



Grace...

A few white lines on a dark ground and one or two sticks of furniture – that is all you need for a story about the debasement of humanity. This is the schematic representation of a village community in which the member's dilapidated houses are ranged along what passes for the main street. Elm Street is ('staat te lezen' bedoelt Ole volgens mij) in the middle. Left and right is an irregular scattering of compartments, the floor plans of the houses. Inside are the names of the inhabitants. For the rest, just a few indications of other features likely to be encountered: an abandoned mine, a vegetable garden. The very lack of structures ensures that the impression you get is the one desired by the deviser of this stylized setting: one of total familiarity and total shabbiness. Welcome to Dogville, somewhere in the US of A. But director Lars von Trier has something very special in mind for this unremarkable community. Just as the lines on the ground stand for a village, the village itself stands for the rest of the world. It serves as a model for a universally recognizable phenomenon. Perhaps not so much because of the surroundings, nor even the relations with family and neighbours, but because of what happens when a stranger from outside arrives in their midst and holds a mirror up to the community, creating an intense moment in which everyone must choose where he or she stands. That person from outside is Grace, a character devised in order to demonstrate how everyone is granted a few opportunities to raise themselves morally, only to bungle them. Because this is what they all do. Slowly and painfully the villagers open their hearts to Grace. Disconcerted by the discovery there of a yawning emptiness, they immediately turn on the one

who has confronted them with this truth. To be incapable of recognizing good and beauty is a terrible thing, but it is above all unfortunate for the person concerned. Wreaking revenge on good and beauty, however, concerns all humankind. As such, *Dogville* is a monument of despair. Scantly represented *Dogville* provides the setting for a universally resonant descent into barbarism. In *Dogville* human beings behave like wolves and the village's end is in keeping with this. Human beings can sink no lower than this.

The action of *Dogville* takes place in interiors that need no more than the barest indication of their function. Tom's place. At school. In church. At home. The moral collapse unfolds against a backdrop of archetypical settings we recognize from childhood. However impoverished the life, it is always imbued with the richness of a place where you belong, a *genius loci*. This makes the contrast between the infinite coldness of human failings and the warmth of village relationships all the greater. It is the cosy intimacy of home that fosters the cold-shouldering of outsiders, any deviation from which is liable to confront you, at an existential level, with the actual emptiness of your world. *Dogville* demonstrates that there is no inside, only outside. That the worst resides outside in the most heavily defended inside. Familiarity is confining. But strangeness is blinding.

Ole Bouman