

A Study on von Trier's *Dogville*: An Amalgam of Aristotelian Dramatic Theatre and Brechtian Epic Theatre

Von Trier'in *Dogville*'i: Aristotelesçi Dramatik Tiyatro ve Brechtçi Epik Tiyatro'nun Bir Karışımı

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of Brechtian epic theatre was to break the illusion of mimesis that is achieved by dramatic theatre through the use of mimetic and teleological drive. Its ultimate aim was to show that the illusion of verisimilitude created by dramatic theatre and realist forms of representation serves only to the affirmation and promotion of the norms and values of the dominant discourse. The aim of this study, accordingly, is to provide a reading of von Trier's *Dogville* in terms of Aristotelian dramatic theatre and Brechtian epic theatre in order to argue that the film disregards the function of the characteristics of epic theatre that it employs and thus evacuates the meaning of them by the use of elements of dramatic theatre such as recognition, catharsis, and closure. Von Trier's *Dogville* has mostly been analysed in terms of the elements of epic theatre. However, it has been ignored that the film features some fundamental characteristics of Aristotle's dramatic theatre like recognition, catharsis, and closure. This study, therefore, examines *Dogville* in the light of Aristotelian dramatic theatre as well as of Brecht's theories within the context of epic theatre and Marxism to discuss whether the film fails to become a proper example of epic theatre on big screen.

Keywords: Dogville, epic theatre, dramatic theatre, catharsis, Brecht

ÖZ

Brechtçi epik tiyatronun amacı, taklitçi ve teleolojik bir anlatım aracılığıyla *mimesis* illüzyonunu yaratan dramatik tiyatroyu eleştirmekti. Brecht'in esas hedefi, dramatik tiyatro ve edebiyatta gerçekçilik akımı tarafından yaratılan sahnede ya da metinde gerçekliği sunma illüzyonunun baskın ideolojiye ve ana akım söyleme hizmet etmekten başka bir işleve sahip olmadığını göstermekti. Bu çalışmanın amacı, von Trier'in *Dogville* filmini Aristotelesçi dramatik tiyatro ve Brechtçi epik tiyatro bağlamında ele almaktır. Çalışmanın öne sürdüğü argüman; farkına varma (recognition), *katarsis* (catharsis) ve kapanma (closure) gibi dramatik tiyatronun temel unsurlarının kullanımıyla *Dogville* filminin epik tiyatro ve epik tiyatronun ilkelerinin içini boşalttığıdır. Von Trier'in *Dogville* filmi, çoğunlukla epik tiyatronun özellikleri bağlamında incelenmiştir. Filmin Aristotelesçi dramatik tiyatronun temel unsurlarına sahip olduğu, şu güne dek genellikle göz ardı edilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı da *Dogville* filmini Aristotelesçi dramatik tiyatro ile Brechtçi epik tiyatro ve Brecht'in Marksizm bağlamındaki teorileri ışığında ele alarak filmin iyi bir epik tiyatro örneği olmayı başaramadığını göstermektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dogville, epik tiyatro, dramatik tiyatro, *katarsis*, Brecht

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Introduction

Lars von Trier's *Dogville* consists of a prologue and nine chapters. It tells the story of a woman named Grace Margaret Mulligan who tries to escape and hide from mobsters. While escaping, Grace arrives in a small American town called Dogville, where she is provided with shelter in return for her labour and assistance to the people of the town. For a while, the people of the town give their consent for her stay in Dogville, but after hearing about a reward for someone who knows her whereabouts, they begin to abuse her. Von Trier's *Dogville* has been mostly examined and analysed only as a film which features elements of Brecht's epic theatre. Few studies have so far analysed the film in terms of the elements of Aristotelian dramatic theatre (Bağır, 2018: p. 52). Although Bağır's study emphasises the use of catharsis in the film and the paper shares his ideas on the impact of the use of catharsis on the film to a certain extent, it fully disagrees with his claim that the film only uses the narrator to fill in the gaps left by the characters. Another major difference between the two studies is that this study incorporates the elements of Aristotelian dramatic theatre and Brechtian epic theatre equally in the analysis of the film rather than mainly concentrating on either side. With the exception of a few, the majority of the studies performed on von Trier's *Dogville* ignored that the film features recognition, catharsis, and closure, which are among the fundamental characteristics of Aristotle's dramatic theatre as well as of realism. This paper, accordingly, by first discussing the characteristics of both dramatic theatre and epic theatre as well as briefly touching upon the evolution of drama, will put von Trier's *Dogville* under scrutiny and show why the film fails to become a proper example of epic theatre on the big screen due to its incorporation of recognition, catharsis, and closure.

1. Dramatic Theatre

Today's dramatic theatre has its roots in Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which he urges that tragedy—or the traditional form of drama, for that matter—is a unified whole whose parts cannot be removed without disrupting its integrity. Furthermore, in tragedy every incident is triggered by a precedent, and tragedy evokes pity and fear in the audience by the employment of catharsis at the end (Aristotle, 2001: p. 97). Furthermore, Aristotle states that the most important component of tragedy is plot, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end (Aristotle, 2001: p. 96). Dramatic theatre is constructed in such a way that it appeals to the audience's emotions and feelings by making them identify themselves with the characters and the story. This emotional identification with the characters and the story, as the paper will discuss, results in an illusory sense of wholeness in the audience. One of the key parts of "Aristotelian aesthetics [is] the important role that emotions play in our identifications with characters and situations depicted in art" (Curran, 2001: p. 167).

Instead of narration, the use of a unified plot that consists of incidents that are completely connected to one another is also significant for dramatic theatre because it establishes suspense and ensures that the audience is emotionally drawn into the story. To be more specific, the

connection of the scenes or incidents and the employment of suspense make the audience emotionally invested in the play. Having been exposed to this presented unified whole on stage and being emotionally invested in it, the audience is illusorily led to believe that what is represented on stage has something to do with external life, that this fixed meaning and single truth presented to them is the only version or form of meaning and truth as if there can be no other, which can also be regarded as epistemic violence.

Catharsis is a process of releasing strong emotions and feelings through a particular activity and experience like realist drama or dramatic theatre, in which the audience is led to identify with the characters and the story emotionally. Catharsis, in other words, for Aristotle, means a representation of a serious action “by means of pity and terror” (Aristotle, 2001: p. 95). It is the most important element and the ultimate aim of dramatic theatre. Its purpose is to make the audience share the experience by identifying with the characters and becoming emotionally involved in the play. In other words, it encourages the audience to experience the emotions and sensations which are intended to be conveyed in the play by the dominant bourgeois (applies to realist works) and aristocratic (applies to tragedy) epistemology for the purpose of presenting them with a totalising form of truth and meaning. This totalising truth and meaning, of course, have nothing to do with external life because there is no such thing as an ultimate fixed truth or meaning, for they vary and are plural. What is presented to the audience in the form of a fixed single truth is in fact the ideology of the dominant class, and through the staging of a realist play or a tragedy, the ruling class achieves to make the audience internalise its discourse and ideology so that the dominant class can maintain power and authority. The employment of catharsis in dramatic theatre, accordingly, has been a common characteristic of plays since ancient times because it is a way of manipulating the audience into feeling a sense of wholeness, which is illusory, by claiming to represent external life on stage by way of providing a single and fixed truth. Dramatic theatre, as Habib argues, achieves this effect on the audience by evoking pity and fear in them via a release of various emotions called catharsis due to its dramatic structure (Habib, 2005: p. 55).

The abovementioned illusory sense of wholeness refers to the illusion of representing external reality in a text or through the staging of a play; namely, to the illusion of mimesis. For centuries, since the development of Aristotle’s dramatic theatre and later on with realism, audiences have been manipulated by those who shared the dominant bourgeois or aristocratic epistemology and ideology. Dramatic theatre and realist texts are constructed in such a way that they appeal to the feelings and emotions of the audiences. The characters in dramatic theatre, as Aristotle puts forward, should be life-like (Aristotle, 2001: p. 102). Dramatic theatre is designed to involve audiences emotionally in the play in order to make them identify with the characters and the story so that they can experience catharsis at the end. This emotional involvement and identification with the characters are of great importance because they make the audience experience a feeling of joy, sadness or fear at the end, which leads them to internalise the totalising discourse and ideology of the bourgeois epistemology without questioning its taken-for-granted notions. From a rather Marxist point of view, it would not

be wrong to assert that the majority of works of dramatic theatre and realism have been the aesthetic weapons of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. It would, however, be misleading to assume that each work under the category of realism automatically becomes an aesthetic weapon of the dominant ideology, for there are, as is known by now, various mechanisms at work in the process of artistic creation such as language and its own agency, as well as the repressed materials in the unconscious of the author, and so on. Moreover, as Althusser also points out, some of the great works of art and literature make the audience and readers criticise the working mechanisms of the dominant ideology like capitalism even if the author himself/herself is a political advocate of that very ideology (Althusser, 1971: p. 224-225).

What are the characteristics of dramatic theatre? Amongst its chief aspects are mimetic and teleological drive—that is, there is a linear flow in the text; the story is based on causality. To be more specific, every incident is triggered by a preceding one, and this linearity and causality continues until the very end when the audiences experience catharsis, usually with a happy ending. Having gone through such an experience, the audiences become complacent and move on with their lives continuing to adopt the values and norms of the dominant ideology, thus ending up taking them for granted. In other words, the audiences, as a result of catharsis and thus of a release of emotions, feel an illusory sense of wholeness, or *jouissance* in Lacanian terms, and this makes them internalise the dominant ideology and discourse and accept the taken-for-granted norms and values of bourgeois epistemology as ultimate truth. This happens because the play provides the audiences with closure, in which usually justice is served and there is a happy ending. Therefore, audiences leave the stage, not feeling the urge or the need to question the assumed validity of the so-called social norms and values that are forced upon them by the dominant ideology.

The characters and events in realist works are attempted to be presented as if they are “lifelike,” as if external reality can be represented through a text or a play. Put it differently, realism is based on the illusion of the correspondence of the signifier and the signified, where each signifier leads to a signified. This illusion is constructed by the logocentric ideology of the bourgeois epistemology in order to inject into the audience the idea that what they see on the stage or read in a text can represent external reality and that the ultimate “truth” can be grasped. Of course, this “ultimate truth” or “external reality” is the truth and reality of the dominant ideology. Even if when it seems to feature social criticism on the surface, when one reads between the lines one realises that the main purpose of many realist texts (of course there are exceptions) is to promote the bourgeois epistemology and make the audiences take the norms and values of the dominant ideology for granted because, regardless of the social status of the author, the language the realist texts use is, for the most part, the language of the totalising discourse of the dominant ideology and what these texts utter are uttered with a point of view of the logocentric ideology and the bourgeois epistemology: “What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘*seeing*’, ‘*perceiving*’ and ‘*feeling*’ ... is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*” (Althusser, 1971: p. 222).

2. Evolution of Theatre Since Aristotle

Following ancient times, there were a couple of forms of drama that emerged in the Middle Ages. First of which were mystery plays, which were the earliest forms of theatre developed in medieval times. The aim of mystery plays was to provide religious messages and entertainment for the audiences, but they also featured criticisms of various social issues of the time (David and Simpson, 2012: p. 448). Mystery plays paved the way for the theatre in the period of Elizabeth I. Morality plays appeared simultaneously with mystery plays. They were filled with allegorical characters and presented the conflict between good and evil (2012: p. 507). Both mystery plays and morality plays followed in Aristotle's footsteps, as they are didactic in tone, aim to evoke pity and fear in the audience by the employment of catharsis, and plot-wise feature a linear flow, causality, and closure. The theatre of the English Renaissance, or Elizabethan theatre, gave rise to protagonists such as Shakespeare's Richard III or Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, that are more evil than good, or grey at best. Elizabethan theatre, therefore, did not particularly follow Aristotle's teachings on drama as it presented wicked characters as heroes (Greenblatt and Logan 2012: p. 557). Another striking difference between Aristotelian drama and Elizabethan drama is that whereas chorus is heavily used in Aristotelian tragedy, music and dance were vital parts of the Elizabethan theatre (2012: p. 558). Last but not least, the incorporation of comical elements into tragedies, which is in total violation of Aristotelian dramatic theatre, was a common practice in the theatre of the 16th and 17th centuries. Comedy was on the rise towards the end of the 17th century and in the early 18th century. These plays are called "comedies of manners", which "pick social behaviour apart, exposing the nasty struggles for power among the upper classes, who use wit and manners as weapons. ... The male hero lives for pleasure and for the money and women that he can conquer" (Lipking and Noggle, 2012: p. 2199). With the rise of poetry in the 19th century, drama was on the decline. Due to avoid heavy censorship, writers preferred to write "closet drama", which is a form of drama produced not to be performed onstage but to be read. Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Byron's *Manfred*, and Goethe's *Faust* are the most popular examples of closet drama. The rise of poetry and novels as well as of comedy and closet drama was foreshadowing the fall of tragedy as the most dominant literary form from the 19th century onwards. Drama was overshadowed by the novel in the 19th century, but realist drama was beginning to gain importance towards the end of the century thanks to such playwrights as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Henrik Ibsen, who tackled the social and political problems of the day (Christ and Robson, 2012: p. 1669). Problem play was a new form of realist drama that emerged in the 19th century. It represents social and political conflicts of real life through the characters' different points of view. George Bernard Shaw describes the elements of realist drama of the late 19th and early 20th century while exploring the essentials of Ibsenian drama:

the introduction of the discussion and its development until it so overspreads and interpenetrates the action that it finally assimilates it, making play and discussion practically identical; and, second, as a consequence of making the spectators

themselves the persons of the drama, and the incidents of their own lives its incidents[.] (Shaw, 1913: p. 152-153)

The 20th century was a period of great turbulences and the thinkers in the 20th century were trying to find solid ground on which they could produce ideas because in the early 20th century, all of the ideas which had been taken for granted were dissolved. There were so many “isms” in the 1920s and 1930s in order to replace the lost logos, for the very foundations of the Western metaphysics and thought, which is built upon the correspondence of the signifier and the signified as well as of the presence of the transcendental signified or absolute meaning, were on the brink of collapse due to the emergence of modernism, postmodernism and poststructuralism, which critiqued Platonic Western thought and realist tradition. Theatre was no different. Epic theatre and the theatre of the absurd, accordingly, were the preeminent rising subversive theatrical movements of the 20th century. Epic theatre and the theatre of the absurd, which were experimental forms of literature, shared similarities in the sense that they both emerged as a reaction to realism, which is the representation of the Western metaphysics in literature. Both forms of drama shattered “naturalistic convention in drama, making ... linear plot give way to fractured scenes and circular action, transparent conversation was displaced by misunderstanding and verbal opacity, a predictable ... universe was unsettled by eruptions of the irrational and the absurd” (Ramazani and Stallworthy, 2012: p. 1907). The theatre of the absurd, to be more specific, challenges such aspects of realist tradition as logocentrism, referential language, verisimilitude, linearity, teleological drive, closure, and so on. It offers self-reflexivity as opposed to referential language, problematisation of meaning-making mechanisms as opposed to the correspondence of the signifier and the signified, and almost no characterization and plot as well as no “meaningful” dialogue between characters as opposed to a plot with linear flow, causality, and closure. Epic theatre, as the paper will discuss in detail in the next chapter, aims to do something quite similar.

3. Epic Theatre

Epic theatre was developed by Bertolt Brecht, who was a Marxist German playwright, poet, and theatre director. As a keen Marxist and in accordance with Marxist ideals, Brecht believed that people must be changed first in order to change the social structure. By changing people, he meant that people must be made aware that realism, very much like religion, is a weapon that has been used by the ruling class to make people internalise its totalising ideology and discourse so that it can maintain its authority and power: “Brecht attacks Aristotelian catharsis as a kind of ‘opium of the masses,’ arguing that empathizing with characters prevents viewers from reflecting critically on the social causes of human suffering” (Curran, 2001: p. 167). Brecht developed epic theatre to break the illusion of representing the external life on stage as if truth or meaning is fixed and not plural, as if each signifier leads to a stable signified: “His aesthetics was anti-Aristotelian dramatic theatre” (Basuki, 2002: p. 137). In order to achieve that, he argued, theatre should be used because it is one of the most influential forms of art that has a great impact on people. Brecht developed epic theatre

because he believed that traditional forms of drama or dramatic theatre could never do that due to their being the products of the dominant bourgeois ideology: “[Brecht] ... thought that staging plays in accordance with the traditional drama led the theatre-goers into laziness since the presentation took hold of the emotions of the audience, thus preparing them for the perspective it wants to preach in the end” (Bal, 2020: p. 679). In developing epic theatre, he aimed to show that external life cannot be represented on stage as if truth or meaning is something fixed and ultimate and to make the audience realise the fact that what they are watching on the stage is only one of the many versions of truth. As Brecht himself puts it: “It is ... necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without the audience” (Brecht, 1964: p. 136).

In terms of its features, contrary to dramatic theatre, epic theatre employs a narrative, episodic structure, disconnected scenes, montage, music, and nonlinear development as an alienation effect in order to turn the audience into an observer instead of drawing them into the story (Basuki, 2002: p. 143). Moreover, the employment of episodic structures and montage break linearity as they cause sudden changes in terms of scene and time jumps in the story (Basuki, 2002: p. 143). Brecht’s purpose of developing epic theatre and employing an alienation effect is to break the illusion representing external life on stage and of presenting a fixed meaning or truth that dramatic theatre claims to achieve by the use of mimetic and teleological drive. By breaking this illusion, epic theatre prevents the audience from becoming emotionally involved in the play, identifying themselves with the characters, experiencing their emotions as well as suspense: “Instead of sharing an experience, the spectator must come to grips with things. ... Empathy, one of the goals of the classical drama, could be reduced to the minimum, and this was only possible by distancing the audience from the staged illusion” (Bal, 2020: p. 680). In addition, Brecht’s epic theatre also features historicization and spatial distance as the elements of the alienation effect by which it aims to make the audience remain as observers, without being emotionally invested in the characters and the story: “Brechtian alienation is an aesthetic device to make us aware, by means of a philosophical method, of our sociological and historical condition and situation. The act of alienation or estrangement produces, dialectically, a bewildered insight into the state of alienation” (Grimm, 1997: p. 43).

In accordance with their features, Brecht provides an insightful account of the differences between dramatic theatre and epic theatre regarding the position of the audience:

The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too—Just like me—It’s only natural—It’ll never change—The suffering of this man appals me ... That’s great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world—I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh. The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it—that’s not the way—That’s extraordinary, hardly believable ... That’s great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. (Brecht, 1964: p. 71)

In the quotation given above, Brecht emphasises the difference between dramatic theatre and epic theatre in terms of the audience's reactions and feelings. According to him, dramatic theatre makes the audience share the experience and emotions of the characters by making them identify with the characters and the story, find themselves in the play, feel that same thing has happened or might happen to them, and appreciate it because everything in the play seems life-like, whereas epic theatre makes the audience realise that what is represented on stage is only a single version of truth and truth is not something fixed or singular. What's more, epic theatre reveals that representing the story and the characters in a play as if they are life-like is an illusion because everything that occurs on stage might seem or feel extraordinary. Moreover, in terms of acting, Brecht urges that the actor should not completely devote himself to the character he or she is portraying: "The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying" (Brecht, 1964: p. 137). By doing so, the actor prevents the audience from emotionally investing in the character and identifying themselves with him or her undermining the illusion of the presentation of a fixed truth or meaning and of representing the external life on stage created by dramatic theatre to make the audience internalise the totalising ideology and discourse of the ruling class. To be more specific, the Brechtian actor is asked to adopt a critical approach towards the given circumstances regarding the character that s/he is supposed to portray, rather than merely transforming into the character. This means that the actor is in a position where s/he recognises the plurality of truth and explores the ideological interaction between the reality of the character and other realities (Karaboğa, 2006: p. 76), thereby undermining the idea of a totalising truth. Edward Murray's following remarks on the characteristics of Aristotelian dramatic theatre and Brechtian epic theatre shed light on the fundamental principles of each form of representation and demonstrate how they differ from each other:

In dramatic theatre, according to Brecht, there is action, the spectator is involved in the action, one scene exists for another, and there is linear progression with suspense over the outcome. In epic theatre, there is narrative, the spectator is an observer, each scene exists for itself, and there is a curved course of events with suspense over the process, or over what happens in each segment. Brecht could not accept Aristotle's idea of catharsis; he wanted not purgation, but alienation – that is, he wanted a theatre which would require decisions from spectators instead of merely subjecting them to an affective experience. (Murray, 1990: p. 106-107)

To sum up, Brecht's epic theatre, with all of its features of the alienation effect, criticises the ideology of the bourgeois epistemology by way of attacking dramatic theatre and realist texts and thus breaking the illusion that external life can be represented and that ultimate truth can be reached. Epic theatre breaks this illusion by the use of a narrator or music that constantly interferes with the story; by the employment of non-linear development of disconnected scenes or events in order to prevent a linear flow; by having the actors not completely transform themselves into the characters they portray in order to prevent the audience from identifying themselves with the characters; and by employing no closure and

catharsis at the end in order to prevent the audiences from being emotionally involved in the story. Epic theatre, put differently, “frustrates our desire to witness a logical historical development where names, dates and events fuse into a harmonious whole, as measured by regulated crescendoes, climaxes and resolutions” (Kowsar, 1983: p. 470). The mimetic drive and the illusory correspondence between the signifier and the signified are disrupted in epic theatre. What is represented on stage does not have any mimetic illusion. In other words, there is no verisimilitude. Epic theatre, then, as Althusser emphasises, disrupts totality by presenting a deferred centre (Althusser, 1969: p. 145). Epic theatre questions the taken-for-granted notions in bourgeois epistemology and shows audiences that truth is not a fixed notion representing external reality on stage or in a text and shows that ideas of a fixed, singular meaning as nothing but illusion.

4. Von Trier’s *Dogville*

Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*, as mentioned before, has been mostly examined and analysed as if the film only features elements of Brecht’s epic theatre. This is, of course, true to some extent, as Özmenek maintains:

Epic theater’s notions of stripped stage ... the use of a narrator, an episodic structure, and the alienation effects are all employed in the film. The bare stage with few props serves a purpose. This simplicity of the stage, with minimum visual distractions, focuses the viewer’s attention on the characters and their acting, and indirectly on the content. Such stylization, the non-existence of the walls, allows the viewer an insight that would have been concealed otherwise. (Özmenek, 2003: p. 86)

Thus, it would be appropriate to talk about the film’s employment of the aspects of epic theatre first in order to achieve a better understanding of how the employment of catharsis at the end makes the film betray its own nature as well as the fundamental principles of epic theatre.

As one of the most effective features of epic theatre, von Trier employs historicization and spatial distance by making the film take place in the United States of America in the 1930s: “... the first major resemblance between the film and Brecht manifests itself in the geographical and historical coordinates of the narrative. Namely, the film is set in the eponymous and fictitious mountain town in the United States of America ...” (Jovanovic, 2011: p. 272). Indeed, the film’s setting makes the film turn into a sort of documentary and puts a distance between the audience and the story as well as the characters, so as to prevent any emotional involvement and identification which could have taken place if the story was to take place in today’s world. As von Trier himself puts it in an interview: “Kapla: ‘Why did you choose to set the film in the ‘30s and not the present?’ / von Trier: ‘... my experience has been that if you choose a time other than the present, the film ... becomes more like a documentary and assumes greater authority’” (Kapla, 2003: p. 208-209). In addition, the

narrative structure of the film and the employment of a narrator, as a significant characteristic of epic theatre, prevent the suspense and thus make it quite difficult for the audience to be emotionally involved in the story. Bağır discusses the film's use of a narrator in terms of Aristotle's teachings on drama and argues that the function of the narrator is to fill in the gaps left by the characters (Bağır, 2018: p. 51-52). As stated before, although this paper shares Bağır's ideas on the impact of the use of catharsis on the film, it fully disagrees with his claim that the film uses the narrator only to fill in the gaps left by the characters. First and foremost, the very presence of a narrator and his interruption of the story break the linear flow and cause a disconnect between scenes, which are two of the main elements of Brechtian epic theatre.

The film literally takes place on stage and employs minimal objects and items, and the stage is for the most part bare:

Many of the town's walls and doors are indicated by the figures' movements and by sound effects: an off-screen knocking on wood and the squeaking of a door can be heard when a character mimes the actions. Similarly, the film denotes Moses the dog through naturalistic barking and a combination of linguistic and visual signs. (Jovanovic, 2011: p. 285)

Bare stage and the employment of a minimum of props are crucial to break the illusion of mimesis and to prevent the audience from experiencing an illusory sense of wholeness or *jouissance*, and the film achieves that for the most part. Bağır suggests that the unrealistic imitations such as the film's display of a bare stage and a minimum of props are part of the film's use of mimetic drive and this mimesis creates a sense of reality in the audience (Bağır, 2018: p. 52). However, the very purpose of having a narrator constantly interrupting the story, disconnected scenes, little decor on stage, and so on is to break the illusion of the correspondence between the signifier and the signified, which is aimed to be maintained through mimesis in dramatic theatre and many realist works.

Having examined and analysed *Dogville* in terms of its employment of the features of epic theatre, now it is time to put under scrutiny the film's employment of recognition, catharsis, and closure as the main characteristics of dramatic theatre. Grace, as the narrator puts it in the film, comes to Dogville only to see that the people in the town are not very different from the ones in her hometown, whereas she had hoped that it would be otherwise: "Grace had already thought for a long time ... the difference between the people she knew back home and the people she'd met in Dogville had proven somewhat slighter than she'd expected" (von Trier, 2003, 02:39:30). Put differently, Grace comes to realise that people are not so different in their nature and with some incitement, they all reveal their corrupt nature. As Koutsourakis maintains:

The people decide that Grace is entitled to stay, but when they realise that a large reward is offered to anyone knowing of her whereabouts, they start abusing her in various ways. Grace is coerced to work more hours, to accept a pay cut, and she

eventually becomes the victim of sexual assault on the part of the male population. (Koutsourakis, 2013: p. 336)

In her process of recognition, which means “a change from ignorance to knowledge, and so to either friendship or enmity, among people defined in relation to good fortune or misfortune” (Aristotle, 2001: p. 99) as one of the fundamental characteristics of dramatic theatre, Grace realises that even if the people of the town have been living under very difficult circumstances, what was done to her was wrong and it was her duty to make it right for the sake of humanity. As the narrator puts it:

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. It was as if her sorrow and pain finally assumed their rightful place. No, what they had done was not good enough. And if one had the power to put it to rights it was one’s duty to do so, for the sake of the other towns, for the sake of humanity, and not least, for the sake of the human being that was Grace herself. (von Trier, 2003, 02:42:15)

After her recognition, she decides to take her revenge by killing all the people in the town and destroying Dogville as she herself maintains after her father suggests that they can make an example of the dog by nailing it to a wall: “It would only make the town more frightened, but hardly make it a better place and it could happen again. Somebody happening by, revealing their frailty ... I want to make this world a little better” (von Trier, 2003, 02:43:57). This act of Grace’s leads to both closure and catharsis, which take place at the end of a play. It strongly contradicts with the core principles of epic theatre because it leads to closure and it allows the audience to release their emotions and feelings by being emotionally invested in the story and identifying with Grace. Grace, as the protagonist of the story, takes her revenge by destroying the town and killing everyone in it, making the audience feel a sense of wholeness now that justice is served and the film has a happy ending. The closure and catharsis in the film betrays the nature of epic theatre and undermines every aspect of epic theatre that the film employs prior to Grace’s recognition and catharsis. They do not make the audience question the taken-for-granted notions of bourgeois epistemology and realise that there are many forms of truth, and that meaning is not something singular and fixed, as epic theatre aims to achieve by its open-endedness (by disrupting the linear flow and preventing suspense with the employment of narrator and episodic structure, by breaking the illusion of mimesis via narrative and having the actors not completely transform themselves into the characters they portray, and so on). Regarding this very matter, Koutsourakis urges that *Dogville* makes the audience question reality and moral values: “Building on Bertolt Brecht’s idea of experimentation as a method that makes the audience question knowledge and social values that are taken for granted, *Dogville* presents the audience with a set of questions that force them to perceive social reality and human relationships as changeable and not as ‘natural’ and fixed” (Koutsourakis, 2013: p. 335). He is, however, mistaken because the film does not make the audience question the taken-for-granted notions of bourgeois

epistemology, due to the illusory sense of wholeness that the audiences experience at the end of the film because of the employment of catharsis. Having experienced a happy ending where the ideology of bourgeois epistemology is affirmed through the victory of Grace, who belongs to the ruling class, over the people of Dogville, who belong to the working class, the audiences move on with their lives continuing to internalise the taken-for-granted notions of the ideology of the ruling class. In other words, the audience does not feel the need to question anything because they are provided with closure in the form of a happy ending. They witness that “justice” is served and the “order” is restored, which are crucial illusions for the ruling class to maintain its authority and power because they are the justice and order within bourgeois epistemology. Von Trier, in his interview with Stig Björkman, justifies the ending of the film by saying that *Dogville* is a film about revenge: “I said I could see myself making a film about revenge. I thought the most interesting thing would be to come up with a story where you build up everything leading to the act of vengeance” (Björkman, 2004, para. 7). Moreover, he, in his interview with Marit Kapla, justifies Grace’s act of revenge by saying that she does the right thing by taking her revenge on the people of Dogville: “The film portrays what happens before vengeance is wreaked. The film has a theme similar to that in my other films, except that this woman doesn’t turn the other cheek” (Kapla, 2003: p. 210). Von Trier’s employment of catharsis at the end of the film can be explained in saying that he did it in order to appeal to mainstream audiences as well as to the audience of epic theatre. To be more specific, though he justifies the employment of catharsis by stating that the film is about revenge, von Trier probably employed catharsis and closure in the film for the sake of the box office by making it appeal to both the mainstream audiences and the audience of epic theatre at the same time.

Conclusion

Even if von Trier’s *Dogville* is one of the finest examples of epic theatre on big screen—of course until the point of Grace’s revenge and the audience experience catharsis—, with the employment of recognition, catharsis, and closure, it betrays not only the fundamental principles of Brecht’s epic theatre but also itself, which presents the features of epic theatre artfully until it evacuates the meaning of those features as if they never took place when it injects the audiences with the taken-for-granted notions of bourgeois epistemology and promotes the ideology of the ruling class with Grace’s revenge and victory at the end. To be more specific, as the paper has already emphasised, dramatic theatre and realism have been for centuries appropriated by the dominant class as aesthetic weapons to culturally subjugate audiences by presenting a totalising truth, which serves only to the promotion of the mainstream discourse and ideology of the ruling class. Put differently, dramatic theatre and realism have always been used to make the audiences internalise the taken-for-granted values and norms of the ruling class. Epic theatre, as aforementioned, emerged as a reaction to this cultural and ideological subjugation. Epic theatre functions as to emphasise the idea that what is represented or verbalised in a play or in a text has nothing to do with ultimate or totalising truth, nor does it have any bearing on external reality through referential language, which

ultimately aims to convey a transcendental signified. Von Trier's *Dogville* has been considered by many as an example of epic theatre on the big screen as the film indeed incorporates many elements of epic theatre. Few studies have so far focused on the aspects of the Aristotelian dramatic theatre that the film incorporates. It has been ignored by the majority, however, that the film in fact undermines its incorporation of the elements of epic theatre by its employment of recognition, catharsis, and closure, which are the main features of dramatic theatre and realism. Therefore, it is safe to say that the film becomes an amalgam of dramatic theatre and epic theatre because of its simultaneous incorporation of recognition, catharsis, and closure from Aristotelian dramatic theatre and narrative and episodic structure, disconnected scenes, nonlinear development, historicization, and bare stage from Brechtian epic theatre.

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