

# Literary Estranged Capitalism in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* and Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to explore how German dramatist Bertolt Brecht and Danish screenwriter Lars von Trier attempt to expose the capitalistic society in which people live in but are rather being compelled to make a contribution in order to maintain their livelihood and become a part of a system that is taking advantage of them. The underlying capitalistic system which is responsible for each protagonist's difficulties is literary estranged in Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage and her Children*, and Lars von Trier's movie *Dogville*. Hence, this paper will illustrate the powerlessness of both protagonists who have no other option than to adhere to the system that controls their live in order to survive.

**Keywords:** Epic theatre; Capitalism; Dogville; Brecht; Power lessness.



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## 1. Introduction

Power has always been a part of our lives because it has the actual ability to influence events. We as individuals have political power and economic power. The former gives us the ability to influence political decisions, and the latter gives us the ability to produce or purchase value in its material and immaterial forms (Vahabi, 2004). It is creative power that creates use and exchange of values (Vahabi, 2004). In contrast to it, destructive power is often used in a non-violent form, i.e., it occurs in forms of pressure such as strikes, boycotts, and threats of penalty at workplaces (Vahabi, 2004). This negative counterpart of creative power is used in a destructive manner by the employee or the employer in order to provide satisfying results. The equalization of power among the individuals should be the greater goal of a fair society (Copp, 2000). Each member in the society takes his place because he has no other option than to belong and contribute to the society which organizes his life (Copp, 2000). Society in turn is organized into a state in order to exercise state control over the controllable aspects of the members' lives (Copp, 2000). However, when delved deeper, one comes to realize that the relation between the equalization of power and one's equal state in society is vague because sometimes authorities or systems like capitalism have the extra power to create inequalities and control our lives. Caught in an unequal capitalistic system of power distribution, one might recall the words of American Politician Adlai Stevenson that "a hungry man is not free" (Ratcliffe, 2011). German dramatist Bertolt Brecht and Danish screenwriter Lars von Trier reflect in their works people who are caught and enslaved by an underlying capitalistic system which controls their lives. Brecht's estrangement effect originated very early in his work because he recognized the necessity for reconstructing the theater to emphasize the need that "identification and empathy were to be hindered in order to make the audience free to criticize actions and positions that were shown" (Fetscher, 1980). Brecht in his play, and Lars in his film estrange the capitalistic system by using alternatives of dramaturgy to explicitly illustrate the difficulties of capitalism which their protagonists have to face (Koutsourakis, 2013). In both plays capitalism is portrayed "in all its strangeness" (Jameson, 2000). This paper seeks to analyze Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage and her Children*, written in 1933, and Lars von Trier's movie *Dogville*, 2003, to portray a capitalistic system that profits of their powerless protagonists who struggle to survive and protect their livelihood.

## 2. Analysis: *Mother Courage and Her Powerlessness*

Bertolt Brecht sets his play *Mother Courage and his Children* midst the Thirty Years War. Brecht in particular places his protagonist Anna Fierling, also known as Mother Courage who struggles to support herself and her children by selling food and goods from her canteen wagon, into the war period which allegorically alludes to an early capitalist system. Right from the beginning of Brecht's play the distribution of power exposes itself as unequal. While people like Mother Courage belong to the lower classes who have neither political nor economic power to influence events which affect their lives, people of higher rank and leaders of society have the extra power to wage wars and dictate the lives of little folks who have no other choice than to fight for their survival under the harsh conditions. Brecht opens his play *Mother Courage and her Children* with a placard which tells the audience that it is "Spring 1624. The Swedish commander-in-chief count Oxenstierna is raising troops in Dalecarlia for the Polish Campaign. The Canteen Woman Anna Fierling, known under the name of Mother Courage, loses one son" (Brecht, 2018). By making use of this introductory placard of scene one, Brecht not only tells the date and where the "episode is set and what that action will be," but he also implies the power relation between differently ranked people of the play (Simon and John, 2007). He indicates that the "Swedish commander-in-chief" has the extra power since he is an officer in supreme command of a country's armed force; that means, his higher rank claims him to be superior and

attributes him the power to “rais[e] troops,” and in doing so he influences and dictates the lives of the proletariat who are expected to follow him.

Moreover, the very first lines of the play describe how people in power, such as the military recruiter, despise people from the lower class who are regarded as the state’s property:

Here am I, got to find our commander four companies before the twelfth of the month, and people round here are so nasty I can’t sleep nights. S’pose I get hold of some bloke and shut my eye to his pigeon chest and varicose veins, I get him proper drunk, he signs on the line, I’m just settling up, he goes for a piss, I follow him to the door because I smell a rat; bob’s your uncle, he’s off like a flea with the itch. No notion of word of honour, loyalty, faith, sense of duty. This place has shattered my confidence in the human race, sergeant. (Brecht, 2018).

These lines show how people in power take advantage of the lower class which is forced to serve in the army; even if they do not voluntarily sign the papers the military recruiter “get[s] [them] proper drunk, [they] sign on the line” (Brecht, 2018). The recruiter expects that little folks should willingly agree to serve in the army and have the “notion of word of honour, loyalty, faith, sense of duty,” however, since this is the not case, he describes the people of the town as “so nasty” (Brecht, 2018).

Brecht further indicates the powerlessness of the little folk who are compelled to participate in the war in the scene when Mother Courage has no choice other than to agree to give her son over to the recruiters. Mother Courage enters the scene singing a song about her business, she sings: “How can you flog them into battle unless you get them boots that fit? . . . Captains, your men don’t look so well. So feed them up and let them follow while you command them into hell” (Brecht, 2018). This song defines Mother Courage’s occupation as a canteen lady who tries to make money off the war by selling goods and food to soldier. When the Sergeants and the recruiter stop her and her children- one daughter, Kattrin, and two sons, Eilif and Swiss Cheese- they insist to recruit her son for the army; however, Mother Courage refuses to give him away and “pulls a knife” to defend her child (Brecht, 2018). Since Mother Courage has no other option than to profit from the conditions created by the war, her attempt to protect her son is futile as the sergeant explains in the following lines:

Put that knife away, you old harridan. A minute back you were admitting you live off the war, how else should you live, what from? But how’s anyone to have war without soldiers? [...] Oh, you’d like war to eat the pips but spit out the apple? It’s to fatten up your kids, but you won’t invest in it. Got to look after itself, eh? [...] Like the war to nourish you? Have to feed it something too. (Brecht, 2018).

This quote illustrates how powerless Mother Courage in her situation is because in order to stay alive and provide for herself and her family with a shelter and food, she needs to believe that the best option is to adapt oneself to the world one lives in to benefit from it (Newton, 2008). With this belief, Mother Courage has to stop protesting and give up one of her sons to feed the war with a soldier to guarantee the continuation of the war which establishes an economic opportunity and guarantees her livelihood. Mother Courage’s short-lived protest and her enforced adaptation to the conditions of the harsh world around her epitomizes the struggle of the working class which needs to obey and follow orders to gain their wages in a capitalistic society, rather than to organize protests and strikes which could cause their unemployment. However, the utterance of the sergeant clearly portrays that the “world that gradually destroys [Mother Courage] and her family is not in the power of a non-human source such as gods but has been humanly produced,” in this case, by the sergeant who represents the military that possess the extra power to recruit the soldiers for the war (Newton, 2008). Viewing the unjust distribution of power, one comes to realize that it represents an oppressive world due to the bourgeoisie who threatens people from the working class with unemployment and thus endangers their livelihood and forces them to follow orders (Newton, 2008).

Furthermore, Brecht attempts to depict the “contradiction between Mother Courage’s maternal duties and her role as a trader” in order to show how her business, that means, her attempt to stay alive and maintain her livelihood in a capitalistic society entails the destruction of her children (Giles, 2005). Any time Mother Courage engages in a business activity she loses one of her children. The war employs her other son named Swiss Cheese, and makes him responsible of the “Regimental cash box” which he takes to hide with the intention to return it back to his sergeant after the war escalations calm down: “That’s three days I been sitting around with nowt to do, and sergeant’s always been kind to me but any moment now he’ll start asking where’s Swiss Cheese with the pay box?” (Brecht, 2018). Because Swiss Cheese laments the fact that he could not return the cash box yet, he decides to return it and takes the risk to fight his way to his sergeant: “He gets the box from the cart and takes it under his tunic. Be back in a moment, Don’t hold me” (Brecht, 2018). Meanwhile a sergeant and a spy “on the track of the Second Finnish Regiment’s cash box” are looking for Swiss Cheese, and eventually captivate him (Brecht, 2018). Again the life of the son depends on Mother Courage who can only save him by selling her canteen wagon in the belief of bribing the soldiers for his life: “It’s a matter of money, that’s all. But where’s money to come from?” (Brecht, 2018). Following Mother Courage, the Chaplain ask her a serious question if “[she] really wish[es] to sell?” and what she will “live on then?” when she does not have the cart anymore because it gives her shelter and economic opportunity; nevertheless, Mother Courage is aware of the fact and says that “[t]he cart’s our livelihood...who knows when you get another like it” which shows her hesitation towards selling it (Brecht, 2018). Accordingly, Mother Courage’s plan is to “pledge it, not sell it” to a friend Yvette under the condition that she receives a payment in advance of “two hundred florins” and if Mother Courage cannot pay her back in two weeks the cart will be then Yvette’s (Brecht, 2018). In addition, Mother Courage intends to use the money from the cash box which her son, she thinks, will still have after she saves him: “I’m counting on the regimental cash box” (Brecht, 2018). When the soldiers accept the bribe, Mother Courage finds out that her son while being tortured “admitted he had the box” and threw it into the river. Not being able to count on the cash box to pay Yvette back, Mother Courage starts to think about her business and bargains her bribe to “hundred and twenty” which the soldiers do not accept; eventually they get tired of bargaining with Mother

Courage and shoot her son (Brecht, 2018). Following the shooting of her son, the sergeant enters the stage with Swiss Cheese corpse on a stretcher and asks if anybody knows him (Brecht, 2018). To avoid any troubles to save her business which she needs to provide for her and her daughter, she “shakes her head” and pretends she has no affiliation with him (Brecht, 2018).

Hence, Bertolt Brecht uses the scenes which depict the loss of the sons to emphasize Mother Courage as “struggling trader to survive economically and physically” during the war period (Giles, 2005). Moreover he depicts the world of war as the socioeconomic basis as an allegory for “early capitalism” in which little people are forced by the external factors to adhere to the conditions in order to survive, as it is illustrated through Mother Courage’s unavoidable trade of her sons to survive “even if this destroys her very humanity” (Giles, 2005). Thus, in this play Brecht focuses on the working people who are trying to find ways to feed themselves and survive the harsh conditions. Brecht reflecting on his play said that Mother Courage was meant to show “that in wartime the big profits are not made by little people. That war, which is a continuation of business by other means, makes the human virtues fatal even to their possessors. That no sacrifice is too great for the struggle against war” (Brecht, 2006).

### 3. Lars Von Trier’s Protagonist Grace in the Footsteps of Mother Courage

Similar to Mother Courage’s struggle to survive, is Grace’s struggle in Lars von Trier’s film *Dogville*. Grace, the main character, tries to escape the mafia lifestyle of her father and wanders into a small town named Dogville set in the “Rocky Mountains in the US of A” (Trier, 2014). When Grace enters the stage her first action involves to steal the bone from the town’s dog because she is very hungry (Trier, 2014). With this action Lars von Trier portrays the difficult condition of Grace who is not only hungry but also searches for a place of protection to hide from the mafia, which can be compared to Mother Courage’s condition who also tries to provide and to protect her family from the ravages of war (Giles, 2005). After the barking of the dog, the town’s luminary, Thomas Edison Junior offers Grace to hide in Dogville - because there is no other place than to go “back down where [she] came from Back down to Georgetown” (Trier, 2014). Grace has to accept this offer since the mafia and police are searching after her. However, her hiding place in Dogville becomes a place of oppression due to the reliance on the townsfolk which take away her power to control events in her life. Very early in the movie, her powerlessness is demonstrated in the scene when Grace begs for the help of Tom who not only makes her stay in Dogville possible but also has the power to call the mafia thanks to the card he received while talking to the mafia boss when they searched for Grace in Dogville (Trier, 2014).

In comparison to Tom, Grace is stripped down of any power and she cannot keep her “vulnerability to herself she had elected to give herself up to [Tom] at random. . .as... yes... a gift. Generous, very generous” (Trier, 2014). Grace argues with Tom about the fact that “[she] got nothing over them in return” if they should accept her to stay and allow her to hide; whereas, Tom says that “[he] thinks that [she] has plenty to offer to Dogville” (Trier, 2014). Grace has no other option than to accept the offer because “it’s a very small town, and [she] [has] to hide” to save her life as Tom describes it to her: “Isn’t saving your life worth at little game? [ . . . ] Do you mind physical labor? Dogville has offered you two weeks. Now you offer them...”- the chapter in the movie finishes with Tom’s unfinished sentence to Grace which foreshadows Grace’s inhumane treatment and oppression by the townsfolk (Trier, 2014). Although Grace “meets with resistance because [the town] does not need her help,” she “follows Tom’s plan and embarks upon physical labour” to make herself useful (Trier, 2014).

Very early in Bertolt Brecht’s play and Lars von Trier’s movie, the female protagonists are depicted in their powerless situation where they have no other choice than to accept the offers of the ones in power, that means, while Mother Courage has to give up her children because she profits from the war and sustains her livelihood, Grace has to give up herself because she depends on the townspeople’s acceptance in order to protect herself and be provided with a shelter. In other words, just as Mother Courage who need to feed the war, Grace needs to feed the townspeople with her service such as physical work, spending time with a blind man, baby-sitting, helping with the harvest. After a rough start, Grace and her services are accepted and justly paid by the townspeople whose growing desire for the help of Grace enable her security and livelihood as seen in the economic power which she obtains to buy little figurines from the town’s shop (Rockhill, 2009): “And now, since the town had agreed that everyone was to give according to his abilities [Grace] received wages, not much but enough to save up for the first of the tiny China figurines” (Trier, 2014).

However, similar to Mother Courage’s business which is threatened by the ending of the war if she does not give up her son to the military, Grace is also threatened by the townspeople once the police search for her intensifies and “the town democratically decides that from a business perspective it is more expensive to keep Grace” because they are running a risk of keeping her hidden (Rockhill, 2009). Tom faces Grace with new working conditions awaiting her because “with all those posters hanging around the place, [he] can hardly think of anywhere else [she] could hide” (Trier, 2014). He continues and tells that:

Well,... from a business perspective... from a business perspective your presence in Dogville has become more costly. Because it's more dangerous for them to have you here. Not that they don't want you since they feel there should be some counterbalance [...] They wanted you to work longer hours. [...] See, Mrs. Henson she also thought we should cut your pay Merely a symbolic gesture. You see the word dangerous on that poster worried her. (Trier, 2014).

Again, with the growing threat, Grace is willing, yet again, to work “harder, longer hours, for less pay” and have a more exhausting day just to guarantee her stay (Trier, 2014). Although the town fears that they are committing a crime by not telling the police her hiding place, Tom assures that the townspeople prefer Grace to stay because she satisfies their needs (Trier, 2014). This selfish reason is similar to the idea of capitalistic companies which are aware

of the unjust treatment towards their workers. The companies often want to keep their workers with the least wages possible to get the work done. Moreover, Tom denies her leave because if Grace should leave nobody would be there to replace her position, which she through her effort created although there was no need for her in the beginning; this is similar to capitalism which produces and improves products which we think we do not need when we first see it; however, once we use those products they do become an indispensable part of our lives because we realize that it makes our life easier, like a microwaves or a water kettle—when there is the oven and the stove top to heat things up. Just as companies need their workers to keep their production going, Tom wants Grace to stay and do the work that seemed unnecessary in the beginning of the movie: “Something, that you would like done, but that you don’t think is necessary,” as Tom describes Graces work in the beginning of the film (Trier, 2014).

Soon, the distribution of power proves itself again unequal. With the extrapower which the townspeople gain, they threaten her and make her submissive to the extent that she cannot refuse to be physically and sexually abused, eventually to be even raped. Just as Brecht demonstrates that “war is the continuation of business by other means, of no benefit for ‘little people’” like *Mother Courage* (Mumford, 2009), *Dogville* is neither a place of benefit for Grace it is rather a place that oppresses her. In both of the rape scenes the extra power which the two male characters, Chuck and Ben, have are used in a destructive manner to intensify the threat against Grace in order to sexually abuse her. Chuck tells Grace that the FBI is in front of the door and that she should not try to scream if she wants to remain hidden. He also takes Grace’s scarf which has her initials on it and threatens her to use it as an evidence against her to force her to give in and be quite when he rapes her:

Expensive, by the feel of it and your initials on it. I imagine they'd draw the same conclusion from this as anybody would. I told the law it'd take me no time at all to find this piece of clothing. I reckon we got us ten minutes maybe fifteen 'fore they start knocking on doors I wouldn't try to run away. They are sure to see you I wouldn't try to holler either. It wasn't me who wanted you here You were far to beautiful and frail for this place. (Trier, 2014).

Ben uses the his power in the same destructive manner towards Grace to take sexually advantage of her and to save some money for his own business, just like capitalistic companies who exploit their workers but threaten them to keep their voices down and restrain from boycott, strikes and any other public attention if they do not want to lose their occupation:

Yeah. There are a hell of a lot of police up ahead I wasn't expecting that . It's more dangerous than I thought [...] in the freight industry carrying dangerous load it cost more A surcharge, they call it. If this were a professional job I could just charge you [...] I was gonna go there tonight And of course it costs me [...]I mean not as much...not as much as a surcharge for dangerous goods, but still...it does cost me [...] I just... I have to take due payment [...]We're parked in the square in Georgetown Right outside the church You'd better keep your voice down (Trier, 2014).

Following the rape of Grace, her condition worsens to a state when “most towns-people of the male sex now visit[...] Grace at night to fulfill their sexual needs” (Trier, 2014). Lars von Trier further illustrates the dehumanization and subordination of Grace in the scene when she is described as fragile who cannot protect herself from the townspeople temptation to gain control over her, that means, the townsfolks who become greedy to dominate and take advantage of Grace, in the same manner as Eve was tempted to take the apple from the Garden of Eden to become immortal and powerful like the Gods: “quite unprotected from any capricious storms, Grace, too had laid herself open. And there she dangled from her frail stalk like the apple in the Garden of Eden. An apple so swollen that the juices almost ran” (Trier, 2014). Eventually, Grace proclaims her situation after she receives the final act of dehumanization when she gets an iron collar and is being chained in town with the excuse that the “chain is long enough so that [she] can sleep in [her] bed” and not “think of it as a punishment” (Trier, 2014). Making the chain long enough, can be interpreted as another judgment of capitalism in which the “society or the government take[s] advantage of people, and make[s] excuses” (Ed). “This could be compared to a politician saying ‘We are providing you with enough money to survive’” (Ed).

To remind once more of *Mother Courage*’s personal situation which is determined by the “fact that she has to trade to survive – even if this destroys her very humanity” (Giles, 2005) as a mother and merely reduces her to a capitalistic machine, Grace also becomes disengaged and emotionless and acts only in a “trance-like state that descends on animals whose lives are threatened, a state in which the body reacts mechanically in a low, tough gear without too much painful reflection. Like a patient passively letting his disease hold sway” (Trier, 2014). Grace, who is turned into a machine that only tries to stay alive, finally proclaims that “you can have me if you want me. Just do what the others do. Threaten me Tell me that you'll turn me in to the law, to the gangsters and I promise you, you can take whatever it is you want from me” (Trier, 2014). Grace responds emotionless since she offers herself in an unconditional way which becomes a dis-grace towards herself, in other words, her gracefulness towards others harms herself and takes her strength to defend herself against humiliation, helplessness, and dehumanization (Chiesa, 2007). Her acceptance of her powerless and her mere struggle to survive is similar to that of *Mother Courage*, who after losing all of her children, has to continue focus on making business by pulling her cart as she says: “Hope I can pull the cart all right by meself. Be all right, nowt much inside it. Got to get back in business again” (Brecht, 2018).

## 4. Conclusion

Bertolt Brecht and Lars von Trier place their female protagonists into an estranged capitalistic system in order to illustrate how capitalism deprives people of their power, and forces the working class to follow the orders coming from the people in power to maintain their livelihood. Just like the female characters, workers become the property of their society that is governed by the people who have the extra-power to control their lives. Brecht and Trier illustrate the capitalistic system where an unequal power distribution prevails and in which the “hungry man is not

free,” i.e., workers who depend on their workplace in order to provide for their families (Ratcliffe, 2011). Brecht portrays how authorities in power control Mother Courage who is a powerless victim who epitomizes “a doomed bourgeois individual[...], in which her character and fate are merely typical of her class.” (Newton, 2008). She can be seen as a unique individual dignified by her refusal to be defeated by her suffering” and survival in a capitalistic world (Newton, 2008). However, in an interview Lars von Trier says that “the idea behind Grace’s treatment at the hands of the townspeople was that if you present yourself to others as a gift, then that is dangerous. The power that this gives people over the individual corrupts them” (Bushby, 2003). In other words, Lars von Trier demonstrates that not only authorities like to possess extra power and make little folks struggle and suffer from their dependency on them, like in Brecht’s play, but also that little folks can become greedy for power as seen in *Dogville*. “It is fact that Von Trier sees society as greedy (Ed): I found out that people are the same all over Greedy as animals In a small town they're just a bit less successful. Feed 'em enough they'll eat till their bellies burst” (Trier, 2014). Hence Bertolt Brecht and Lars Von Trier exposes the capitalistic system as greedy and unjust that tends to oppress and take advantage of workers and threatens them with unemployment in order to maintain their own business and its position. In Brecht’s play and Von Triers film the estrangement of capitalism provides a new perspective of a given situation enacted on stage, which in both cases exposes the power of the capitalistic system over the lives of those who are not in power and are being taken advantage of and abused (Rockhill, 2009).

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