1. *Dogville* – Eight Steps to Hell. A film review

Dogville[1] is a film that, like all films by Danish director Lars von Trier, leads to controversy. It is a parable in Brechtian style that describes the disintegration of a township's civility. A woman fleeing from gangsters shows up unexpectedly in Dogville and asks for help. She is taken in and treated kindly until doubts about her identity arise and the township is targeted by police and gangsters alike. The righteous citizens gradually give in to the external pressure, humiliating the woman they have sheltered in increasingly shameless ways and finally handing her over to her pursuers.

This agonising demise of civility raises the question of what is going on between the people of this township and between them and the stranger, and what is the role played by morality and politics in a crisis. The film describes this process without giving answers. Such conflicts with strangers and minorities are probably familiar to us. The wars in the former Yugoslavia and the massacres in Rwanda remind us that the 20th century was not only a century of totalitarianism, but also of civil wars and refugees.

Humiliation is one of the expressions of the simmering conflicts, it undermines civilised conditions. Humiliation is generally seen as a social phenomenon involving people's behaviour towards each other, rather than as a political problem. It seems to be political only when it is about national humiliation, i.e. an inter-state or inter-ethnic phenomenon that is not infrequently abused, most recently by the ideological movements in the Arab world. Humiliation in a domestic context, on the other hand, is rarely addressed, either as a component of dictatorial oppression or, more recently, as a rather unintended concomitant of institutions of the democratic welfare state, as in Avishai Margalit's book *The Decent Society*.[2]

Dogville shows us that humiliation in interpersonal relations can be of eminently political significance, much like the more familiar political forms of humiliation (by another nation, by a dictatorship, or by institutions of mass democratic society).

1 Dogville, 2003, Lions Gate Films, written and directed by Lars von Trier, starring Nicole Kidman.

2 Avishai Margalit: *The Decent Society*, Harvard University Press 1998.

The kind of humiliation in Dogville is not about deficiencies in the welfare state, nor can it be confined to a sociological or social psychological consideration. Rather, it gains significance to the extent that members of the community respond to a political challenge individually and egoistically, but not politically. Humiliation here becomes a direct challenge to politics. One of the strengths of this film is that it also addresses another interpersonal relationship that could have prevented the moral decay of the community, namely love.

In the following, I will first give a synopsis of the film, secondly show the role of humiliation in the erosion of civilised conditions, then ask about the significance of love in preventing this erosion process, and then finally discuss the failure of political action in the face of the crisis depicted in this film. Precisely because this film shows us the development of a catastrophe in a quasi ideal-typical way, Hannah Arendt's political-philosophical remarks on love, friendship and politics seem like an indirect reaction to it, like a possible contribution to a dialogue.

Dogville

The film is set in a very remote township somewhere in the mountains of the USA at the time of the Great Depression in the 1930s. We are not shown a real place but a stage, reminiscent in its sparseness of the theatre Bertolt Brecht. The plot is also reduced to a bare minimum, as a parable. There are 15 townspeople, the main character Grace, a beautiful young stranger, three policemen who occasionally come from the next town, and a gangster boss with his henchmen. The film is divided into nine chapters and a prologue and is accompanied by a narrator.

Dogville presents us with a township of orderly circumstances and friendly people. Occasionally, the young writer Tom tries to improve the moral values of the inhabitants with lectures that are ultimately unsuccessful. Everything goes on peacefully until one day shots are heard in the distance and a little later Grace appears and begs for help. Tom hides her from the pursuing gangsters, and the residents agree to house Grace for a fortnight. They are tolerant and in principle also willing to help, although finding suitable chores for Grace proves difficult. They don't really need Grace. Only slowly does a possibility arise here and there to do a meaningful job. Grace, who obviously comes from a better background and is unused to working, quickly finds her feet. The people are happy and the climate is very friendly. After two weeks, they unanimously decide at a meeting that Grace can stay on. Grace offers several times to leave if the townspeople want her to.

Then a policeman turns up and puts up a poster, saying Grace is missing. The residents agree that the gangsters are behind it and are therefore prepared to continue protecting Grace. A little later, however, the climate changes. They notice a love affair beginning between Tom and Grace, which leads to some unrest.

The decisive turning point, however, occurs when the police appear again and now put up a wanted poster for Grace, who is accused of having committed crimes. This worries the residents. They are only willing to continue protecting Grace if they get something in return for the risk they will be taking. Grace is expected to do twice as many chores for half the pay, work that originally, as the narrator points out several times, "no one needed".

Now unfriendliness spreads, the township "bares its teeth". Grace is unsettled by this, she works frantically, and she is increasingly criticised for mishaps. Distrust arises when the son of one family provokes Grace until she reluctantly spanks him, whereupon the mother no longer leaves Grace alone with the children, but constantly controls her. When the police turn up for the third time, the fruit grower takes advantage of the situation to blackmail Grace: either she sleeps with him or he will betray her. Grace is forced to accept the blackmail. She then wants to leave, but the residents now won't let her go, they have become accustomed to the comforts of her work. They want more of it; the fruit grower from now on regularly abuses Grace during work.

Grace then tries to escape. The local truck driver agrees to smuggle her out for money. Tom helps her and steals the necessary money from his father, promising to meet her at the destination of the escape. As Grace rides with the truck driver, he also takes the opportunity to rape her. He then claims that the road is closed by the police and they must return. Arriving back in Dogville, Grace learns that the truck driver had already given away the secret of the escape the night before. Since Tom denies having stolen the money from his father, suspicion falls on Grace. To prevent another escape, she is now tied to a mill wheel with a dog chain, which she struggles to drag along the ground. Now most of the other men also feel encouraged to rape Grace in her home. The men's behaviour is tacitly tolerated, Grace's dignity has sunk to the level of human chattel.

Tom wants to free Grace but does not know how. He is simultaneously fascinated by the events and wants to process them in literature. He wants to love Grace, but she refuses because she wants to be free first. Tom feels rejected by her and now decides, together with the other residents, to get rid of Grace. He informs the gangsters, whose phone number he has kept. When they arrive, it turns out that their boss is Grace's father. She had always refused to follow his criminal example and had therefore fled from him. Now, however, she is ready to return. The world of the gangsters and that of Dogville are no longer very different for her. In a final dialogue, she agrees with her father that the township's crimes must not go unpunished and that there is no need for mercy. Grace therefore orders the gangsters to shoot the inhabitants and burn down the houses, and she herself shoots Tom. The world, she says, must be freed from this township.

Steps of Humiliation

Humiliation plays a decisive role in the decline of civility in this film. This civility is based on the people's tolerance of the stranger. They endure her presence because they are willing to protect her from persecution. But this willingness to help is limited, because it is really only a matter of accepting what Tom has already agreed to do. Tom directs things, believing he can persuade the residents to be more communal when presented with a practical challenge. He refers to Grace as a "gift" to the township, but the residents do not ask about why Grace was actually persecuted, where she comes from, or who she is. They are willing to behave decently towards her as long as nothing further is required. The fact that her work is not needed by anyone also means that her presence is unnecessary; people just put up with her. Grace makes more efforts to fully adapt to the customs of the inhabitants and their kitschy tastes. It soon becomes apparent that the benefits are worth the effort to employ Grace. Even the appearance of the police does not change this, because it is not a punishable offence to ignore the search for a missing person.

It is not until the second appearance of the police, and at the same time with the developing love affair with Tom, that the relationship changes. Now the residents are hiding a criminal, and the love affair with Tom stirs up passions such as jealousy and desire. From now on, a sequence of eight steps of humiliation begins, which finally ends in the revenge of the humiliated:

- The first step is the exploitation of Grace, that is, the demand that she does double the work in return for further protection. It is only a matter of time that this first humiliation will also lead to the destruction of the friendly relationship between the townspeople and Grace;
- The second step takes the form of self-degradation. Grace has so far experienced and herself cultivated a kind of mutual respect, which is now destroyed with the passing on of pressure from outside. Excessive irritation, criticism and the provocation of the boy cause her to smack him and thus do something that she herself perceives as humiliating;
- The third step is being blackmailed into sexual intercourse with the fruit farmer;
- The fourth step Grace experiences as an assault on her property, combined with a kind of psychological torture. The fruit farmer's claim that Grace seduced him serves as justification for his wife to take revenge on Grace. She destroys the objects Grace has bought for the wages of her labour, one by one, with the explanation that she will not stop until Grace shows that she can hold back her feelings about this destruction. For Grace, these objects, which she actually thought were obnoxiously tacky, signify the bond between her and the townspeople. For her, their destruction is an expression of the townspeople's final break with her;

- The fifth step consists of a kind of confinement that forbids her to leave the township;
- The sixth step is being chained to the millstone after the failed escape;
- The seventh step consists of repeated rape by the men of the village, her degradation as human chattel;
- The eighth step is betrayal, several times over: first by the lorry driver who pretends to drive her to freedom only to abuse her on the way, and then by Tom, who first accuses her of stealing the escape money from his father and then betrays her to the gangsters. Finally, his love is also full of betrayal because he wants to use Grace first as a pedagogical object, then as a literary model and finally as an object of sexual desire.

How can a civilised community abandon mutual respect, disregard personal integrity and place itself outside the law?

This process shows how thin the veneer of civilisation is in such a community. There are several factors that make up the fragility of civilisation in this story, and they all concern interpersonal relations. They are mainly the liberal aloofness, the primacy of self-interest and the absence of political interest in the common good. This is expressed firstly in the subordinate status of the stranger, in the distanced tolerance; secondly, in the increased assertion of self-interest as a reaction to increased risk; Thirdly, in the instrumentalisation of the relationships and the destruction of the dignity of Grace; and fourthly, in a questionable love and betrayal.

One might think that a fifth aspect is added, namely to interpret Grace's reaction to murder the residents of Dogville as revenge, but it is an attempt to find justice, as we will see below.

As far as the first factor, the status of the stranger, is concerned, the peculiarities of tolerance quickly become apparent. We know tolerance to be the main feature of relations between people in liberal society, characterised by a passive attitude of allowing, and indifference. Through it, other values such as self-interest relationships are not compromised. On the contrary, self-interest prevails and all actions are measured against one's own advantage. Kindness and helpfulness, and likewise the idea of what the common good is, are also subject to the priority of realising self-interest. The common good in liberalism sees the maintenance of a condition in which a community of individuals can successfully pursue their self-interest, as in Dogville.

The equality that Grace seeks is only established at the level of work and pay, not human dignity or even political rights. Therefore, there is no protection against arbitrary change. The opinion of the majority determines whether relations are changed, and this arbitrariness seems to be without limits.

It therefore only takes a certain external pressure that seems to threaten these self-interests to reveal the character of this tolerance and Grace's unsecured status. This is where the second factor comes into play, the reaction to fear through

the increased assertion of self-interest. The townspeople find themselves in a double moral dilemma: first, their initial moral relationship to Grace, namely to provide help from persecution, has changed to a purely material one of utility. Should the townspeople now keep her because of the original promise or merely out of self-interest? Secondly, the townspeople now face possible legal punishment for harbouring a criminal; should they risk punishment, or not? In both cases, they choose self-interest over moral considerations. In both cases, the starting point has changed. Grace is now no longer the one pursued by criminals, but is apparently a criminal herself. But because she is useful, and is not guilty of anything in the township, they would like to keep her. However, the risk of hiding a criminal from the police is considerable and must be worthwhile for them. So from their point of view, extra work by Grace to offset an increased risk for the residents appears to be fair. In reality, however, it has nothing to do with a fair deal, but on the contrary with pure arbitrariness and exploitation of Grace's situation.

This brings into play the third factor, the instrumentalisation of relations with Grace and the destruction of her dignity. From the beginning, kindness and mutual respect have been subject to considerations of utility. For this reason, the question of how to respond to the increased risk is decided according to the cost-benefit analysis. This consideration gains prominence with the exertion of external pressure. Grace is now seen exclusively in economic terms, and thus as an object – this seems all the more justified because she is obviously a criminal and had concealed this.

At the same time, residents are willing to collectively break the law and benefit a criminal. In this combination of maximising benefit and breaking the law, the sense of legal and moral boundary violations seems to dwindle. There emerges a separate standard for law and morality, for the right and the good. If Grace is only of value as a worker, why use phrases of kindness? If she is an object of utility, then why not a sexual object? And why then can't a claim be made on the whole person, on her possessions and her freedom of movement? The townspeople feel innocent as individuals of what they commit collectively. They are only doing what someone else has already done, and that someone else feels innocent because everyone else does it after them. And above all, the community tacitly claims some kind of reparation for Grace's alleged offences: the violence towards the boy, the adultery, and the theft of the money.

The fourth factor, love and betrayal, introduces an additional aspect concerning helping the defenceless stranger. When the townspeople reduce Grace to an object of utility, the only thing left is Tom's love for her, which does not seem to be driven by any utilitarian consideration. She could be the alternative to inhumanity and Grace. But even this love offers no protection; on the contrary. Tom remains loyal to the residents because his love for Grace is also driven by utilitarian considerations. As the disaster takes its course, he even considers writing a play about it as an observer.

The Fire of Love and Active Charity

At this point, the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt intervenes, so to speak. A dialogue between the film and her is possible because she not only dealt with the decline of civilised society, but also made the role of politics, i.e. collective action in favour of the common good, the decisive prerequisite for the preservation of a civilised community. The central undoing for Dogville is precisely the absence of politics.

For Arendt, interpersonal relationships are at the centre of her work. Totalitarianism, freedom and politics are considered against the background of these relationships. Totalitarianism is characterised not only by its apparatus of power, the political movement and the use of ideology and terror, but also by people's lack of relationships and their sense of a meaningless existence at the beginning of totalitarian movements. The movement with its ideology seems to offer a new orientation. From the point of view of interpersonal relationships, freedom is not an abstract good, but, according to Arendt, only arises at the moment when people enter into an active relationship with each other. It is the opposite of relationality under totalitarianism. Politics is therefore not an administrative act nor a power struggle of individual persons or groups against each other, but the joint acting and speaking in which freedom first arises. For Arendt, this in-between is synonymous with world, and any impairment of relations, the introduction of violence or the instrumentalisation of others or the replacement of politics by administration, reduces the common world, enables the spread of violence and ultimately risks doom, as in Dogville. For Arendt, liberalism is based on a series of such impairments of freedom and political action.

The only assistance that seems to exist in Dogville is the love between Tom and Grace. Apart from the failure of this love, the question arises whether, in the selfish and humiliating community of Dogville, love can protect against inhumanity, lack of empathy and lack of commitment? Could it save people in the absence of political action?

Undoubtedly, love could have played an important role if Tom had found the strength to defend Grace at all costs. That could have led to a discussion about the state of the community. But acting out of love against humiliation and betrayal only puts the fate and concerns of two lovers first, not those of the community. Love can defend the dignity of a person and stop the degradation of the townspeople, but it cannot focus on the concern for the existence of the community. Love and politics are therefore distinguished by the twoness of lovers against the interest in the common good.

Love is exclusionary, whereas the regulation of public concerns requires precisely the relationship between many people, their inclusion. Since for Arendt the existence of the human world in the sense of a civilised world depends on this mul-

tiplicity, the plurality in the form of interpersonal relationships, she is very keen, as she noted in philosophical notebooks, to distinguish "the elementary human activities as modifications of plurality". She counts five activities among these elementary activities: labour, work, action, thinking, and also love. And she defines them through interpersonal relations: labour, which takes place in abandonment as an activity of force; work in isolation, which creates objects and works of art and is based on violence; action, which is based on togetherness, the common world; thinking, which takes place in solitude, but knows the inner dialogue and the idea of others; and finally love, which consists in togetherness, but at the same time in worldlessness, that is, in isolation from others.[3] In labour, according to Arendt, people are always isolated and driven by worry and fear; in work, they are alone in the freedom of spontaneity and inspired by the work as creation; in action, they are together with others in political responsibility, and only in love "there is real mutuality, based on needing the other. To be a human being is at the same time to be in need of (another) human being."[4] In love, the one needs the second; in plurality, on the other hand, the one is dependent on the others. "In the case of love, he seeks what is appropriate for him; in the case of plurality, he has to reckon with the 'inappropriate', the foreign, the different. The fundamental difference between the need, which arises from the two sexes, or at least is marked out in them, and the being dependent on one another, which lies in multiplicity."[5] Thus she concludes that labour – thought – love "are the three modes of sheer life from which a world can never arise and which are therefore actually anti-world, anti-political."[6]

The difference between togetherness and plurality becomes clear in speaking. What distinguishes politics as a relationship between those acting in its plurality is speech: "All speech with others is always already speech about something common to both", while "the speech of lovers is free of this 'about'; "in it one speaks with the you as with oneself. … The speech of lovers is therefore inherently 'poetic', in it there is neither thinking *dialegesthai* (speaking with one another, WH) nor speaking about. It is as if in its people first become what they pretend to be as poets: they do not speak, and they do not talk, but they sound."[7]

In Dogville, speech has no meaning; in the moralising monologues at the meetings as little as in the conviviality of the residents or in the blackmail and humiliation towards Grace.

Nowhere in her published work did Arendt write such a declaration of love as in the notebooks of her *Denktagebuch*. When she declares that love does not spring

3 Hannah Arendt *Denktagebuch*, Munich Piper 2002, p. 459.
4 Ibid., p. 203. (my translation WH)
5 Ibid., p. 38f. (my translation WH)
6 Ibid., p. 493. (my translation WH)
7 Ibid., p. 214. (my translation WH)

from the heart but is divine, a power of the universe, and compares it to fire and lightning, she herself uses poetic images to describe love which only knows poetic words: "Love burns, pierces like lightning the in-between, that is, the world-space, between people. This is only possible with two people. When the third joins, space is immediately restored."[8] That is why this divine love is so different from earthly action, this absolute worldlessness from the relative world of references.

Love, which Arendt so aptly described as lightning burning up the in-between, also consumes itself and is of limited duration. Love might save Grace, but hardly the village. In contrast, charity is of greater permanence. Active kindness has also at times defined the political sphere since the emergence of Christianity. But charity is also apolitical because its silent action has a negative relation to public action and responsibility for the common good. In her book *The Human Condition*, Arendt, following Machiavelli, points out that where active charity, in the form of the church, determines public life and directs the destiny of a city, it becomes a power factor that exerts a corrupting and destructive influence.[9]

Politics, Public Friendship and Political Institutions

What does politics mean for Dogville? The answer is: a necessary alternative to the apolitical liberal world of 'enlightened self-interest'. For if this self-interest is not limited by laws and public discussion and concern for the common good, it can, under external pressure, turn into a kind of demagogic common interest.

A dialogue between the director's critique of Liberalism and Hannah Arendt's republicanism is unmistakable here. For Arendt, politics in this context means three things: first, the rule of law; second, action in favour of the common good; and third, the paradox of maintaining morality by keeping it out of the realm of politics.

As for the first aspect, the rule of law, it means the existence of both concrete laws and an effective separation of powers, thus preventing the development of lawlessness and natural centres of power. In Dogville, law and order fade away and the inhabitants create something like a dictatorial *volonté générale,* which gives rise to a new rule of interests, passions and demagogy. Similarly, in political reality, state legality is fading and arbitrary local rule is emerging, giving autocrats the opportunity to take over the leadership of such deficient communities.

Acting in favour of the common good presupposes the rule of law. This does not make action superfluous, on the contrary. *Dogville* shows how in a liberal society, which is, after all, based on the rule of law, the constitutional foundations and also liberality can be undermined and eliminated if there is no political action. Politics

8 Ibid., p. 372. (my translation WH)

9 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, Chicago: Meridian 1958, Chapter 10.

in Dogville would mean that the residents would see themselves not as mere individuals but as citizens, and they would see their community not as a mere utility but as a *polis*. These citizens would ask Grace about her background, publicly discuss why and how they should help Grace, and ultimately deliberate on how to resolve the conflict between helping Grace and exposing themselves to prosecution. Such civic behaviour requires public-communal discussion, information, political judgement and active action. In Dogville there was no discussion but collusion, no information but ignorance, no judgement and not even prejudice, no action but behaving, seeking one's own advantage, and problem solving not in public but in secret.

What the citizens of Dogville also did not know through their behaviour are two experiences that come with public, responsible action: the sense of satisfaction of meaningful action, and the experience of public friendship, where the inhabitants of the township know that for all their differences, sympathies and dislikes, they collectively value and want to preserve the existence of their civilised place. It was this experience that Hannah Arendt sought to revive as what she called the 'treasure' of a republican tradition and to re-establish it in terms of interpersonal relations. *Dogville* makes it clear that politics and society or the interest in the common good and the pursuit of private interests are indeed not the same thing.

As for the third aspect, the maintenance of morality by keeping it out of the realm of politics, *Dogville* clearly shows that morality cannot replace politics. Tom's moral exhortations do not stand up to external pressures and internal temptations. Even a community subjected to a strict moral code would probably not have saved Grace from humiliation, for such a community would be based on a severe restriction of freedom and would breed hypocrisy and corruption. In proportion, a community acting in a civic manner would be much more able to take pressure off the individual citizens by publicly regulating their common affairs and in this way protect their everyday morality.

It is astonishing that, although these insights into the foundations of the civilised *polis* have been known since antiquity and the examples of catastrophes like Dogville are nothing new, in the liberal modern times there is so little public awareness of these threats to society and the need for self-binding.

However, the film does not offer this civic alternative. The film differs from Arendt's path in two respects: firstly, with regard to institutions, that is, the design of power. Lars von Trier rather argues for the hard hand of the Hobbesian state or at least the Machiavellian defence of the republic against internal corruption, when in the end the gangsters – and Grace – act with an iron fist; secondly, the restoration of justice is justified religiously rather than politically.

This religious aspect is already visible at the beginning of the film when Tom calls Grace a "gift". Her arrival has the character of a test. In her grace, as her name suggests, in her youthful beauty and apparent vulnerability, she embodies a purity that is reminiscent of the appearance of Jesus. Both Jesus and Grace were not of this

world, nor could they be, for they found no place in it. Humans failed the test both times. The conclusions drawn by religion and politics are diametrically opposed. Christianity interpreted the fate of Jesus as a sacrifice for the redemption of humanity, as an example of the pure way of life. Politics, on the other hand, cannot redeem people from sins, but must secure them a place in the world that at the same time prevents a catastrophe like that in Dogville. This does not require mercy, but political justice.

Hannah Arendt illustrated this difference in her book *On Revolution* using the story of the Grand Inquisitor by Dostoevsky and Billy Budd by Herman Melville.[10] In Dostoevsky's view, no one today would recognise Jesus; Melville depicts how the absolutely good man unwittingly becomes a murderer. Arendt used these literary examples as insights into the necessary limits that the *polis* must set not only for evil but also for good.

The justice that Grace now wants to establish by destroying Dogville in order to free the world from this evil does not consist in self-sacrifice, but in avenging punishment. It appears like the reversal of Jesus' death and wants to be political, but more resembles an apolitical, quasi-mystical act of purification that affects the guilty as well as the innocent, such as the children. For Hannah Arendt, politics would not consist in the arbitrary act of an iron fist, but in the common foundation of a new Dogville. Thus, although she chose a similarly worded justification when she agreed to Eichmann's execution, it is free of revenge and mysticism: since Eichmann and his superiors had arrogated to themselves the right, according to Arendt, to want to inhabit the world without the Jewish people and a number of other ethnic groups, "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 you must hang."[11]

Written in 2004. First Published: 'Dogville' – Humiliação, amor e política. Reflexões em diálogo com Hannah Arendt, in: Izabel Marson/Márcia Naxara (eds.): *Sobre a Humilhação. Sentimentos, gestos, palavras,* Uberlândia: EDUFU 2005.

10 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, New York: Viking Press 1963, Chapter 2

11 Hannah Arendt *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report of the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press, revised and enlarged version, 1965, p. 279.