**Film as Phantasm: *Dogville*’s Cinematic Re-evaluation of Values**

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Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* (2003) seems to defy the very idea of cinema—in particular, the realism of this artistic medium. At its birth, film was seen as more of a technological marvel than an art because of its ability to replicate the reality of our everyday audio-visual experience. Before its artistic capacity was discovered, film was a curiosity, a way of capturing and projecting an event from one time and space to another. Eventually the realism of film became a powerful tool for storytelling due to its ability to transport and immerse us in an experiential world. Unlike a painting, with cinema we sit in darkened theaters and stare at a screen as though it is a portal into another reality. From its beginning, film has blurred the distinction between reality and illusion. By contrast, *Dogville* is a film that continually gestures toward its fictional and illusory qualities. In the style of black box theater, the film unfolds on a bare sound stage with chalk outlines to designate buildings and other features of the town. This minimalist style requires actors to move through spaces where there are no real boundaries and to handle objects that are not really there. Instead of immersing us in a realistic space, the set always appears as a set. Von Trier never lets his audience forget that we are viewing fictional events. We, the audience, do not have the opportunity to suspend disbelief and lose ourselves in the reality of the film because it always appears as a performance being presented to us through cinematic images.

Yet despite the fact that none of the images appear as real, *Dogville* still achieves a real and forceful affective response. At times, von Trier’s minimal style even intensifies our emotional responses—a surprising effect multiple scholars have analyzed. Tarja Laine describes how the minimalist set of *Dogville* sets up spatial relations that magnify social dynamics, which allows viewers to focus more deeply on intersubjective relations and place themselves within the events (Laine 2006, 132). Robert Sinnerbrink notes that von Trier’s style adopts Brecht’s distancing effect but reverses its sense of alienation by using emotion rather than eliminating it (Sinnerbrink 2007, 4).

While others have examined the cinematic style of *Dogville* as a method of intensifying emotional responses and questioning social, political, moral, and theological ideologies (Rancière 2010, Nobus 2007), this paper will argue that von Trier upends our visual suspension of disbelief in order to examine the very nature of belief. That is, von Trier’s techniques reveal how we form, evaluate, and re-evaluate our beliefs based on changing impressions and shifting perspectives. Using Nietzsche’s revision of Stoic philosophy as a lens for interpreting the film, I will argue that the recognition of the artificiality of how things appear to us serves a moral purpose. Specifically, I will compare the style of *Dogville* to the Stoic concept of phantasms and to Nietzsche’s perspectivism. For the Stoics, we never experience reality itself. Instead, sensory perceptions are always impressions of how things appear, or *phantasms*, and not the way things are in reality. Along similar lines, Nietzsche sees all ideas and beliefs as perspectives, appearances without an underlying reality, which can change and be transformed. Both the Stoics and Nietzsche emphasize the contingency of appearances in order to re-evaluate values. In content and style, *Dogville* enacts a similar re-evaluation of values, especially the value of compassion. For this reason, von Trier presents film as a powerful art form for suspending and evaluating how we see and understand the world, which makes it the perfect medium for moral provocations aimed at self-examination.

**I. The Destruction of Moral Belief in *Dogville***

*Dogville* plays with belief on multiple levels. In addition to the style of the film, the plot questions the possibility of belief in religion, ethics, philosophy, and any system of belief, rational or otherwise. As Dany Nobus explains, von Trier provokes “a serious re-consideration of the notions of acceptance, tolerance, hospitality and solidarity… central principles of a democratic society” (Nobus 2007, 25). The film questions beliefs that form the very foundation of contemporary society, and in particular the ideals of human progress and social justice that underlie the United States’ vision of itself as a city upon a hill. Moreover, the problem of belief—that beliefs are never certain and always open to re-interpretation—is central to the film.

Von Trier undermines belief first through symbols of nihilism that evoke the decay of moral values. The plot unfolds in Dogville, a very small town in the Rocky Mountains, during the Great Depression. The town of Dogville has no priest or minister and no police or law-keepers. The vacant mission house is an emblem for the death of God. The abandoned silver mine forms the boundary of the town, and a sign above its entrance reads “dictum ac factum,” a phrase that emphasizes the integrity of doing exactly what one says. In the town of Dogville, this connection between what is said and done, between belief and action, is as abandoned as the silver mine. Additionally, there are multiple references to the sound of the pile drivers in the valley below, which indicates a new penitentiary being built—the birth of a prison. For a contemporary audience viewing this film in 2003, this sound foreshadows the current problems of the U.S. justice system—namely, the prison-industrial complex, the growth of for-profit prisons and the rise of mass incarceration. Everything about the town of Dogville suggests the frailty of morality and the conditional nature of justice.

Beyond this heavy-handed symbolism, von Trier makes moral belief a concrete and deeply troubling problem, rather than a merely theoretical one, in the development of the characters Tom and Grace. These characters embody the real consequences of the problem of belief. The main character, Tom, is a self-proclaimed moral philosopher who sees himself busy “mining” into the human soul. Yet Tom’s efforts to “scourge and purge” the human soul lead nowhere. Despite an over-inflated estimation of his own ideas, Tom is unable to write anything and instead gives a series of unwelcome lectures on “moral rearmament” that are meant to benefit the community, even though the townspeople vocally disregard his ideas. Unlike the other townspeople, Tom does not need to work since he can live off of his father’s pension. Not only is Tom presented as a useless person who does not contribute to the town and is not taken seriously, he judges everyone from a position of privilege and leisure. It is this position that allows him time to sit and think about human nature and moral issues. Yet his privilege also distances him from others. Von Trier’s fictional moral philosopher hardly seems up to the task of understanding human nature and his naiveté about human nature in general and the townspeople in particular are what drive the plot forward to its violent and devastating ending in which the entire town and all its inhabitants are destroyed. Throughout the film the very idea of moral philosophy is in question.

At the beginning of the plot, Tom’s main insight is that people lack an “attitude of openness” and do not know how to accept a gift. Tom’s desired method of teaching is by way of illustration, but he has no examples to prove his point. The town is very poor. There are no gifts, only poverty and want. Then a gift appears in the form of Grace, a beautiful woman who appears in Dogville late at night fleeing on foot from gangsters. Tom discovers Grace, takes her into his care, and gets the reluctant townspeople to allow her to hide in their town by offering her as a gift. Grace gains favor in the town through thoughtful services that make the townspeople’s lives easier and more pleasant. She becomes beloved by everyone. Yet her relationship with the town deteriorates into slavery over the course of the plot. Her once superfluous gifts become labor, expected work that can be compensated with wages and later exploited by force and manipulation.[[1]](#endnote-1) When “Wanted” posters appear with false accusations against Grace, the townspeople decide that her presence in Dogville is more “costly” and that they need a “counter-balance.” This shift in power leads to a very different relationship between Grace and the town. Slowly, each townsperson finds a way to use her: dominating over her with unjust demands, humiliating her with cruelty, and subjecting her to sexual violence. Even the children understand Grace’s place within their community and join in coercing and bullying her. By the end of the film Grace’s suffering at the hands of the townspeople becomes unbearable. After a failed attempt to escape, the townspeople put an iron collar around her neck and chain her to the heavy flywheel of the old mill to insure she cannot run away. Her collar, chain, and wheel are images that evoke both slavery and martyrdom. This act of maliciousness is particularly painful and horrifying, as Grace had once been celebrated and loved by the same people who abuse her—and not through any change in her character or actions, but only due to her vulnerability, her need for protection.

This transformation in the relation between the townspeople and Grace seems to indicate how circumstantial morality and justice are. Given the right circumstances, given the power, would we all inflict harm on others and commit such cruel acts? Grace explicitly asks herself this question in the final scene of the film before deciding the fate of Dogville. The dramatic narrative of the film hangs on this very question, and yet its answer is not quite clear.

The plot not only emphasizes the conditional nature of moral action, it questions the means by which we decide what is moral. The character Tom presents us with the failure of moral philosophy to understand human nature or to guide action. At best, he demonstrates the uselessness of theory and, at worst, its dangers. He convinces the town to accept Grace as a fugitive with the ulterior motive of using her as an illustration of his theories. He then fails to prevent the town from exploiting her once they discover her vulnerability. Finally, Tom turns against Grace out of frustration and embarrassment when she sexually rejects him. It is Tom who hands Grace over to the gangsters that he saved her from in the beginning. Yet he manages to justify his self-interested action as necessary to uphold his ethics thanks to a long process of rationalization, which is clearly a superficial guise for his cowardice and sexual frustration. Despite Tom’s romantic relationship with Grace, despite having been in love with her, he theorizes himself out of any responsibility to her and even justifies an action that he expects will end her life. Simply put, he uses ethics to justify his unethical action. In the end, the moral philosopher ends up committing the worst offense and deepest betrayal.

If Tom presents us with the failure of moral philosophy to cultivate a system of belief that improves human life and relationships, the character of Grace presents us with the failure of Christian morality and its remnants in secular ethics and neoliberal democratic principles. Throughout the plot Grace accepts the townspeople’s moral weaknesses with compassion and forgiveness. From her perspective, they should not be blamed for their xenophobic distrust or unwillingness to help. They are poor and come from different circumstances than her. At the beginning of the film, Grace’s attitude and actions seem completely justified. Moreover, her humble attitude and service to the town creates a happier community with stronger ties between people. Grace initially appears as a shining beacon of hope that transforms the town of Dogville with her compassion. Yet as the plot develops, these very same moral qualities become a disastrous liability, especially when Grace willingly accepts abuse. As her relationship with the town falls into exploited labor and then slavery, Grace continually shows sympathy for those who harm her. She excuses their maliciousness by trying to understand their motivations and how their circumstances have contributed to their actions. She even feels pity for the men who rape her. By the end of the plot, Grace’s forgiveness becomes unbearable for the audience. In her collar and chains, she becomes an image of martyrdom that evokes disgust. Von Trier makes Grace a Christ-like figure whose self-sacrifice is unbearable. The audience requires some relief from the pain we feel with her plight, and von Trier delivers one that unsettles us as deeply as possible.

**II. *Dogville*’s Moral Aporia and the Re-evaluation of Compassion**

The ending of *Dogville* challenges Grace’s ethics of compassion and pity and in doing so creates a troubling moral aporia. After Tom betrays Grace and the gangsters arrive, the audience expects her to be killed. Instead, Grace is freed from her chains and enters the car of the boss, who is revealed to be her father. Within the car an intense moral debate unfolds. We learn that the daughter refused to follow in her father’s footsteps as a leader of organized crime, a system of justice that operates through force and demands an eye for an eye. Grace bluntly expresses disgust for her father’s violent way of life, which she calls arrogant. Grace’s father, however, turns this criticism against her and describes her compassion as a hypocritical form of arrogance that refuses to see itself as such: “you do not pass judgment, because you sympathize with them. A deprived childhood, and a homicide really isn’t necessarily a homicide, right? The only thing you can blame is circumstances—rapists and murderers may be the victims according to you.” Her father then calls her arrogant because she forgives others with excuses she would never permit for herself. He argues that her mercy is not an act of kindness but instead subordinates others by judging them as less than her.

This intense debate instigates a sudden and unexpected reversal of values. At first, Grace opposes her father’s position and maintains her sympathy for those who abused her, but after more thought it dawns on her, as the omniscient narrator states, that “if she had acted like them, she could not have defended a single one of her actions and could not have condemned them harshly enough.” She then realizes that she has a “duty” to punish them. Grace’s previous belief system of pity becomes untenable. The harm the people of Dogville inflicted on her demands judgment. She stops making excuses for Dogville and decides to destroy it by ordering the gangsters to shoot everyone and to burn the town to the ground. People who were especially cruel to her receive punishments that mirror their actions against her. Grace herself kills Tom with a gun to the back of his head at pointblank range. These actions, however, are not presented as personally satisfying revenge. Instead, Grace acts as if she has a moral imperative to destroy the town and uses phrases like “I owe her that” and “I think it’s appropriate.” She adopts violence as a tool of justice to prevent the town of Dogville from harming another person.

This ending is at once deeply satisfying and deeply horrifying. Not only is Grace’s sudden turn from martyrdom to violence jarring, the emotional response of the audience is startling. Von Trier makes Grace’s abuse and humiliation so uncomfortable that we revel in the ending when justice is finally served. We, as the audience, feel relief and pleasure as the people of Dogville die in a fiery blaze. This destruction is cathartic in the sense that it resolves the dramatic tension of the plot. The ending feels necessary even in all its violence. Yet despite the resolution, the violence of her actions is still troubling. Von Trier manipulates us to empathize with a character who destroys an entire town, including the children, elderly, and disabled. The horror at this realization forces us into a state of moral aporia. We do not know what to think or feel.

In this way, *Dogville* critiques systems of belief without offering a clear alternative. At the same time, the events of *Dogville* and its dramatic ending demand that we make judgments, even without an objective system or set of standards. Grace’s father criticizes her for failing to pass judgment on those who exploit and abuse her. The ending’s dramatic tension rests on both the necessity of moral action and the fallibility of moral belief. It is a difficult position: we must act according to what we deem is right, yet we must act without the reassurance of irrefutable justifications. These two demands reflect the same tension in Nietzsche’s re-evaluation of values and his treatment of belief in general.

In questioning what most would consider moral virtues—empathy, compassion, and pity—*Dogville* unsettles our moral frameworks and provokes us in a way that is similar to the Stoics and Nietzsche. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche poses his aphorisms as a polemic aimed at morality that values pity and self-sacrifice. For Nietzsche, this moral attitude is based upon a “fundamental mistrust” of the world and “corrosive skepticism” (Nietzsche 1989b, Preface §5, 19). Nietzsche describes pity as a nausea that turns away from earthly life (Nietzsche 1989b, II: 7). Since pity is self-denying, it is life-denying. It is a danger to humanity because it expresses the will *against* life, a symptom of the ultimate disease, nihilism. This morality of pity, or “self-torture” as Nietzsche describes it, runs against sense, instinct, and nature because it is hostile to life and slanders the world (Nietzsche 1989b, II:24).

It is important to note, however, that Nietzsche derives his critique of pity from reading the Stoics, which indicates similar moral concerns guiding it. As Martha Nussbaum argues, Nietzsche’s criticism of pity is not rooted in cruelty but is meant to be “a revival of Stoic values of self-command and self-formation within a post-Christian and post-Romantic context” (Nussbaum 1994, 140). Nietzsche carefully studied Epictetus and Seneca and refers to Stoicism frequently in his writings—both in praise and in critique—and even refers to himself as the last Stoic (Nietzsche 1989a, §227, 155). His critique of pity is especially Stoic. Ancient Stoicism rejects pity, because it accepts that only virtue brings happiness, not external goods. Virtue is an internal good that everyone has power over through the exercise of reason and will, whereas external goods are subject to fortune and chance. Thus, the goods that contribute to a happy life are not susceptible to misfortune. As such, pity has “a false cognitive structure” insofar as it gives importance to things and events that are unimportant (Nussbaum 1994, 144). For the Stoic, pity insults the dignity of the person who is pitied, because it assumes that the person is not virtuous or self-commanding and instead weak enough to value unimportant things of the world. Nietzsche asserts that “To offer pity is as good as to offer contempt” (Nietzsche 1997, 135). Rather than showing kindness toward another, pity reveals a lowly estimation of who they are. Like Grace’s father, the Stoics and Nietzsche argue that pity is condescension in disguise..

Nietzsche’s philosophy confronts the false consciousness of pity in the same way that Grace’s father reveals the arrogance of her compassion. Within the film, Grace’s pity for the townspeople occasions their cruel exploitation of her. Rather than fighting or resisting, she makes excuses for their actions. Grace’s acceptance of their cruelty appears almost hyperbolic, especially when she undergoes such bodily and psychological harm. Her merciful exonerations of her rapists throw the limits of pity into sharp relief. Why would anyone want to empathize with someone who would dehumanize them to such a degree? How does such forgiveness benefit anyone? This self-sacrifice is not a moral value, but a denial of the value of one’s life.[[2]](#endnote-2) Nietzsche would describe Grace’s forgiveness as life-denying nihilism in the disguise of virtue. This disguise, however, wears out over the course of the film and reveals its flaws. By the end of *Dogville* Grace’s mercy for the townspeople no longer seem reasonable but instead has jeopardized her selfhood at fundamental levels by putting the needs and feelings of everyone before her own until she is completely diminished. Von Trier exaggerates her compassion to the point that we respond with revulsion. We feel the life-denying aspects of her pity as a wave of nausea.

The moral questions that arise in the film thus reflect the same critique of pity in Nietzsche and the Stoics. Pity and compassion are not a sufficient basis for moral action and can even signal complacency in the face of grave injustice. *Dogville*, like Nietzsche’s critique of traditional morality, makes us question the value of our moral values for life. We are forced to confront our ideas of good and evil from a different perspective, one that turns everything on its head and uproots our deepest assumptions about the world. Just as Nietzsche’s philosophy was meant to destroy the life-denying delusions of modernity to clear the ground for a morality that could affirm life, so von Trier forces us to confront the problematic assumption that people are merely the product of their environment and cannot be blamed for their actions. Nietzsche’s and von Trier’s critiques of pity are provocations aimed at a critical re-examination of our moral beliefs and the ways that they might fail to promote genuine equality and human flourishing.

**III. The Optics of Belief**

These comparisons between *Dogville*’s and Nietzsche’s provocations become even more striking when we turn to the formal qualities of the film. The cinematic techniques and style of the film performatively undermine belief by drawing our attention to the conditional nature of perception. In style and content, *Dogville* examines how we form beliefs when perception is unreliable and perspectives can shift, a question that was central for the Stoics and for Nietzsche.

In ancient Stoicism belief is based upon phantasms, impressions that strike the mind. Through reason and will we can either assent or dissent to phantasms. In other words, we can suspend our immediate acceptance of how things appear in order to evaluate the phantasm and accept it as true or as false. Action, moral choice, and belief all proceed from this structure of assent and dissent to phantasms. Stoics emphasize that the purpose of reason is “to make a proper use of impressions” and that “the first and greatest task of a philosopher is to put impressions to the test… and not admit any that has not been tested” (Epictetus 1995, 48, 49). This Stoic practice of evaluating phantasms is significant because it recognizes the gap between how things appear and how they are in reality, especially since phantasms are so contingent. As Epictetus describes, “The soul is like a vessel filled with water; and impressions are like a ray of light that falls upon the water. If the water is disturbed the ray will seem to be disturbed likewise, though in reality it is not” (Epictetus 1995, 158). All our impressions of reality are as ephemeral as the play of light on water—ever shifting and never stable. Thus phantasms pose questions to us and should not be taken at face value. The difficulty is that most people do not take up this important task and tend to accept appearances without reflection. We tend to assent to what appears as true and dissent to what appears as false, which may be independent of how things are in reality. For this reason, the evaluation of impressions requires careful practice. As Epictetus explains, you must “set thoughts against your impression” to “overpower it, and not be swept away by it” (Epictetus 1995, 121). Like the Stoics, Nietzsche believes all we experience are appearances. Unlike the Stoics, for Nietzsche this idea does not necessitate an underlying reality. His philosophy radicalizes the Stoic concept of phantasms by collapsing the distinction between appearances and reality. Nietzsche also emphasizes the evaluation of impressions in his approach to morality, which he sets up as a problem of optics when he calls Judeo-Christian morals a “disease of the eye” (Nietzsche 1967a, 191).

*Dogville* involves the suspension of judgment in a way that performs an evaluation of phantasms. The aporetic ending of *Dogville* is significant because it provides conflicting impressions of right and wrong. From one perspective, pity is morally good and violence wrong. From the other perspective, violence is morally good and pity wrong. Instead of presenting morality in only one particular way, *Dogville* demands that we examine these conflicting impressions of moral judgment and decide for ourselves. *Dogville* deconstructs belief and demands belief without providing an answer, so that the burden of resolution lies with us, the viewer. The lack of resolution at the end reflects the nature of how we form moral beliefs.

Von Trier more importantly emphasizes the *changing* of perspective in moral reasoning through his use of light. The narrator notes a small change in the light over Dogville twice in the film: at the beginning when Grace first arrives and at the end when she decides to destroy the town. At the beginning of the film, the narrator notes a slight change of light as Grace realizes the town is watching her with distrust as a suspicious outsider. At the end of the film, after a long period of viewing things from their perspective, her merciful attitude toward the town is altered in the moonlight. As the narrator describes, “It was as if the light previously so merciful and faint, finally refused to cover up for the town any longer… The light now penetrated every unevenness and flaw in the buildings, and in the people.” The changes of light that alter her vision of the town express the conditional nature of belief. We can always see things differently. We can always shift perspective. More importantly, events and circumstances can shed light on a situation in a way that forces us to see it differently. Our moral judgments always take place under specific contingencies, changing circumstances, and partial understandings of matters. Von Trier, like the Stoics and Nietzsche, recognizes this very important aspect of moral belief: our judgments are always based on appearances, and appearances are not stable or certain.

*Dogville*’s cinematic style also acts as an evaluation of phantasms insofar as it emphasizes the fictional nature of appearances. While every film consists of appearances and viewers commonly understand the difference between the fictional images of cinema and the real world of everyday experience, von Trier exaggerates the fictional qualities of film. With *Dogville,* we are constantly aware that it is merely staged events. The town never appears as a real town, only the sketch of a town. The actors move through this space according to imaginary rules of its fictional geography. The audience feels the absence of a real place and real objects in a way that other films cover up with sets and props. Each scene of *Dogville* appears as a mere appearance that is open to interpretation. This technique not only suggests the ephemerality of all beliefs, it also surprises us with how it still achieves real effects. Despite the palpable falseness of what we see, we still have strong emotional reactions to these events. The minimalism of the set even magnifies our affective responses at time. The first time Grace is raped by Chuck, the absence of walls allows us to see the townspeople walking by outside oblivious to the atrocity of what is happening inside. This violation, hidden in one sense and in plain sight in another, allows us to visualize the complacency of the townspeople in a stark and horrifying way.[[3]](#endnote-3) There is a very raw and real quality to this style, which surprises us because of its obvious artificiality. Through fiction, von Trier illustrates something about our lived reality and the fictions that form our real world. Von Trier, like Nietzsche, suggests that fictions have reality since reality is created from fictions.

The Nietzschean resonances of von Trier’s style become more evident if we examine the relation between perspectivism and moral belief. In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche’s re-evaluation of values is framed in terms of perspectivism. He states that the idea of an objective perspective is a “nonsensical absurdity” and we should instead attempt to “employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations” (Nietzsche 1989b, III: 12). In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche describes perspectivism by explaining that all knowledge is interpretation and thus has “no meaning behind it, but countless meanings” (Nietzsche 1967b, §481, 267). These multiple interpretations reflect the needs and drives of our lives, which are circumstantial and subjective, not universal and unchanging. For Nietzsche there is no absolute truth, only fictional truths that give value to life and in doing so help us to live. All ideas are thus “provisional assumptions” (Nietzsche 1967b, §497). This contingency and groundlessness, however, reflect the very thing that Nietzsche wants to guide moral values: life. Life has no fixed nature but instead evolves to different challenges and situations posed by a given time and place. A value that is life-affirming will always look different from time to time and place to place. For this reason, forming life-affirming moral values requires the ability to shift one’s perspective.

*Dogville* explores this uncertain and shifting nature of perspective cinematically. Von Trier shifts between two contrasting methods of filming and editing: (1) discontinuous shots filmed with a hand-held camera and edited with jump cuts, and (2) overhead shots filmed with a crane. With this first technique, we are immersed in the action and at eye-level with the characters within the film. Von Trier captures interactions between characters with a hand-held camera, which records the slight hand tremors, shifting weight, and breath of the operator so that the perspective feels embodied and subjective. To add to this realism, von Trier had the actors perform for extended periods of time and lose themselves in the action and roles, rather than continually cutting the action and setting up a new camera angle. This technique, however, changes the editing process. Without spatial and temporal continuity between takes, von Trier must use jump cuts between shots within a scene. The wavering images of the handheld camera along with the jump cuts give the film a rough, unpolished feel. Points-of-view shift continually and force us to reorient ourselves as viewers. This method contrasts with continuity editing, which seamlessly moves from perspective to perspective to give an uninterrupted sense of space and time. Von Trier’s method, however, presents the falsity of continuity editing. Continuity editing requires a transformation of space and time that is possible only within the medium of film and not possible in our ordinary experience. Yet continuity editing makes a viewer lose oneself in the experience of the film so that it feels real. Continuity editing covers over its artificiality. In this sense, Von Trier’s method of filming long takes and assembling scenes with jump cuts is truer to experience because he cannot shift perspective without us becoming aware of the shift. He cannot jump from one moment in time to another without our awareness of this leap. This technique means we are keenly aware that film is an assemblage of images, not a complete whole. Yet despite the inability to immerse ourselves in this world wholly, there is something truthful about this technique because of how it treats our human perspective. The jump cuts draw our attention to how we see and not simply what we see.

Von Trier uses a second technique that draws further attention to the nature of perspective. These shaky, discontinuous shots contrast dramatically with the overhead shots filmed by a crane. From the God’s eye view of the camera crane, we can see the outlines of the buildings of Dogville that are drawn on the sound stage. From this perspective, we can view the town as a whole and see its layout like a map, which gives a sense of order. These overhead shots correspond to the voiceovers of the omniscient third-person narrator’s explanations of the story. At times von Trier adds superimposed images to give even more information, like a chapter title or demarcations that indicate the movements of the actors over time. These shots and voiceovers mean that *Dogville* unfolds in a very literary way like a novel. In contrast to the jump cuts of individual scenes, the overarching story-telling device is highly organized and structured. Von Trier thus not only utilizes two modes of filming and editing, he adopts two contrasting techniques of story-telling that give us very different impressions: (1) a subjective and changing perspective that disorients us, and (2) a privileged vantage point that provides structure and clarity.[[4]](#endnote-4) These visual cues expose the conflicting undercurrents within the film: the conflict between the impossibility of moral objectivity with the jump cuts and the demand for moral judgment with the overhead shots and omniscient third-person narrator.

This dramatic shift from one viewpoint to another makes us aware of perspective and also mirrors what moral judgment is like in life. When we find ourselves entangled in moral confusion, we often step back to find some critical distance and gain clarity. This is not to say that we can be completely objective or find a perspective of absolute truth, both of which are impossible. Even within the film, the critical distance of the narrator is finite because there is no absolute vantage point to observe the story. As humans, we can never remove ourselves completely from the time or place that shapes our perspective. All perspectives remain perspectives. Von Trier’s use of different perspectives does not resolve moral relativism but instead connects it to the problem of optics. All of these visual aspects draw our attention to how perspectives can be shifted or radically transformed. We continually take in images, make sense of them, and assemble them into a narrative that is imbued with our desires, fears, values, and illusions.

Perspectivism highlights the challenge to moral theory: to figure out the right thing to do in a world where nothing is certain. When faced with the fact that moral values are illusions with no stable basis, our beliefs evaporate into the ether. Yet we cannot live without the illusion of value. When ultimate oughts disappear, the question becomes what values we want to create and to what end. This task, however, presents a challenge that is difficult to confront. How do we build a new system of belief if there is no stable foundation? The moral aporia at the end of *Dogville* poses this very challenge. Like Nietzsche, *Dogville* questions all our beliefs without providing a clear answer. At the same time, Nietzsche and *Dogville* both assert the necessity of acting. Our moral reasoning lacks a firm basis, yet we must still act. Beliefs guide our actions even though we are always in the process of forming them and revising them. A complete system of morality that is universal, eternal, and unchanging is impossible. If morality is to serve life and life is always changing, morality becomes process of continual revision. To live is to change, and morality must have the same adaptability. Like Penelope’s weaving, the web of belief must be continually woven anew, undone and redone. To this end, provocative films like *Dogville* serve a vital purpose by unsettling moral frameworks that have grown untenable.[[5]](#endnote-5)

**IV. Cinematic Phantasms**

*Dogville* troubles and shakes our belief systems to the core. It is clearly a polemic against the ideals and principles that guide contemporary society. The film, moreover, does so in a way that reveals why beliefs lack stability and are subject to sudden shifts. *Dogville* draws attention to the gap between appearances and reality, which leaves a space that demands evaluation of not only what we believe but also how we form those beliefs. I have argued that this polemic is a way of re-evaluating moral values in the vein of the Stoics and Nietzsche. This re-evaluation of morals, moreover, involves more than the plot, themes, character development, or symbolism of the film. Von Trier plays with belief at the material and experiential level. In this way, *Dogville* present us with film as the medium where our beliefs can be projected and suspended for us to reflect upon them from a distance, but without them being removed from their concrete, personal, and affective dimensions. We gain reflective distance that allows us to question and transform what we believe, but this distance does not strip away the experiential or affective dimensions of our everyday experience. Film thus allows reflective distance without abstraction or disinterested contemplation.

Film has the power to question our deeply held assumptions about the world and to shift our perspectives. This power is not necessarily in its realism, however, as von Trier shows us, but in its ability to reveal how we see the world. We do not see the world as it really is. We always see the world as a fiction, as a phantasm. Cinematic images strike us in a way that is similar to our everyday sensory experience, but with film we are aware of its fictional nature. By showing us the strength of our affective and intellectual responses to blatantly artificial images, Von Trier asserts the reality of fiction. Von Trier thus harnesses the power of cinema to show us that all beliefs are merely beliefs. In doing so, he develops a powerful optics of belief that—if we think like the Stoics or Nietzsche—can transform our moral values in ways that truly serve life.

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**Notes**

1. The concept of the gift is also important for understanding the social, political, theological, and ethical questions at stake in *Dogville*. See Nobus 2007, Lorenzo 2007, Bradatan 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Nietzsche’s critiques of altruism and self-sacrifice are also relevant for understanding why he rejects compassion as the basis for ethics. See Janaway 2007, Reginster 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For analyses of von Trier’s depictions of the sexual abuse of women in his films and how they challenge patriarchy, misogyny, and gender, see Bainbridge 2004, Marso 2016, and Galt 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There is much more to say about the two contrasting types of filming and editing techniques von Trier uses in *Dogville*. As Francesco Casetti explains, film continually negotiates between conflicting types of the gaze: e.g. between the partial gaze of point-of-view and the totality of world that is given in movement and editing, between the penetrating gaze of the camera’s enhanced vision and the uniquely human gaze of cinema that is always anthropomorphic. Film is at once fantastical and real, fragmented and whole, immersive and distant. Casetti describes film as “an ever inventive synthesis of gazes that strived to bring about true compromises without ever sacrificing the complexity of contradiction” (Casetti 2008, 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. While my paper argues von Trier’s provocations can serve an ethical purpose, I do not address the controversies surrounding his work. Mette Hjort looks at the dangers of von Trier’s provocations not only in his films but also in his words and behavior off-screen and their real world effects (Hjort 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)