



Bryce Dallas Howard in *Manderlay*

## FREED ENTERPRISE

### *Manderlay*

review by Girish Shambu

The French erotic novel *The Story Of O*, first published in 1953, opens with a preface that tells an allegedly true story. When a group of slaves on Barbados were freed, they pleaded with their master to take them back. When he refused, they slaughtered him and his family and resumed living in their old quarters, leading the same lives they did under slavery.

This story was the inspiration for Danish filmmaker Lars Von Trier when he decided to make his new film, *Manderlay*. It is the second film of a loose trilogy that he began with the notorious and powerful *Dogville*, starring Nicole Kidman. (It is not necessary to have seen *Dogville* in order to understand *Manderlay*.) The new film opens with Grace (Bryce Dallas Howard taking Kidman's place) and her mobster dad (Willem Dafoe, doing the same for James Caan) driving across Alabama in the early 1930s. They come upon a plantation called Manderlay and encounter a black woman crying for help. They discover that slavery is still in effect at the plantation, 70 years after its abolition, and the place is ruled with a whip hand by Mam (Lauren Bacall).

An appalled Grace takes control of Manderlay from the dying Mam, frees the slaves and institutes a bold social experiment by putting majority vote into place. One would think that this would turn the emancipated micro-society into a shining example of enlightened democracy. But no such thing happens. Instead, the former slaves continue to conduct their lives as they did before Grace arrived, neglecting their homes and—absent Mam's rule—the crops. Things go from bad to worse when a dust storm hits, and though the film was made a year ago, this scene contains an eerie echo of the Katrina disaster.

*Manderlay* re-uses several brilliant ideas that made *Dogville* so original. The film is shot on a large, nearly empty stage.

Specific locations are marked by chalk outlines and the horizon is pitch black. Careful use of spotlights and miming of actions—like opening of doors, accompanied by a click on the soundtrack—accentuate the theatricality of the production. Almost every single one of these innovations packed a greater punch in *Dogville*, which also felt more universal and complex. But it's an unfair comparison to make because the previous film was unusually strong. *Manderlay* has plenty going for it even if it does stand in *Dogville*'s shadow.

John Hurt's narration is more sarcastic and biting here than it was in *Dogville* and this wit is an important counterweight to the earnest literal-mindedness of Von Trier's race relations allegory. *Manderlay* may not teach us much about slavery and racism that we don't already know, but, because the story shows us the disastrous effects of imposing democracy at gunpoint, it has unmistakable parallels with the American intervention in Iraq.

Ultimately the best thing about the movie is Von Trier's conscious artifice because there's purposefulness to it. He shoots with hand-held camera to capture facial expressions but then constantly jump-cuts within a scene to distance the viewer emotionally from the characters. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht warned against complete and unbroken "emotional identification" of the audience with the characters because he believed that it stops the audience from "reflecting" on the characters and their problems and thus the problems of society. *Dogville* was inspired by Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, and the same spirit of watchful reflection—not wholehearted emotional immersion—prevails in *Manderlay*. Feeling, Von Trier seems to be saying, is important—but it's more important to both feel and think. Which is what he tries to make us do in these films. **av**

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