

"Young Americans":  
David Bowie and the Citizens of *Dogville*

Perhaps one of the most striking features in Lars von Trier's *Dogville* is the final slideshow, its blunt naturalism and dynamic speed a great contrast to the stylized, measured flow of the film itself. The choice of David Bowie and his song "Young Americans" is by no means accidental in this respect, not only for its merry rhythm and gloomy lyrics, but for the image the artist represents in himself. Bowie is a cultural icon of some significance, and by 2001, when von Trier filmed *Dogville*, the singer's reputation as a musician, actor, and pop culture image was established to such a degree, that his somewhat questionable, or at least unorthodox sexual norms already reached a cult status in themselves. This same sexuality as a reaction to the star cult surrounding David Bowie as a person is, again, an unorthodox yet fruitful way to interpret the appearance of his song at the end of *Dogville*, just as much as it can serve as a basis for a comparison between Bowie and the characters of Tom and Grace in particular as far as pop cultural iconography of androgyny is concerned, in motion picture and music. For the sake of argument I will analyze appearances of Bowie's songs at the final credits of several films that articulate a sort of innate criticism of pop culture and "American culture" as such, namely David Fincher's *Se7en* and its treatment of law both human and superhuman, David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and the issue of industrialized sexuality through narrative pornography, and finally Mary Harron's *American Psycho* and the notion of sociocultural nonexistence: these are, in the von Trierian sense, all the citizens of *Dogville*.

A strong semblance is to be found between modern popular star cult and religious worship, in both the overzealous fanaticism and the dichotomy of love and hate, the mental and sexual desire of becoming one with the adored subject via identification or vicarious (more recently acoustic and primarily visual) pleasure. A contemporary piece with Bowie's *Young Americans*, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) is a perfect example for that. For this purpose perhaps it should be "Grace Mulligan Superstar", in the von Trierian sense. It is along this von Trierian savior-star trajectory that I wish to examine David Bowie and his vocal and iconic appearance.

Just as Nicole Kidman represents a savior turned inside-out (in both gender and methods of salvation), so does David Bowie questions star cult and the notion of a modern messiah through such works as *The Man Who Sold the World* (1971), *Hunky Dory* (1971), and predominantly *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), by

becoming and embodying the very icon he ridicules, subverting it by enacting (and overdoing) all its idiosyncrasies. The validity of the same icon and its gender is questioned through such lines as "Femme fatales emerged from shadows / To watch this creature fair / Boys stood upon their chairs / To make their point of view / I smiled sadly for a love I could not obey / Lady stardust sang his songs / Of darkness and dismay" ("Lady Stardust"), Bowie himself embodying, as he sings his (her) own rise and downfall from an outsider's point of view as well as it reflects in retrospect on the behavior of the citizens of Dogville towards Grace, or "It ain't easy to get to heaven when you're going down" ("It Ain't Easy"), which shortly summarizes the basic plotline of *Dogville*: the U-turn symbolically shown at the opening credits. Bowie maintained this image of the extraterrestrial transexual rock star (a lepper messiah in "Ziggy Stardust", a name inspired by Bowie's contemporary singer, Iggy Pop, with whom he had a long lasting and controversial affair) in his music videos as well, visualizing his own projected image. I will return to this parallel of Bowie and Grace at a later point, after a brief survey of "the woman on screen" as such, all in order to map the woman on screen with regards to David Bowie and the woman on screen in the von Trierian sense.

In order to shed some light on the previous comparison the fundamental notion of objectifying the woman as an image is to be examined. In the introduction to his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault suggests that sexual representation and, more fundamentally, sexual discourse (or discourse of sexuality) is a reciprocal after-effect of the repressive nature of sexuality in western society (11-13). In chapter I of *The Repressive Hypothesis (The Incitement to Discourse)* Foucault examines and contextualizes the necessity of a verbal and visual representation of sexuality in both high and low culture (19-21). As a reaction to legal and Christian indoctrination the repressive nature of sexuality and its subsequent discourse had to surface in different manners or, in other words, generally human and natural desire that is ultimately and culturally repressed at such a broad scale will require and in a long run will find a way to ventilate. In the second chapter (*The Perverse Implantation*) Foucault distinguishes three major factors according to which sexuality was and had been judged and interpreted by: canonical law, Christian pastoral, and civil law:

They were all centered on matrimonial relations: the marital obligation, the ability to fulfill it, the manner in which one complied with it, the requirements and violence[s] that accompanied it, the useless or unwarranted caresses for which it was a pretext, its fecundity or the way one went about making it sterile, the moments when one demanded it (...), its frequency or infrequency, and so on (Foucault37)

In this manner these three laws determined and oriented sexuality and the contemporary notion of decency and indecency prior to nineteenth century. In some ways, these ideas permeate the social and cultural diasporas of later ages as, through prohibition and repression (41), sexuality and the woman as its object remained unspoken, not discussed, and indeed unperformed in a sociocultural context, only through a male filter. These undercurrents went through long transformations with the development of visual culture as a means to an end and an excuse to put the object of the gaze on public display.

What Foucault defines as "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (45) is reinterpreted in the light of consumer society, mass production, popular culture, and visual entertainment in the form of the cinema and pornography, two major constituents of the aforementioned elements of twentieth century society and culture, and a direct manifestation of the (male) gaze. In accordance with that sexuality is a product and women as objects are facts and figures for the purposes of financial gains and visual (real and tangible, in a vicarious manner) pleasure. Chuck, Vera, Bill, and Tom immediately spring to mind as perpetrators and the ultimate orchestrator of the continuous, repetitive, and mechanic violation and abuse of Grace. In this sense, Tom is the bearer/projector of the gaze who directs the attention of the citizens (i.e. audience). With this established, a further examination of the visualization of women is necessary.

In order to understand the corporeal nature of the gaze as a reaction to prohibition and repressed discourse, an investigation of the camera and cinema is required. In *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* Jacques Lacan interprets the camera as the signifier of the gaze (91). The camera is associated with illumination and "the presence of others as such" (84), i.e. the signifier, the viewer in front of the screen. In his interpretation however, it is the viewer, the owner of the gaze that produces the light, it is he that is the source of illumination and at the same time the object of the reciprocal turn (Foucault 11-13) of representation that is projected back from the subject image from the screen (Lacan 83-84).

The screen itself is of utmost importance, as it creates a barrier, a filter through which the signifier (the gaze) becomes the signified (subject of representation). This provides an explanation for the vicarious nature of identification with the signified in cinema. In this sense, the camera is less a machine, but rather a primarily two-way (if somewhat complex) field of relations between the gaze and the object (Lacan's subject of representation), the signifier and the signified (Silverman 136). The signified as an object, the look as spectacle is thus inscribed into the mind of the male signifier and on the role of the woman on screen. In this sense however, Tom serves as the screen through which the citizens' gaze is directed. He

is the filter, just as David Bowie is when he acts Ziggy Stardust on stage wearing green pajamas, red hair dye, and snow white tan. Even though the audience knows his true identity, they are expected to believe that they do see a rock star from Mars. They believe the spectacle, just as the citizens of Dogville do. To further the argument, I will introduce a radical feminist interpretation of the male gaze in visual culture.

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Laure Mulvey maps the metaphysics of the woman as image, the woman as signified, and the woman as the object of visual and corporeal sexual desire. She introduces the female image as a reciprocal answer for a phallogocentric culture (I. A). She separates two primary and contradictory methods through which a male viewer relates to the female subject on screen: scopophilia that is sexual stimulation through visibility and a proverbial narcissistic/egotistic identification with the image seen (II. A, B). In the cinema this manifests as two separate codes of behavior:

Thus, in film terms, one implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen (active scopophilia), the other demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like. The first is a function of the sexual instincts, the second of ego libido. (Mulvey II. C)

In this sense one can either be attracted to the signified via visual stimulation or identify with her (it) by applying egotistic conduct as, again, a vicarious interpretation of the visual pleasure. The image (object of the gaze) at the representational end of the signifier-signified relation is as much a projector of an image as the receiver: the roles of viewed and viewer seem to intermingle with one-another: the signified being a reflection of the signifier (Silverman 141). This already blurs the fine line between Lady Stardust and Ziggy Stardust, and incorporates the two into David Bowie himself, the (en)actor, the performer, who is himself (herself/itself) used as a signifying and signified object when consciously chosen as musical icon at the end credits of any film. Immediately we can turn to Grace and Tom, two characters displaying highly androgynous traits of sexuality, two blurs of the sexual signifier and the signified.

Building on Silverman's argument, it is difficult to decide who the signifier is and who is the signified in the case of the two 'lovers' in *Dogville*. Initially it is definitely Tom, and through him the townsfolk, while after the 'change of light' it is rather Grace, especially at the very end. The turning point, where the boundary seems to blur is perhaps the 4th of July feast, where the two express their mutual love, albeit in a peculiar manner, psychologically speaking. It is Grace who is more masculine (as far as traditional sexual behavioral codes and

stereotypes are concerned) in the sense that she launches the topic and initiates the confession (i.e. the Foucaultian discourse), while Tom is much more feminine in his reserved, contemplating behavior that borders on outright fright. From this point on their relationship deteriorates to the level of Tom losing any semblance of gender: he becomes the asexual, inert screen, a means by which the citizens take pleasure in the object of their gaze (David Bowie adopted a similar asexuality via the 'Thin White Duke' appearance maintained through his 'Berlin Trilogy' albums; the point being that the audience do not watch the 'star' of the show, they rather watch the show through 'it'). Only this is not mere visual stimulation, even if the forced sexual encounters are reduced to the level of a conveyor belt, where Grace is the work station.

After the arrival of the Boss and Grace's epiphany she is endowed with nearly superhuman powers by commanding life and death, a reversal of the female role in a phallogocentric society, especially by the way she manages to 'penetrate' Tom who, in his turn, failed to do the same with her and verbalizes his frustration about the fact, while she does so with a gunshot, by appropriating a quintessential icon of phallogocentric visual imagery: the perfect reciprocity of Mulvey's scopophilia. Thus Grace restores equilibrium, and so does David Bowie, by 'breaking up the band' after the fall of Ziggy and Lady Stardust in the title song of that iconic album. The gestures themselves are appropriative and subversive at the same time, where the imagery of on-screen phallogocentric society and the filtered gaze are concerned: breaking up the Spiders from Mars and butchering the Dogville townsfolk signify a (pop) cultural reversal. With the citizens of Dogville dead, it is time to take a look at the "Young Americans".

Nomen est omen, the choice of David Bowie is as conscious in *Dogville* as that of the name Grace. Born as David Jones, David Bowie took his name from Jim Bowie, 'hero' of the Alamo and the namesake of the famous 'Bowie knife', all three being prominent cultural icons in America. "Young Americans" is situated under the closing credit sequence, with a slideshow made of Jacob Holt's photos from his documentary book *American Pictures*, 1984. As the song progresses, so do the pictures in the material they portray: first it is only portraits and faces, later it is scenes with drunkards, beggars, homeless people, and generally the great average of country society (not a particularly unbiased representation), most of them holding some kind of a firearm.

Another cultural icon is brought into the tableaux as president Nixon appears when Bowie reaches that line in the song: "Do you remember, your president Nixon? Do you remember the bills you have to pay?". Apart from the evidently intended pun, the somewhat

controversial yet undeniably important cultural icon that is Richard Nixon is inseparably linked with a historical and sociocultural icon in America: the Watergate scandal and the president's subsequent voluntary leaving of office in 1974, one year before the album *Young Americans* appeared. In this manner David Bowie and his song are clearly situated as the filter through which one must witness the passing pictures as signified, and a screen which reflects those same images back on the signifier as the subject of representation. It is, however, not the only instant where Bowie is integrated into a script in such an intricate manner, therefore a further examination of the 'other' citizens of Dogville is in order.

In David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995) Trent Reznor (Nine Inch Nails) is responsible for the opening song, "Closer". It is a heavily edited version of the song, where only the last line of the chorus is sung: "You bring me closer to God" when the title appears, thus setting the scene for the plot to unfold, and also giving a cue for the audience of the shape of things to come. It is of further note that the spatial setting for the film, the decaying city where it never stops raining remains unnamed; much like Dogville, it can be at any place, at any time. In the movie Foucault's triumvirate of canonical law, Christian pastoral, and civil law resurface in this interpretation: det. Somerset (Morgan Freeman) being the canonical law and jurisdiction, John Doe (Kevin Spacey) the Christian/religious indoctrination and judgment, the celestial power, while det. David Mills (Brad Pitt) is the civil law, common sense, whose wife is the object of desire, the unseen and untraceable signified.

All three betray human emotions at certain points, and by the end it is indeed difficult to determine who had gained the upper hand, if anyone at all, a point which is illustrated by David Bowie's "The Heart's Filthy Lesson" during the end credits. Lines such as "If there was only some kind of future" and "What a fantastic death abyss / It's the heart's filthy lesson" reflect on the controversial nature of the alleged moral in the story: apparently there is nothing to be gained by the sacrifice of either men, yet it is undoubtedly necessary. The wife of the civil law (Gwyneth Paltrow) embodies no deadly sin whatsoever apart from being female, and is murdered, passively, off-screen, as an unseen signified. Det. Mills, the civil law, embodies Wrath, while John Doe, the celestial law, embodies Envy: the two are irreconcilable and end up destroying one another, on-screen, while the canonical law of det. Somerset remains incapable. It is the complete subversion of orthodox sexual and moral imagery, the blurring of the signifier and the signified in a lawman-criminal as well as a male-female context: it is the heart's filthy lesson.

In *Lost Highway* (dir. David Lynch, 1997) composer Angelo Badalamenti took David Bowie's title track "I'm Deranged" and divided it as a recurring motif of the film, at the

beginning and the end, while at both instances we only hear an edited fragment of the song, which again could serve as a key to decipher the movie: in order to make anything feasible out of it, one must put the pieces together after an initial view, a typical if not orthodox Lynchian approach. In its raw treatment of rape and women as sexual objects that drive the narrative (here the U-turn of *Dogville* can be characterized as a circular O-shaped narrative, where the protagonist brings about his own demise by performatively opening and closing the plot), the film is intimately connected to *Dogville*. Also, by the very presence of that same narrative and intricate symbolic imagery, the movies as feature films or auteur films are separated from narrative pornography, a topic widely discussed in *Lost Highway*.

A film must be linear by nature, and so is the perception of the audience: Lars von Trier tricks this with the chapters, the narration, the myriad minute details hidden in the language and scenery, and Grace herself as the filter, while David Lynch achieves something similar with fragmenting the linear plot and revising it in a different, cyclical order (Bill Pullman resurfacing in the film's dreamscape with the sentence "Dick Laurent is dead"), as well as the unseen woman, and the dreamlike representation of murder and pornography. In the former case (*Dogville*) it is the narrator who is our guide, in the latter it is the song and its instruction: "Cruise me blond / Cruise me babe". The "blond" and the "babe", Patricia Arquette, are (is) the undefinable, ungraspable, and intangible objects of desire and indeed subjects of the plot: by embodying industrialized sexuality through pornography, the woman is the ultimate, almost transcendental signified, yet she (it) is unreachable, the unutterable secret, as defined by Bowie's opening lines: "Funny how secrets travel", which also refer to the cyclical nature of the narrative. Both songs ("The Heart's Filthy Lesson" and "I'm Deranged") appear on *Outside*, 1995, while both incorporate the same dissonant piano that Bowie first introduced on his 1973 album *Aladdin Sane*, later used on *Young Americans*.

Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000) and its closing song by Bowie "Something in the Air" achieves something different than the aforementioned two movies, while it is somewhat reminiscent of the effect "Young Americans" has at the end of *Dogville*, that is a fake sense of relief. The former has quite a mild, wavy tune, while the latter has a definitely merry and catchy one: a stark contrast to the communicational and existential vacuum that both songs portray along with, of course, *American Psycho*, and the protagonist, his undecidedly imagined killing spree and perversity. Bret Easton Ellis's novel is heavily edited in the movie, most importantly the final monologue spoken by Pat Bateman (Christian Bale). It takes place at a different time, in a different setting, and in a different manner than in the novel. His opening monologue explains his aforementioned existential hiatus, the lack of any

significance and signification whatsoever: "(...) although I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel my flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I simply am not there." By the end of the movie, the final monologue reflects on the opening one by restating yet reinterpreting his nonexistence, his androgyny (the existence of his sexual crimes remain just as questionable as his very existence), and his subsequent transcendental insignificance, by stating that this confession does not mean anything. Here it is the closing line of the film, immediately followed by Bowie's words:

Lived all our best times  
 Left with the worst  
 I've danced with you too long  
 Say what you will  
 There's something in the air  
 Raced for the last time  
 Well I know you'll hold your head up high  
 But it's nothing we have to say  
 There's nothing in our eyes ("Something in the Air", bridge)

According to this, by the end of the century (or, according to Lars von Trier, by the Great Depression) America had run its course, and virtually cannot offer anything else anymore to anyone, especially the Americans to each-other. Subverting the existential and sexual signification on-screen and culturally results in a cathartic vacuum, which is vacuum nonetheless.

The substitution of president Nixon with George W. Bush in the end credits of *Manderlay* (2005), where "Young Americans" makes a lasting return, as the soundtrack of the hypothetical "*Dogville 2*", illustrates this subversive reciprocity perfectly. There the slideshow is even more brutal than in its predecessor portraying African Americans in increasingly abhorring existential situations, while the closing picture portrays the statue of Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., being washed by an African American. One cannot help but wonder which group of 'nigger' that man would fit in according to the Manderlay plantation standards.

Through the aforementioned examples it is plausible to deduct how David Bowie became the 'freeman' of Dogville, of the town that is at any place, at any time. Much like John Hurt as the narrator of the movie (and another Englishman), he serves a similar purpose as the omnipresent, omniscient, and distant yet intimately accurate commentator of the unfolding events, and consciously chosen to be so by the director(s). The blurring of the signifier and the signified in sexual and cultural discourse permeates the films discussed, and in a



particularly American(ized) context, the United States being an apparently uncannily fertile ground for such examinations, as the country exhibits any trait of any place at any time, at least in the von Trierian sense. David Fincher's *Se7en* deals with law, canonical, transcendental, moral, and the loss and inapplicability thereof; David Lynch's *Lost Highway* addresses sexuality as industry and the reciprocity of the male gaze; Mary Harron's *American Psycho* explores the loss of meaning, existential, sensual, and sexual; Lars von Trier's *Dogville* contextualizes all these through one primary symbol: Grace. All these films chose David Bowie as the commentator, the footnote, or indeed the signifier of these issues due to his character, his history, and his androgyny. As to Grace's, Tom's, and Bowie's own sexuality, perhaps it might prove fruitful to reconsider the artist's previous suggestion which he made in 1973 in his song "Oh You Pretty Things": "Homo Sapiens have outgrown their use" and ultimately "Let me make it plain / You gotta make way for the Homo Superiour." Reconsidering the end credits of *Dogville* and the androgynous grace of subverting the sexual signifier and signified on screen, David Bowie is absolutely correct, at least as far as the proverbial citizens of Dogville are concerned in the von Trierian sense.

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