplomatic means. If the parable of *Dogville* is about signifying Grace, then *Manderlay* could be said to be about how Grace learns a bitter lesson by confusing her new power (the power *from above*) with a substitute for the violence she experienced in the previous chapter: law and authority (Denny, 2007). And yet, as we said, even this fairytale failed to put to sleep the irony. The old law, Mam's law, is never really overcome. Grace herself has to constantly go back to the book to learn things she did not know about the plantation. The old law is the dirty secret in every new order, a secret that must not be unveiled. After all, as Wilhelm argues, 'the slaves are not ready to live in freedom; and even if they were, the rest of American society is not ready to receive them'. Are we?

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Author. *L'ebbrezza del potere. Vittime e persecutori*. Verona: Ombre Corte, 2009.

Author. "The Role Of The Refugee And The Impact Of Fragmented Identities In Diasporic Filmmakers. A Review Of *Dogville* By Lars von Trier." *CineJ Cinema Journal* 3, no. 1 (2013): 107-125.

Benjamin, Walter. "Critique of Violence." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Brighenti, Andrea Mubi, and Alessandro Castelli. "Foundations: Dogville to Manderlay." In *La violenza allo specchio*, edited by Pierpaolo Antonello. Massa: Transeuropa, 2009.

Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and power*. New York: Seabury Press, 1962.

Clastres, Pierre. *Society Against the State. Essays in Political Anthropology*. New York: Zone Books, 1989.

Collier, Paul. *Wars, Guns, and Votes*. London and New York: Harper Collins, 2009.

De Simone, Antonio, Accarino, Bruno, and Luigi Alfieri. *Diritto, giustizia e logiche del dominio*, Perugia: Morlacchi, 2007.

Denny, David. "Signifying Grace: a reading of Lars Von Trier's Dogville." *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1, no. 3 (2007).

Derdzinski, Joseph. "Rapid Urban Settlement, Violence, and the Democratizing State: Toward an Understanding?" USAF Institute for National Security Studies Research Report Series (2007) <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a540748.pdf>

Diamond, Larry. *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Fitzpatrick, Peter, and Patricia Tuitt. *Critical Beings: Law, Nation and the Global Subject*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

Gehlen, Arnold. *Man, his nature and place in the world*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Girard, René. *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Girard, René. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of The World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.

Harsin, Jayson. "Von Trier's Brechtian Gamble: On Manderlay." *Bright Lights Film Journal* 51 (2006) <http://brightslights.com/51/manderlay.htm>

Hawksley, Humphrey. *Democracy Kills*. London: Macmillan, 2009.

Keane, John. *Violence and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Keane, John. "Does Democracy Have a Violent Heart?" In *War, Democracy and Culture in Classical Athens*, edited by David Pritchard, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Koutsourakis, Angelos. *Politics as Form in Lars von Trier: A Post-Brechtian Reading*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Levi, Primo. *The drowned and the saved*. New York: Summit Books, 1988.

Lloyd, Vincent. *The Problem with Grace: Reconfiguring Political Theology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.

Mann, Michael. *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.

Muller, Jerry. *Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought*. Princeton University Press, 1997.

Scott, Kyle. "A Girardian Critique of the Liberal Democratic Peace Theory." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 15, no. 18 (2008): 45-62.

Tharoor, Shashi. "Are Human Rights Universal?" *World Policy Journal* 16, no. 4 (1999/2000):1-6.