Absence in a textual "Dogville"

Oana ANDRIESE
University of Suceava

Résumé: Le noyau de cet article est représenté par le concept d' «absence» de Derrida et par son applicabilité dans un décor de nature textuelle présent dans le film *Dogville*, Lars Von Trier. *L'absence*, propre à tout signe par sa propre nature, peut être manipulée pour influencer en quelque sorte le récepteur si habitué aux décors cinématographiques stéréotypés.

One of the most interesting movies of the last decade is, no doubt, Dogville, not because its subject, distribution, or characters, but because the "mise-en-scene". The entire action of the movie takes place on an empty scene, always present in the eye of the beholder, stage on which certain objects are represented by white lines drawn on this writing-pad, the stage. Still, there are real objects present, but only with the purpose to make a reference to something else. Thus, the entire stage transforms itself into a giant textual entity where both phonetic and non-phonetic writing are used. The images of certain objects function also as signs for something else, transforming themselves into figurative speech (Derrida, 2004:102). What this setting implies is the textual nature of the world itself, alluding to Barthes' theory about the infinite of text, that is "the text is infinite and contains everything" (Barthes, 1997:156).

Regarding the world of Dogville as a textual entity one cannot limit to call the receiver of such a text a reader, because the non-scriptural code of the text and the visual nature of the entire product. As a movie, Dogville must have viewers, and as a

BDD-A17846 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:05 UTC)

text, it must have readers. Combining these two facets, we venture to call the receiver of the Dogville with the name of reader/ viewer.

The question that arises when such textual scenery like the scene of Dogville, is taken into discussion, is how can it work for a reader/viewer so anchored to the traditional rules of cinema. To explain its func-tionality, the main purpose of the present article, we need to bring forward Derrida's concept of "absence", defined by John Philips as "the disappearance of the world behind the veil of language" (Philips, 2006).

Paradoxically, absence is something present in every sign because of its very nature: a sign replaces an object that is missing. Thus, the present sign replaces an absence that leaves its mark inside the sign. Moreover, absence is a property of any type of writing because. "A written sign […] is a mark that subsists one which does not exhaust itself in the moment of its inscription and which can give rise to an iteration in the absence and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context has emitted or produced" (Derrida, 1988: 9).

Present in every sign, absence can take various forms. The most obvious is the absence of the receiver. The birth of the text, writing, takes place without the receiver to be implied. When the text has arrived in the hands of the receiver, another form of absence can easily be identified: the absence of the emitter. The text must remain readable, although its author is absent. Including this form of absence in Barthes' theory, one can venture to say that no doubt the author is absent since it is no longer alive. Thus, "it is language which speaks, not the author" (Barthes, 1997:143).

Authorship is restricted to a simple cultural convention and it does no longer precede the text (Foucault, 2003, 418). The presence of the author would itself imply an absence, as the presence of the author enables a certain limitation of meaning, as it prefers one in the other's detriment. So, the presence of the author implies an absence of meaning. Luckily, this is not the case in Dogville, as in this textual world, with textual characters, no author is present, and the impression of the reader/viewer is that

BDD-A17846 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:05 UTC)

these very characters are the ones who write their own destiny, captured in the text of Dogville.

Reducing the dimensions from an entire text to a single sign, Derrida identifies the facets of absence that found their applicableness at this level: the absence of the referent and the absence of the signified. The most common form of absence is the absence of the referent, as "An utterance […] can very well be made understood without its real object (its referent) being present" (Derrida, 1988: 10).

The lack of referents is the main characteristic of the Dogville stage. The entire scenery is made up of signs that stand something else and replace the real object. These absent referents do nothing else but to emphasize the importance of the signified. The reader/viewer perceives a signifier and must mentally construct the signified and place it on the stage. Thus, the signifier 'dog' enables the reader/viewer to construct the signified of the dog called Moses. This signified will animate the scene of Dogville. The shape and size of Moses is dependent of every single reader/viewer but does not affect in any way the meaning of the movie.

In most of cases, one signifier is no longer sufficient to start the creating process in the mind of the reader/viewer. Thus, most of the signifiers are doubled by another, both having the same signified, that must so strongly replace the absent referent. The gooseberry bushes are drawn on the floor. But this signifier would not be able to lead to the aimed signified and a second signifier is needed. In this case, a scriptural one is added for the reader/viewer to construct the signified 'gooseberry bushes'. The absence of the referent endows the reader/viewer with a total freedom to construct an ideal world of Dogville based on signifieds.

Still, one can identify certain referents on the scene. These referents are used as signifiers for another absent referent. Some clear examples of such a game of presence/absence are the church and Ma Ginger's Store. At a first sight, the reader/viewer sees on the stage is a suspended belfry and a shop window that have their specific purpose in the context of the movie. From this point of view, they are present referents. Still, changing the perspective

BDD-A17846 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:05 UTC)

due to a change of context, these referents become the signifiers for now absent referents. Metonymy is used in such cases by applying a single part of an object to the entire object (Fiscke, Hartley, 2002: 49). The reader/viewer will con-struct the mental images of a church and a store starting from one of its parts. Thus, the present referent becomes a present signifier of a present signified but an absent referent.

Because of this lack of referentiality the sign becomes dual as the signifier present on the scene leads to the mental construction of the signified. The role of the absence of the referent is best described by the director of Dogville itself, the unconventional Lars von Trier:

„My theory is that you forget very quickly that there are no houses or whatever. This makes you invent the town for yourself but more importantly makes you zoom in on the people. The houses are nor there so you cannot be distracted by them and the audience doesn't miss them after a time because of this agreement you have with them that they will never arrive" (Lars Von Trier, 2004).

The functionality of this scenery is based upon a convention between the reader/viewer and the textual entity to mentaly replace the absent referent with the present signified. The absence of the referent allows the readers/viewers to construct their own image of a Dogville that becomes in such o way, by the lack of particular signs, universal.

Another particular case of absence identified by Derrida is the absence of the signified. Seldom present, this type of absence has a powerfull effect upon the receiver of a textual entity. In Derrida's theory the absence of the signified generates a „crisis of meaning" (Derrida, 1988:11). In Dogville this crisis of meaning is asociated with moments of crisis. Considering the absence of the referent the main particularity of the Dogville scenery, the referent cannot be present, not even in the absence of the signified. Thus, the signifier stands for itself, becoming empty of any meaning. Normaly, the reader/viewer constructs the signified starting from this present signifier. But in certain moments of

BDD-A17846 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:05 UTC)

crisis, the mind of the reader/viewer is to shocked to be able to construct the signified, and he or she fails to read the signifier. Such a moment of crisis and maybe the most relevant is the scene of the rape that takes place in Chuck and Vera's house.

While inside his house Chuck is raping Grace, the female protagonist, Tom, the male protagonist and in love with Grace passes by and takes a moment to gaze at the house. He cannot see the rape inside, because a house has walls, according to the rules the reader/viewer has agreed with in the first minutes of the movie. The fact that Tom does not interfere to stop the rape, becomes a gesture that functions as a signifier for the absent walls that prevent him from seeing inside. But the impact of the scene upon the reader/viewer is so intense, as he or she fails to read Tom gesture in such a way. A mental barrier stops the reader/viewer from placing the signified, walls' in their proper place, as until this point. This lack of perception creates a crisis of meaning because the lack of the signified, absence used in a manipulative way. In this context the absence of meaning is used „in an active and actual manner, with the attention and the intention of signification" (Derrida, 1988: 11).

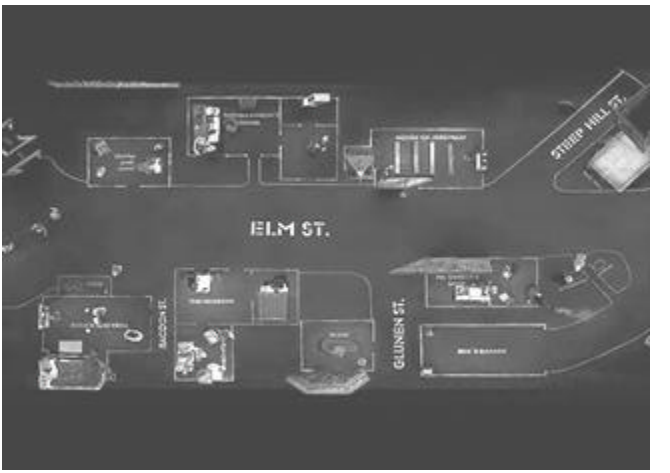
This rape scene becomes very powerful as the embodiment of human ignorance, one of the main themes of the moovie.

The notion of abcence is used in Dogville in order to manipulate the reader/viewer that agrees to this form of manipulation in the fist moment os the moovie. Moreover, absence itself can be manipulated in order to create special forms of signification and to surround the world of Dogville with the power to manipulate the reader/viewer. Derrida's concept found its aplicability on the movie of Lars von Trier, a movie with very unusual textual characteristics, and a complex though simple scenery.

BDD-A17846 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:05 UTC)

Images of absence:

The town of Dogville



The bellfry and the shopwindow



BDD-A17846 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:05 UTC)

The dog Moses



Bibliography

Barhes, Roland [1977], **Image, Music, Text**, Fontana Press, London.

Derrida, Jacques [1988], **Limited Inc.**, Northwestern University Press, Evanston.

Derrida, Jacques, **Freud and the Scene of Writing**, avalaible at http://links.Jstor.org/sici?sici=00440078%281972%290%A48%C74%3AFATSOW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N, Wed, Aug. 25, 18:13:2004.

Fiske, John, Hartley, John [2002], *Inelele televiziunii*, Institutul European, Iasi.

Foucault, Michel [2003], "What is an author?", apud Sibisan Aura, *Theories, A Reader*, Paralela 45, Pitesti, pp. 403-419.

Lars Von Trier [2006], "Interview about Dogville", avalaible at, www.rottentomatoes.com/m/dogville/about.php, Aug. 14, 09:12.

Philips, John, "Derrida and Deconstruction", avalaible at http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/derriductioncontents.htm, August 18, 2007, 12:36.

Sibisan, Aura [2003], *Theories, A Reader*, Paralela 45, Pitesti.

BDD-A17846 © 2008 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:56:05 UTC)