Lars von Trier’s Gift

Originating in diverse religious thought, the problematic of “gift” has for centuries been present in art as well as in philosophical discourse. Most recently the question of gift was taken up by the continental philosopher Jacques Derrida in his book *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*. Basing his argument on the century old work by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, Derrida went on to stress the “poisonous” nature of any “gift-giving” (playing on the German word “Gift” which means poison). Put differently, this entails that any giving of a gift is never simply an act of generosity but always carries an element of economic exchange within itself. There is no such thing as an altruistic gift to Derrida. When we give or donate something the receiver feels indebted to give something back in return. What is more, we automatically expect re-payment, at least in form of symbolic return such as gratitude, respect, being acknowledged as the donor and thus as some kind of a beneficiary sovereign.

Therefore, it is no mere chance that the theme of “gift-giving” permeates the work of our most important artists today, especially those who deal with both philosophical and theological aspects of human condition. This is true for any kind of artistic expression.

One of the central figures in modern filmmaking currently preoccupied with the problematic of “gift” is the Danish director and screenwriter Lars Von Trier. His production boasts with several thematic trilogies: *Europa, Golden Heart, The Kingdom* (unfinished), and the planned *USA – Land of Opportunities* trilogy of which the first two films have been released so far, *Dogville* (2003) and *Manderlay* (2005). Von Trier is known for his principal “rock in the shoe” premise of experimental
filmmaking. He was one of the founders of the school of filmmaking called Dogme 95, and a production company Zentropa, independent of the Danish state.

Von Trier’s filmography has always borne elements of gift-giving problematic. This is in particular true of his latest films, which bear more overt theological overtones than his early work. Even though the “gift” is an abstract idea and an umbrella term for assorted types of phenomena, Von Trier narrows his focus to one particular gift, in fact the gift of freedom, independence or rather individual sovereignty.

One can begin with his major feature, *Breaking the Waves* (1996), which broadened his reputation as an innovative, important and groundbreaking artist. Already in this film, the religious aspect of grace that is central to his latest production has started to swell up. Young, pious Bess marries Jan, an oilrig worker. She prays that he return to land, which he does, yet due to a horrible accident that leaves Jan crippled. This “gift” of retrieved husband bears a bitter aftertaste. It is as if Bess is being punished, or made give something in return for her husband.

Feeling guilt and obligation towards her husband, Bess gives in to his absurd request that she have intercourse with other men and tell him about the experience. One could claim that the bizarreness of Jan’s demand is a disguise of his gift to her, a secret gift of freedom from a life under social constraints that oblige her to tend a physically handicapped husband, as much as the constraints of her deep love to him. However, given Derridean analysis, if Bess does not see this as a gift, is it really a gift. If she cannot understand Jan’s demands as a means of setting her free, is she really free? Not even the objective eye of an outsider can focus on only one option. In a sense, Bess is being liberated in this uncanny psychological process staged by her depressed husband. Furthermore, she is also mercilessly manipulated by Jan’s
pragmatic thinking, and his inability to receive her gift of love because he can never even hope to return it. Does his goal justify the means? Is his gift an act of his egotism or pure generosity? Does Bess have to go through an ordeal, or even a strange kind of purgatory to find out she has always already been free as an individual, religious or not? Von Trier leaves us with no easy answers. There are no clear dichotomies between good and evil, gift and sheer exchange. As Thomas Beltzer suggested, Von Trier’s “work cannot be reduced to anyone’s message, not even his own.” Von Trier cannot be simplistically classified as a Christian zealot on the basis of his professed Catholic sentimentality. His films have that rare ability to implode in themselves and thus prevent closure, obstruct our ability to decide upon the only correct interpretation.

Waiting for the final chapter in the USA trilogy, we can so far conclude that the nature of gift is the main theme of Dogville and Manderlay, apart from the overarching exploration of the American class systems. In fact, it seems that the sociological as well as phenomenological nature of “gift-giving” is fundamental in any analysis of class, racism, systems of rule, statehood, then also the question of sovereignty of individual, family, community, and finally state.

In Dogville, the woman called Grace is “bestowed” like God’s gift upon a small community. She is welcomed and sheltered as a fugitive yet eventually nearly every citizen takes advantage of her, and eventually rapes her. In the end, her mighty father arrives and offers Grace a possibility to punish the entire community because they mistreated her, because they did not pay enough respect to the gift of Grace/grace.

Emblematically, this brings into question the purity of the Christian idea of bountiful grace of God. In other words, one could almost think that Von Trier only
pushes the old question of hell. Yet still, why are there injustices? Do we deserve hell, be it in afterlife or on Earth, because we mistreat the gifts of God, because we use them and perhaps do that inappropriately? Maybe we are ungrateful for the gifts and therefore ought to be punished like the inhabitants of Dogville. Still, if gifts, be they divine or mundane, are acts of generosity why the demand at return, why insist on punishment in the closing act? In an allegorical sense, why is Grace not turning the other cheek but strikes back with a vengeance? Again it seems impossible to settle on only one simple alternative.

Moving onto Manderlay, Von Trier stays with his protagonist Grace, this time plunging her into a small town seventy years behind the rest of the U.S. in terms of human rights, civil rights movement, integration of slaves, etc. Once again, Grace perceives herself as a gift to this Godforsaken place. She sees all the errors of the past, all the crimes of white population still lingering with this group of black slaves. In Grace’s own simile they are like “caged birds”. Not even after the death of their owner do they dare leave the farm and go outside the steal gates.

In a bout of empathy, Grace rebels against her “what-is-in-there-for-me” father, a cruel gangster who only believes in immediate profit and cannot care less about mercy and gifts. Grace decides to bring enlightenment, freedom and democracy to the “negroes” as well as the whites, all of them mummified in another era. Upon freeing them all from their bonds, Grace is offered thanks. She is pleased with her inceptive contribution, yet emphasises that they do not need express gratefulness for what is so fundamentally human: freedom. Freedom is not hers to give. It has already been given to each and every one them upon birth. It ought to be considered the ultimate gift of God, of which no man can bereave any other. Still, Grace goes on to believe that she is a kind of saviour and a teacher who takes action into her hands: she
liberates the black community from slavery and re-educates the bigoted white working-crew at the farm.

As he does with *Dogville*, Von Trier ends *Manderlay* rather appropriately with a series of photographs, this time from American history of slavery and civil rights movement. In fact, the last picture in this slide show is that of the giant Abraham Lincoln statue in white marble being cleaned by an African American. One cannot but wonder whether there could be a statue of Martin Luther King next to Lincoln’s, perhaps in black marble.

How far have we really come since Lincoln, this reformer of America? This question is the central theme of the film. It is evoked through every element of the narrative and overemphasised by the rather condescending voiceover (though beautifully read by John Hurt). Time and again, Von Trier reminds us that we have forgotten this and he slips it like a rock into our too comfortable shoe. Perhaps we rather conveniently think there should be no prejudices in the modern world and oftentimes choose to pass on with our eyes closed.

Furthermore, it is the problem of “gift” that lies underneath everything, especially any discussion of injustice. As we pinpointed earlier, the gift of freedom is to Grace the most essential and unquestionable part of being-human, which is always the case even when it appears differently. There is no doubt that slavery, torture, and social injustices are old evils that keep scourging the world, today certainly as much as ever. But morally speaking, what exactly should we do about that? We have to act, as Grace shouts at her father, we have to free people, spread democracy, even when it means taking to doubtful measures. The connection to the American enterprise in Iraq and the idea of pre-emptive warfare is clear.
When we act we mean to give a gift. Grace claims freedom is natural, and that she as a white woman “made” the black people what they are. Therefore, it is her responsibility to return what “her” people bereaved them of. In other words, she feels guilty, like the two gentlemen from Baudelaire’s story *Counterfeit Money* (used by Derrida) who feel indebted to give alms to the anonymous beggar they encounter on the street. Somehow the logic of social equality forces these men and Grace to realise that they have profited from the unfortunate lot, and in a just society they need to give back. The alms giving is originally a religious institution, yet the basic philosophy behind it has become a fundamental element of socialism as well, hence we have institutionalised forms of donation at the level of state.

In the end of *Manderlay*, nearly the same scenario from *Dogville* repeats itself. Grace finds out she has been deceived, but what is more she does not understand that she has all along had prejudices against black people herself, that she has all along believed in the seven categories of “negroes” recorded in the red “Bible” of the deceased slave-owner.

It is, however, true that from the very beginning Grace has despised the red notebook as an example of sheer evil, a blueprint of slavery and oppression. Yet, she has nevertheless abided by its prescriptions when reorganising the community and leading them into freedom and democracy. In the end she thinks her crucial error lies in misclassifying one man under the wrong category.

The moment Grace believes she has accomplished her plans and paid the African Americans back more than they bargained for, she feels ready to leave and let the community lead their own lives in democracy she has taught them.

However, the former slaves reveal to her that it was not the old slave owner who wrote the red book of rules and categories, but one of them. Moreover, most of
the others were aligned with him as well. Suddenly, and to Grace’s immense chagrin, they want her to reside at the farm and ignore everything she has given them: counterfeit democracy and spurious human rights. They demand that she stay and act as their new white leader, a merciful one yet who understand the evil structure of the world. The world is simply not ready for them, they claim. It is still a jungle too dangerous for birds born in cage, which is a fairly common though subtle use of the wilderness metaphor in the critique of a modern civilised Western world.

Once again, Grace is furious. She takes a whip and lashes one of the men, the “proud negro” from category 7, whom she saved from flogging in the beginning when she first arrived at the farm. Now she does what she could not imagine any civilised human being would do. But she feels justified, they have betrayed her, deceived her, they did not acknowledge her bountiful gift of freedom. In fact, they seem to have resented her gift all along while only pretending they were appreciating her presence and help. In fact, they all seem to classify into category 1, the ambivalent, i.e. face shifting “turncoat negroes”. Therefore, she has to punish them. Only this time her father is not there to give her a hand. He looks at her from a safe distance thinking she has finally understood how things work in the world.

The end has for some reason been the payback time in Von Trier’s latest films. At this point, Von Trier, like Derrida, seems to paint a dismal picture of goodness, grace and gifts in this if not in afterlife. Yet the ambivalent nature of his art remains, and as Beltzer maintains, Von Trier might be working in the heritage of T.S. Eliot, “depicting the wasteland and then transcending it with faith”.

Rather than attempting one final judgment of Von Trier, it might therefore be appropriate to finish with a caution note that the reason for writing this whole article
may be a kind of repayment for the gift of insight, or at least food for thought that Von Trier has given us as over the years.