

Law, Grace, and Race: The Political Theology of *Manderlay*

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"In the wake of the perceived demise of Marxism and of Heidegger's Nazism, everybody's looking for an ethics. But in fact they should be looking for a political theology."

– Gillian Rose¹

Frequently read as an anti-American parable, Lars von Trier's 2005 film *Manderlay* has been accused of pedantry, "bonking us on the head with supposedly searing 'truths'."² According to the *New York Times*, *Manderlay* is the product of the "moral arrogance of a snide European intellectual thumbing his nose at American barbarism."³ The contribution that such a project could make to political theory seems as though it would be, at most, to reinforce certain critical positions – in this case, the critique of liberal democracy and of the treatment of African Americans, the topic of the film. However, if instead of looking at the superficial critique the film performs, we look even closer to the surface, at the relationship between Grace (the name of the main character) and Law (the name of the codified rules she confronts), we will find a *political theology of Manderlay*. The critique that *Manderlay* levels is not a critique of American politics or liberal democratic political theory. It is a critique of the political theology underlying not only liberal political theory but also underlying many critiques of liberalism. Indeed, we will see that it is exactly von Trier's pedantry, his strict adherence to rules, which opens the door to new ways of understanding the enterprise of political theory – and the practice of political activism.

After reviewing the story *Manderlay* tells, I will examine two readings of *Manderlay* that take the film to be presenting a critique of liberalism. These two readings of *Manderlay*, I suggest, allegorize two different approaches to the project of political theorizing. *Manderlay* exposes, critiques, and offers an alternative to the latent political theology widespread in critiques of liberalism. By developing the alternative political theology presented by *Manderlay*, assisted in this development by the work of Gillian Rose, I suggest that a powerful critique can be leveled against many political theoretic projects. I apply this claim to the case of recent pragmatic thought in African American political theory, showing how *Manderlay's* political theology exposes the subtle troubles of even seemingly impeccable theoretical endeavors. Finally, through a discussion of the way that *Manderlay* performs its critique of political theology, I gesture towards doors opened for political theorizing *sans* problematic political theology.

Manderlay is the second film in a projected trilogy, "U.S.A.: Land of Opportunity." The first film in the series, *Dogville*, was set in a small mountain town; the third will be set in Washington, D.C.⁴ *Manderlay* is set in the rural South and, like *Dogville*, revolves around a character named Grace Margaret Mulligan, a cultured young woman with a taste for fur coats. The year is 1933 and Grace, her father, and their posse of gangsters happen upon the gates of the Manderlay plantation. Inside, Grace finds a community of African Americans whose white "owners" have not informed them that slavery has been abolished. Grace informs the slaves that they are free and, with the help of a few of her father's gangsters, takes up residence at the plantation to facilitate the transition of the former slaves to freedom.

But things do not go as well as Grace had hoped. The former slaves seem ungrateful and are not sure how to act in their new situation. The obsequious Wilhelm (Danny Glover) asks Grace, "At Manderlay, we slaves took supper at seven. When do people take supper when they're free?"⁵ Grace confidently responds, "Free men eat when they're hungry." The former white slave owners are put to work doing hard labor around the plantation while the former slaves are given ownership of the plantation. But the new community quickly encounters difficulties. Grace looks for "the burgeoning change of character that freedom ought to bring," but she sees the former slaves carrying on as they had before – except without doing any manual labor.

Eventually, Grace finds a handful of volunteers to begin plowing the plantation's fields, albeit several weeks late. In frustration, she eventually abandons the voluntary approach. She uses her father's gangsters to round up the former slaves and forcibly bring them to a lesson on democratic citizenship that Grace teaches (literally, as a schoolmarm). The community endures various travails: a dust storm, famine, and

internal strife. But the community eventually begins to work together to overcome the challenges it faces. Grace proclaims the white former masters to be "graduate Americans." Crops are harvested and fetch a record price. Grace finally gives herself to Timothy, a strong and opinionated African-born former slave. However, devastating troubles soon return to Manderlay. The community discovers that the profit from the harvest has been stolen, and the community turns on itself, consuming itself in fire, violence, and death. It is revealed that Timothy stole the proceeds from the harvest and gambled it away.

In the film's climactic sequence, the community "elects" Grace to be the new "Mam" (the name of the community's former mistress). Grace feigns – at first – acceptance of the new position in order to escape. But, whip in hand and Timothy's back bared, she begins to take on Mam's role. The final straw comes when, after Grace preaches to the community about their self-hatred, Timothy responds, "Aren't you forgetting something? You made us!" Over the end credits David Bowie's "Young Americans" plays, accompanying images from the history of blacks in America, from lynching photographs to civil rights rallies to black American soldiers in Iraq.

Manderlay's Critique of Political Theology

*Reading #1: Manderlay offers a critique of the efficacy of liberal politics.*⁶ Grace is confronted with oppression: a community of black people is living in slavery. At the moment she happens upon the community, one of the black people is going to be whipped. While her father argues that it is merely "a local matter" and that it is "not our responsibility," Grace says that "we" (white people) have created the situation and so have a "moral obligation" to fix it. Grace informs the former slaves that they have rights. She tells them that each human being has inherent worth and dignity that must be respected. "They can now enjoy the same freedoms as any other citizen of this country," Grace proudly announces. She creates a forum for democratic participation in the governance of the community, complete with a system for voting.

Indeed, Grace not only creates the political institutions that she thinks are necessary to end the oppression of the former slaves; she also tries to personally reach out to them. She buys an easel and paints for one young man (because his face "possess[es] an artist's sensitivity") and proudly presents the supplies to him with the words "because we believe in you." But her high hopes are soon dashed: she discovers that she has confused the artistic young man with his brother. Timothy, the strong spirited former slave, looking on, notes facetiously how all black men look alike. The attempts Grace, as representative of liberalism, makes at recognizing differences within the community of Manderlay run aground.

Moreover, the newly constituted liberal democratic polity miserably fails. First, it turns in on itself, with its newly "liberated" members using the democratic processes just established to their own advantage and in "inappropriate" ways (voting on when a jokester can laugh at his own jokes; sentencing a woman accused of stealing food to death). Finally, after the initial troubles seem resolved, the community self-destructs. Set off by the theft of the harvest profits, Manderlay goes up in flames. Liberalism has failed. Empowerment did not end oppression; it merely transfigured oppression.

*Reading #2: Manderlay allegorizes Nietzsche's genealogy of morals.*⁷ Before Grace arrives, Manderlay is ruled by the noble and powerful. The whites at Manderlay have guns and whips, in addition to their fair skins and civilized culture. With the help of a priestly class – Grace and her entourage – the weak overthrow the strong in a "slave revolt." The priestly class institutes its own set of rituals to secure its power: "democratic" community meetings, votes, and celebrations replace inspections and whippings. At first, the former slaves are wary of Grace and her entourage, but eventually they forget the founding moment of their community and seem to live in harmony, not only with Grace but also with the white former slave owners. Grace, as Nietzsche diagnoses the Judeo-Christian consciousness, is plagued by *ressentiment*. "The sins of the past are sins I cannot and do not wish to help you erase," she says. As Grace puts it, "Manderlay is a moral obligation, because we made you."

But history is not complete. There is still a noble man – strong, physical, cunning – who has not been entirely domesticated by the slave revolt. Timothy appears to have just the sort of character that Nietzsche holds in high regard. When he hears Grace talking about "moral obligations" and "truth," Timothy memorably says: "Luckily, I'm just a nigger who don't understand such words." Obviously he does

understand exactly what Grace is saying – he simply finds it irrelevant. He has a haughty attitude, responding to Grace's apparent desire for gratitude cuttingly: "When we were slaves, we were not required to offer thanks for our supper, and for the water we drank, and for the air we breathed."

Timothy is classified (by Mam's Law, the rules of the plantation) as a "Proudy Nigger," and he is said to come from a line of ancient African kings ("that old-fashioned morality," we are told). However, at the end of the film it is revealed that, in fact, he is actually classified as a "Pleasin' Nigger," a "chameleon," who is "diabolically clever." He could "transform [himself] into exactly the type the beholder wanted to see." Recall how Nietzsche writes that the character type he endorses is "necessarily a great actor," and how his ideal "is achieved by the same 'immoral' means as any other victory: violence, lies, slander, injustice."⁸ Timothy tricks the community in revolt against the "slave" values brought by Grace – values which he never accepted. The community disintegrates and the strong, who have hidden their power up until then in the mask of "pleasin'," reveal themselves.

These two readings, clearly, are complementary. Read together, we find the standard critique of liberalism advanced in recent political theory.⁹ Liberalism, as the continuation of Socratic-Judeo-Christian values under another name, according to Nietzsche, faces an inherent contradiction which is bound to explode in internal rupture – what Sheldon Wolin calls "Nietzsche's prophecy of the disintegration of the liberal-democratic state."¹⁰ On this synthetic reading, the liberal project does not end oppression; it simply replaces one set of values with another while the masses remain subordinated to an aristocratic elite. This new set of values is particularly pernicious because it advances under the label of universalism, providing a "tolerant" umbrella for all points of view. It is agonism, not suppression of conflict, which holds the potential to affect a decisive switch out of an oppressive problematic, critics of liberalism contend. This agonism is a performance, its achievement always "to come."

However, both readings of *Manderlay* miss what is most interesting about the film: its critique of political theology. *Manderlay* problematizes both the political theory of liberalism and the political theory of many of its critics – and offers an alternative. In reading *Manderlay*, we must not overlook what is most obvious. The main character is named "Grace." Christianity understands grace as a supernatural gift for the salvation of humans.¹¹ Grace refers both to God and to the way God transforms humans. It is not given to people because of their merits; rather, grace is that "original love that alone gives rise to the qualities of man, making him worthy of love."¹² Furthermore, not only does grace create a special relationship between God and humans, it also creates a special relationship between humans in the world.

Grace is the name of the protagonist in all three films in von Trier's American-themed trilogy. Two of von Trier's earlier films, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Breaking the Waves*, while not featuring main characters named Grace, feature female protagonists of a similar type.¹³ In each case, the female protagonist feels as if she is making sacrifices of herself, going out of her way, to help others. She imagines herself as selfless, putting the needs of others in front of her own and making of herself a gift to them. In *Dancer in the Dark* and *Breaking the Waves*, this sacrifice results in the death of the protagonists – a death intended to give others a better life. In *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, the sacrifice apparently misfires. It results in the deaths of some of those Grace is trying to benefit as a direct or indirect result of her intervention. But in these cases, Grace is still aligned with Christian grace. When Grace is first informed of the persistent slavery at Manderlay, her slave informant describes Manderlay as "this godforsaken place." Grace's arrival at Manderlay is an (attempted) gift to the inhabitants of the plantation, intended to improve their condition, to help them form a new community.

Grace is not the only explicitly theological word that plays a central role in *Manderlay*. In addition to Grace, there is Law. Referred to as "Mam's Law" (from Mam, the plantation mistress, its supposed author, played by Lauren Bacall) and regarded as "almost sacred," we first encounter this Law when the dying Mam, moribund along with – likely, because of – the dying way of life she represents, asks to speak privately with Grace. She asks Grace for one favor, "one woman to another" (to which Grace responds that gender offers no privilege). Mam asks Grace to destroy the book of Law kept under Mam's bed. It contains the rules and customs by which the plantation operates, "well-filled with bizarre and vicious regulations," we are told by the narrator. Grace flatly refuses, asserting that any decision should be made in public, by the community as a whole: "[I]t's my view that anything, no matter what, is best served by being

brought out into the open." By bringing it out into the open, Grace can demystify the Law, destroying its authority – through her own authority.

As Grace encounters difficulties guiding the liberated plantation, she considers revealing the book of Law to the community. She is convinced by Wilhelm to wait, agreeing with his advice that the community might not yet be ready. After the community has gone up in flames, as Grace is departing, she delivers the book of Law to the community as a parting "gift" (her gift: to overturn, to turn over, the Law). The film dramatically reveals that Wilhelm, the elderly former slave who had seemed most sympathetic to Grace and her project, had written the Law: "I wrote Mam's Law for the good of everyone."

Wilhelm had tried, long ago, to formalize the best customary practices of the community. Each of the apparently meaningless or simply oppressive regulations had a significance which was, on his view, in the best interest of the community. All slaves had to line up in a particular part of the plantation each day because that was the only part of the plantation that had shade during the hottest part of the day; paper money was prohibited so it would not be gambled away; it was prohibited to cut down the trees of the "Old Lady's Garden" because they blocked the wind from covering crops with dust; and the slaves were divided into categories (i.e., Group 1, "Proudy Nigger"; Group 2, "Talkin' Nigger"; Group 5, "Clownin' Nigger", etc., each receiving different amounts of food and permitted different liberties) because this allowed for the best organization of the plantation based on the psychologies of its members. These numbers kept the plantation "in an iron grip," according to the narrator who here identifies with Grace. After Wilhelm explains the advantages he perceives of the Law, Grace retorts, "Damn it, Wilhelm, they're not free!"

Simply by looking on the surface, at the relationship between "Grace" and "Law" in *Manderlay*, we can begin to understand what the underlying political theological project of the film might involve. Before Grace comes to Manderlay, the plantation is ruled according to the Law. Grace overthrows the Law. She says that the Law no longer matters. She thinks each former slave, regardless of his or her "group," should receive the same amount of food; she thinks it silly that the former slaves line up on the parade ground each day; and she suggests that the "Old Lady's Garden" be cut down in order to improve the decrepit cabins in which the former slaves live. We cannot help but think of the Christian narrative: Old Testament Law overturned by New Testament Grace.

The results of Grace's attempt to overthrow the Law are calamitous. A dust storm destroys most of the crops which the community had planted because, in violation of the Law, Grace encouraged the community to chop down the trees in the Old Lady's Garden. With the abolition of the "groups" into which the slaves had been categorized, those who, by their "psychology," were prone to take advantage of others did so. Wilma steals food from a dying baby and Timothy steals money from the community as a whole. Both acts result in further violence. One is reminded of the violence that Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida famously suggest lies at the foundation of the law.¹⁴ For Benjamin, law-making violence is hidden by the law, and the law is sustained by law-preserving violence. When the law is suspended, such as in a general strike, law-making violence is exposed. Benjamin seems to relish this violence, aligning himself with an anomic apocalypticism and praying for a Messiah to sweep away worldly law with divine violence.¹⁵

Is von Trier associating himself with Benjamin's violent Messianism, perhaps as a complement to his allegorized Nietzschean genealogy? If this were the case, Von Trier would be endorsing the conventional (Christian) relationship between Law and Grace, simply flipping their moral valences. Simplistically: on the traditional view, Law is superseded by Grace. Christian Grace brings peace. On Benjamin's (Jewish) view, we are still waiting for Grace to supersede Law, but it is something that we wish for despite its necessarily accompanying violence. In *Manderlay*, it seems as though we witness the moment at which Law is superseded by Grace – and we witness the violence that necessarily ensues.

But this reading misses the dramatic revelation at the end of *Manderlay*: the Law was written by the slaves themselves (at least, by one of the slaves, with the supposed best interest of the slaves as a whole in mind). With this information, von Trier forces us to reevaluate our understanding of the relationship between Law and Grace; he forces us to push beyond any simplistic story relating the two. We are pushed into what might be loosely called a more Hegelian understanding of the Law.¹⁶ The Law is not imposed from the outside by some supernatural force. Rather, the Law grows organically from within a community,

sometimes explicit (codified), other times remaining implicit. A book of Law simply codifies best practices of the community – as was the case in *Manderlay*. Certainly, Law has a tendency to become reified, separated from its foundations in social practice. It is this – these reifications – that must be critiqued and overcome; it is not Law itself that must be overthrown.

Manderlay, on this Hegelian reading, exhibits the problems that result when Law is misunderstood. This misunderstanding makes it appear that Grace is necessary for salvation because Law is a foreign imposition. The result is that we appear to be faced with a choice between the violence of Law and the salvation – or the redemptive violence – of Grace. The only possible response is melancholia, mourning without end.¹⁷

In both of the readings first offered of *Manderlay* – the efficacy of liberalism reading and the Nietzschean genealogy reading – the same political theology is at work. In the first reading, the task of the political theorist is understood to be that of finding a way of replacing a repressive regime with an alternative. The political theorist is in search of Grace to replace Law. But the Grace of liberalism does not work. In the second reading, the task of the political theorist is understood to be that of moving from harmonizing to agonistic understandings of politics. In this case, it is understood that the old Law is simply replaced by a new Law in the guise of (the character) Grace. The task, again, is to find "real" Grace, this time by finding some way of escaping the forced harmony imposed by Law, a task that can only result in melancholia.

Gillian Rose and the Hegelian Alternative

For a theoretical articulation of this problematic, I suggest that we turn to the work of the late and much underappreciated Gillian Rose. In her extensive and diverse writings, Rose performs a critique of the Law/Grace opposition parallel to that performed by *Manderlay*. While *Manderlay* demonstrates what is at stake when political theory relies on implicit political theology, Rose's work offers a thick, philosophically-grounded exploration of these issues that will put us in a position to question the extent to which the sophisticated work of contemporary African American political theorists is susceptible to critique in terms of political theology.

Rose was, first and foremost, a committed Hegelian.¹⁸ She understood herself to be faithful to Hegel against his many betrayers – ranging from Marx to post-structuralists. According to Rose, Hegel has been betrayed because of the allure of an insidious neo-Kantian problematic. The defining feature of neo-Kantianism is its "diremption," or splitting, between the empirical world and some set of transcendental presuppositions not accountable to the empirical world. To take two disparate examples, Rose argues that Durkheim took "society" to exist in the transcendental register and then applied the category of "society" to his investigation of the empirical world without allowing the empirical world to feed back into his understanding of society. Similarly, she argues that Foucault (in *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality*) took "power" to exist, unaccountable, in the transcendental register and applied the category of power to his investigations of the empirical world.¹⁹

In opposition to this neo-Kantian apostasy, Rose locates herself as a (perhaps *the*) orthodox Hegelian. She does this by understanding philosophy and social theory as jurisprudence, as the study of Law.²⁰ In other words, the task of the theorist is to investigate law – Law – rather than to attempt to locate a region "outside" the Law, a region in the transcendental register (the realm, shall we say, of Grace).²¹ For Rose this does not mean a turn to positivist social science. Rather, it means an engagement with the richly textured lived world: she urges investigation via what might be described as the phenomenology of Law.

In transforming the practice of philosophy into the study of Law, and true to her Hegelian commitments, Rose emphasizes the unavoidability of "metaphysics." Rose argues that metaphysics and ethics are always already intertwined. Philosophy and social theory go wrong when they attempt to disentangle the two, when they repeat the neo-Kantian diremption between, shall we say, Law and Grace. To think that metaphysics and ethics, Law and Grace, are inextricably entangled is a "disturbing possibility." Rose suggests that this view is, and will be, strongly resisted: "In both the world of politics and the intellectual world, there seems to be a low tolerance of equivocation. The result of this intolerance and unease is the reproduction of dualistic ways of thinking..."²² The work of philosophy and theory is "difficult" work –

there only appear to be easy answers when we resort to dualistic ways of thinking, to a supposed diremption between Law and Grace.

Rose only gestures towards an alternative to the diremptive tradition with which she disagrees. In her positive vision, the theorist (or subject) acknowledges that action, power, law, and violence are always intertwined. She suggests that mourning, not (postmodern) melancholia, is the appropriate response to the recognition of the power- and violence-infused nature of the Law. Her slogan, that "mourning becomes the law," means that the frustration effected by the violence inherent in the Law must remind us of our commitment to justice, return us to the political realm, "renewed and reinvigorated for participation, ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city."²³ We are not to slip into melancholic fixation on a fantasized but ever-distant "New Jerusalem," a fantasized land of Grace. Instead, we are to be committed to "political action" tied to "structural analysis" – which is to say, we must commit ourselves to a thorough investigation of the Law, and we must commit ourselves to act based on the results of that investigation.

Law, Grace, and African American Pragmatism

The critique of political theology performed by *Manderlay* and elaborated by Rose is subtle but powerful. *Manderlay* is a film about race in America so it seems appropriate to turn to African American political theory to examine its ramifications. Specifically, let us turn to what is perhaps the most influential current in African American political theory: pragmatism. Exemplified – and popularized – by Cornel West, recent theorists have addressed issues ranging from black leadership to black identity by mobilizing the resources of the American pragmatist tradition.²⁴ In addition to the canonical figures of Dewey, James, and Peirce, African American social critics such as Ellison, Baldwin, and Morrison have recently been included in this tradition. The question that I want to explore is whether recent theorists in this tradition are vulnerable to the critique of political theology performed by *Manderlay*. Pragmatists have been proud of evading many arguments between liberals and critics of liberalism. But do pragmatist theorists, like liberals and their critics, implicitly rely on a political imaginary that opposes Law and Grace?

Before directly addressing these questions, let us note that recent writers have drawn attention to the "religious genealogy" of contemporary American pragmatism.²⁵ For example, while noting the strong continuities between American pragmatism and nineteenth century developments in the human sciences in Europe, Gail Hamner has argued that what makes pragmatism distinctively American is the way that European scientific research was fused with the uniquely American "Puritan imaginary" to shape, *inter alia*, James' interest in individual religious experience and Peirce's focus on self-discipline.²⁶ Similarly, Joan Richardson has shown how Jonathan Edwards "embedded the divine within the empirical" and emphasized worldly works as signs of God's grace.²⁷ These religious themes, Richardson argues, have animated the tradition of American pragmatist thought both in philosophy and in literature.

Instead of approaching the question of the possible political theology of African American pragmatism through a "religious genealogy," the approach here will focus on conceptual affinities – though these conceptual affinities will echo the genealogical continuities identified by Hamner and Richardson. In short: pragmatism understands itself as suspending metaphysics (variously: foundationalism, ontology, epistemology, etc., or some combination thereof) and allowing for a newly freed conception of social criticism. The pragmatist theorist, like Grace arriving in *Manderlay*, cheerily announces (already present) freedom: No more metaphysics! Essence is a hoax! Ontology is over!

In explaining why pragmatism has recently become a hot topic, Cornel West notes the "widespread disenchantment with the traditional image of philosophy as a transcendental mode of inquiry, a tribunal of reason which grounds claims about Truth, Goodness, and Beauty."²⁸ Pragmatism offers a means of escaping the "tribunal of reason" and its accompanying foundation in a privileged (capitalized!) notion of Truth. Indeed, this is the meaning of the title of West's monograph, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*. He examines a tradition of American thought that has not been corrupted by the problematic metaphysics of Western philosophy.²⁹

To focus our inquiry into African American pragmatist political theory, let us focus on *In a Shade of Blue*, the recent book about "Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America" by Eddie Glaude, a former student and current colleague of West. Glaude, drawing especially on Dewey, argues that the complexity of issues related to race is elided when race is considered to "really" exist in some deep, metaphysical sense. Part of Glaude's task is a rescue operation – the peril: "black power's cultural metaphysics."³⁰

Glaude suggests that his contribution to political theory is to mobilize the resources of pragmatism to address "conceptual problems that plague contemporary African American life," such as questions about black identity, history, and agency.³¹ Note how Glaude is explicit about the "meta" level of his inquiry: it is about "conceptual problems." He applies the resources of pragmatism to dissolve metaphysical clots and to free African American political theory to do its job right, to offer "imaginative responses to problems confronting *actual* black people."³² To return to and refine the question guiding our inquiry: does Glaude's attempt to resolve "conceptual problems" differ from the attempt that Grace makes to resolve the "conceptual problem" of the status of African Americans at Manderlay? When we witness her initial announcement that slavery has been abolished and blacks are free, is Grace doing no more than resolving a conceptual problem with the intent to encourage "imaginative responses" to "*actual*" problems?

On the central question of black identity, Glaude forcefully argues that ontological conceptions of race must be abandoned in favor of a pragmatic conception: this is a key conceptual clarification that he urges. Race language is invoked strategically, on the pragmatic conception; it is invoked when it will do productive work to bring together a community of different individuals with certain shared interests.³³ Understood as a rhetoric, strategically employed, Glaude suggests that the pragmatic conception of race evades the "problematic" view that race "really" exists (his terminology). However, if we turn to Glaude's examples of this "problematic" view, the question of whether race language is employed strategically or ontologically is more complicated than it sounds. If we read texts – for example, from the black power advocates who particularly interest Glaude – invoking race and linking it, seemingly "ontologically," to African heritage, would this not be best to read strategically, as the invocation of a rhetoric that serves a function in a specific time and place? Would it not be, to borrow Rorty's language, "silly" to understand such language as positing some Reality to race? In the words of Timothy from *Manderlay*, isn't Reality a word that many people just don't understand?

Grace entered Manderlay to inform the slaves that they were free. Grace brought conceptual clarity to the slaves. A few of their rituals changed: they now held democratic meetings and each received an equal share of the food supply. But, for the most part, their lives remained the same – until the changes ushered in by Grace led to various increasingly violent acts. Glaude claims to be bringing clarity, to be informing us that race does not "really" exist – indeed, that the whole metaphysical enterprise is superfluous. Certainly, the practice of the social critic must change slightly. She must no longer talk about race in certain ways. The former slaves at Manderlay must no longer refer to each other as "Pleasin' Niggers" or "Proudy Niggers." More than about the significance of the change commended by the pragmatist theorist, one worries that these changes rely on the problematic structure which *Manderlay* so clearly exhibits: the opposition of Grace and Law.

But Glaude and others might object that the alternative political theology offered by *Manderlay* – the political theology of critical and difficult examination of Law alone with no appeal to Grace – is exactly what they advocate. Glaude calls for investigation of "social context" and "the messiness of life" while West similarly commends the examination of "social structure constraints... that reinforce and reproduce hierarchies."³⁴ Despite these gestures, the pragmatist is bereft of resources with which to carry out an investigation of Law. Those resources – posited distinctions, claims about representation, classificatory schemas – are dismissed by the pragmatist as "metaphysics." Again, *Manderlay* demonstrates this point well: Grace, the character, refuses to use Mam's law to classify the different "groups" of former slaves, with the eventual consequence that the community goes out of control and self-destructs. Counter-intuitively, the classification, the metaphysics of *Manderlay* as it were, is "pragmatic" in the sense that it works, it keeps order in the plantation.³⁵ Yet through a subtle rhetorical maneuver "pragmatist" theorists seem to have dismissed just this sort of pragmatism. Recall how Grace at one point purports to have an interest in the textured life of the former slave community. She tries to give little Jim an easel and paints – but she accidentally gives them to his brother, Jack. From the perspective of Grace, all black people look alike, for

Grace has overturned Law and all of the distinctions which Law entails. One worries that the same might be true of theorists blinded by the dazzling intellects and smooth talk of some pragmatists.

The "heart of pragmatism," according to Rorty, is the refusal of the correspondence theory of truth, the refusal of the theory that concepts in the head correspond to things in the world.³⁶ Glaude expands on this point in his discussion of black nationalism. Instead of searching for an "essence" of black nationalism – what it really is, out there – Glaude advances a method of "explication by elimination." Instead of attempting to offer necessary and sufficient conditions for classification of a phenomenon as an instance of black nationalism, Glaude suggests that we "set the term aside and proceed with the kind of thick description" that allows for a more complex understanding of the phenomenon.³⁷ But, again, it is hard to understand how this "meta" change that Glaude is advocating would make a practical difference. No historian writing about black nationalism tries to capture what they mean by the term in a sentence or a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Everyone seriously interested in a phenomenon explicates, through thick description, the phenomenon that they are studying. If a shorthand definition is used – what Glaude derisively labels an "essence" – it is understood to be just that: a shorthand formulation, a heuristic. Glaude's anxiety seems to be a more general – although still only "conceptual" – anxiety about the legitimacy of representation. He seems suspicious that any claims about black nationalism necessarily bring along the "cultural metaphysics" from which the pragmatist has liberated us.

It is in the ability to make speculative distinctions and then test them against empirical evidence that the heart of the metaphysical enterprise eschewed by Glaude resides. On this question of identity and representation, it is helpful to turn once again to the work of Gillian Rose. The critique of representation is closely tied to the critique of metaphysics – to what Rose takes to be the critique of Law. Rose argues that when postmodernists and neopragmatists object to, and attempt to abstain from, making representations of the world, they are replicating the same maneuver that they use to search for a "New Jerusalem." They view "the overcoming of representation as the *imperium* of the modern philosophical subject, and as the false promise of universal politics."³⁸ Yet Rose argues that representation is a necessary aspect of the world. Representations do not necessarily reflect an absolute truth; they merely stake out ground in order to begin a discussion. They can, if we like, be thought of as useful fictions, not the scary machinery of a "cultural metaphysics." To quote Rose once again, "Only the persistence of always fallible and contestable representation opens the possibility for our acknowledgment of mutual implication in the fascism of our cultural rites and rituals."³⁹ In the context of *Manderlay*, it is Grace's illusion of purity, her attempted abstention from the practices of representation of from the "cultural rites and rituals" that make up Mam's Law, that eventually leads to the violent destruction of Manderlay.

Both West and Glaude are interested in infusing pragmatism with a sense of "the tragic." This offers another resource to which they might appeal when facing the charge of casting the pragmatist in the role of Grace. They might argue that, if the pragmatist acknowledges the difficult choices and inevitable failings of political life, she immunizes herself from the charge that she appeals to some incarnation of Grace. Glaude's account of "the tragic," developed through an extensive engagement with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, suggests parallels with the story of *Manderlay*: both narratives are structured around displays of seemingly unwarranted suffering. In the film, we see a child die, an elderly woman killed in revenge, and, finally, destruction wrought upon much of Manderlay. Like *Beloved*, perhaps, *Manderlay* simply signals the depths of the challenges confronting the African American community and humbles political aspirations. In the face of these tragic circumstances, we must, to cite Glaude citing James, "Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes... If death ends all, we cannot meet death better."⁴⁰ Indeed, Glaude writes that at the end of *Beloved*, there is "[n]o grace still, real or imagined."⁴¹

Glaude's account of the tragic may lead him to conclude that there is no "grace," but he makes way for its stand-in: faith. He notes that Dewey, while acknowledging the tragic, the unavoidable conflicts and uncertainties that characterize the world, also has "faith... in our capacity to engage in intelligent action."⁴² This faith is accompanied by a "responsibility" "to act intelligently in order to ensure... that this future is better than our present."⁴³ If "faith" and "responsibility" here are not concepts in the transcendental register, it is hard to say what is. Faith is invoked as rhetoric – secularized religious rhetoric – to commend a particular presupposed position. Faith is not accountable in any way to the world itself, a world which only offers death. In the face of the futility of much "intelligent action," why should we have "faith" in it?

Why does the life of future generations bring "responsibility" rather than just, say, concern? It is impossible for the pragmatist to answer these questions without appeal to Grace, or its equivalent. For Glaude, the condition of the world is tragic – but pragmatism allows one to escape the fallenness of the world and to continue acting, to have "faith" that one's actions will work. Yet again, the pragmatist brings Grace to a fallen world.

The Political Theology of *Manderlay*

Having examined the critique of political theology that *Manderlay* performs, a critique thickened with the help of the work of Gillian Rose, and having extended this critique of political theology to the critique African American pragmatist political theory, let us now turn to the question of whether *Manderlay* has anything constructive to say about political theology. Perhaps if we turn from the substance of the narrative to the methodology, to the style of filmmaking in which that narrative is presented, we can begin to identify resources for developing a political theory untainted by problematic political theology. Instead of opposing Law to Grace, I argue that the style of *Manderlay* performs an interrogation of Law alone with no appeal to Grace. This interrogation proceeds by toying with filmmaking conventions, exceeding or underplaying norms in order to highlight them and call them into question.

Manderlay is visually striking. It is set on a simple white stage with only blackness beyond the stage's edges. All of the characters remain on the stage all of the time – it is Manderlay, their home. There are only the most minimal props on the stage: Mam's bed; the pillars representing the plantation house which, significantly, support a beam engraved with the slogan "LITTLE LITTLE CAN I GIVE;" a few pieces of wood representing the leaky slave cabins; and one or two other props. Many locations are designated by labels written on the floor in white lettering. There are not doors: when a character needs to represent going in or out of a doorway, he or she knocks and turns the air.

The result is a visual minimalism, sometimes disorienting, sometimes claustrophobic. Indeed, the style is nearly the opposite of von Trier's earlier ("Dogma-style") films such as *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*. These earlier films were made almost entirely on location in quasi-documentary style (these films were, in turn, a response to von Trier's technically sophisticated earliest films). Moreover, in both the on-location films and the entirely set-bound (indeed: theater-style) *Dogville* and *Manderlay*, von Trier uses a handheld camera which he himself operates much of the time. This has an effect both on the actors and on the viewer. The relationship between actor and director is dramatically altered when the director is but a few feet in front of him or her all of the time. The viewer is taken into the scene; the detachment allowed by an "objective" view through the lens of the camera is taken away. There is no framing: the viewer is not allowed the relaxation of symmetry or ordering in what she sees. Another effect of the handheld, director-operated camera is that the film is often momentarily but noticeably out of focus, an effect desired by Von Trier.⁴⁴

Dominating the feel of *Manderlay* is the voice of a narrator (John Hurt). This voice – strong, masculine, mid-Atlantic, authoritative – booms across the plantation set. Despite his authoritative sound, the narrator is not, in fact, an authority. He misleads us, and his allegiances are unclear. When Grace first liberates blacks at Manderlay and begins to facilitate their transition to "freedom," the narrator reassuringly tells us, "Her actions would comprise an unconditional enrichment of these people's lives, there was no doubt about that." Notice also the excessively – facetiously – pretentious language and stance. It provides a clue that something is amiss, that the authority of the narrator should not be taken for granted. Yet the narrator himself brings his authority into question. After making the statement just quoted, we are shown the skeptical faces of the former slaves. The narrator adds – "or was there?" In another case, the narrator tells us that the slave community is "Living proof of the devastating power of oppression" – a statement that, as the finale of the film shows, is at the very least misleading.

The voice of the narrator is complemented by "chapter" titles displayed in black lettering on a white screen – for example, "Chapter ONE: In which we happen upon Manderlay and meet the people there" and "Chapter EIGHT: In which Grace settles with Manderlay and the film ends." The combination of narrator and titles serves to replicate – in excess – the Hollywood conventions which guide the viewer through an ordinary plot. The narrator's voice is *too* strong, *too* masculine... *too* authoritative. Similarly, the chapter

titles tell us *too much*. It is not that their content gives away what is about to happen in the film, but rather that, like the restrictive set, they frame the narrative excessively.

Finally, when we turn back to the narrative itself, we find even more examples of convention-bound unconventionality. The narrator's voice banally opens the film, "It was in the year of 1933..." There is a main character who encounters difficulties while trying to do the right thing. A woman lusts after a forbidden man, the "wildest" of the former slaves, Timothy. The winds of fortune blow this way and that: Grace's difficulties are sometimes resolved, sometimes compounded. There are Hollywood stars: Bryce Dallas Howard plays Grace (Nicole Kidman was set to reclaim the role, which she played in *Dogville*, but she had a scheduling conflict); other actors include Danny Glover and Lauren Bacall.

At the same time, these Hollywood conventions are altered: the main character is female, not male; the difficulties she faces are largely her own fault; her moralism is explicit and ubiquitous; and, dramatically, there is no happy ending – or even any resolution. It is not clear what will happen to Grace at the end of the film. She simply runs away, escapes. And it is not clear what will happen to the remaining former slaves, who seem to have internalized some democratic values (e.g., voting), but who remain tied to the old customs of Manderlay.

In each of these ways, *Manderlay* toys with rules. Indeed, rules – Law – have long been a fascination, perhaps obsession, of von Trier. He famously distributed little red pamphlets containing the new "rules" for filmmaking in 1995, the organizing document of what came to be known as Dogma 95. Billed as a response to Hollywood excess, the Dogma rules prohibited filmmakers from using music, required filmmakers to use digital cameras, and prohibited lighting and special effects. In 2003, von Trier challenged fellow Danish filmmaker Jorgen Leth to remake the latter's 1967 film "The Perfect Human" with five obstructions. These obstructions were each rules constraining what Leth could do. One obstruction was to have no shot with more than 12 frames, another was to use only animation.

Unlike von Trier's project with Leth, the way that *Manderlay* toys with rules is not purely constrictive. *Manderlay* takes familiar conventions and follows them in such a way that they are brought into question. It follows norms alternately excessively and deficiently, denaturalizing them. At once, the film is restricted to a stage and is filmed through a handheld camera. At once, we see familiar Hollywood faces and we see those faces in the roles of ill-fated characters. And, at once, we are reminded of the formality of the plot by a narrator's voice and the standards rules which characterize a "good" plot are violated.

Perhaps one way to understand von Trier's strategy here is to recall Aristotle's account of the virtues. Aristotle began by looking around his community to find all of the character traits of those who are labeled virtuous – of the just, the courageous, the temperate.⁴⁵ These character traits led Aristotle to conclude that virtues are happy mediums of behavior, vices are excesses and deficiencies. The courageous man is neither fearless, running into battle ahead of his army, nor is he timid, running away at the first sign of danger. Instead, the courageous man is praised as virtuous when he acts just as the community norm for courage dictates – no more, no less.

Von Trier practices what might be called anti-Aristotelian virtue. Instead of striving to meet the community norm, he tries to exceed that norm or to fall below it. Aristotle would call such practice vice. But unlike vice on Aristotle's account, von Trier is not uneducated: it is not that he was insufficiently acculturated into the norms of the filmmaking community. Rather, the excesses and deficiencies of his filmmaking practice are always entirely conscious and intentional with full knowledge of the rules that are not being perfectly followed. This observation suggests how political theory might be done in light of the political theology of *Manderlay*. In the narrative of *Manderlay*, von Trier rejects the opposition of Law and Grace. In its style, *Manderlay* investigates the interstices of Law, highlighting and toying with specific norms. *Manderlay* invites political theorists to investigate the ways in which Law – that is, customs, norms – are manipulated. And *Manderlay* invites political activists to stop arguing about, or waiting for, avatars of Grace and to instead proceed with the difficult work of highlighting and challenging specific problematic norms and conventions.

This suggestion is not novel; the novelty is framing it in terms of political theology. To take one prominent example of a theoretical endeavor which I take to be aligned with the political theology of *Manderlay*: when Judith Butler commends drag as a means of creatively using existing norms (how men dress, how women dress) to subvert gender norms (men should dress like men, women should dress like women), she is refusing the Law/Grace opposition and instead focusing entirely on the interrogation of Law, even though she does not frame her project in these terms.⁴⁶ Von Trier's focus is on excess and deficiency while Butler's is on parody, but the similar direction to which their works point suggests a fruitful way of doing political theory, and political activism, which avoids problematic political theology. Political theory done in this way takes heed of the provocative claim made by Gillian Rose: "*this is politics* – the risk of action arising out of the negotiation of the law."⁴⁷

NOTES

¹ Gillian Rose, Radio Interview with Andy O'Mahony, RTE Radio 1, Ireland, April 9, 2005 [First broadcast 1995]; forthcoming in *Theory, Culture, and Society*.

² Dana Stevens, "Back on the Plantation," *Slate* <<http://www.slate.com/id/2134922>> January 27, 2006.

³ Stephen Holden, "An America Where Gangsters Free Slaves Not Keen for Liberation," *The New York Times* January 27, 2006, E10.

⁴ Production of the third film has been indefinitely postponed.

⁵ All quotes in the text come from the soundtrack of *Manderlay*.

⁶ Along these lines, see, for instance, Jayson Harsin, "Von Trier's Brechtian Gamble: On *Manderlay*," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 51, <<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/51/manderlay.htm>> February 2006.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967).

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power* in *Complete Works*, vol. 14 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), sections 304 and 306, pp. 250 and 251, respectively.

⁹ See, for example, Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, expanded edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 490; cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 144: "The concept of politics will have then merged entirely into a war of spirits, all power structures from the old society will have exploded – they are all based on lies."

¹¹ Eva-Maria Faber, "Grace," in *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 647-652.

¹² Eva-Maria Faber, "Grace," p. 650.

¹³ *Breaking the Waves*, in particular, has generated a good deal of discussion, particularly relating to its use of religious imagery. See, for instance, Stephen Heath, "God, Faith, and Film: *Breaking the Waves*," *Literature & Theology* 12:1 (March 1998), pp. 93-107; and Slavoj Žižek, "Death and the Maiden," in *The Žižek Reader*, Ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 206-221. Cf. Lorenzo Chiesa, "What is the Gift of Grace? On *Dogville*," *Film-Philosophy* 11.3 (November 2007), pp. 1-22.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), pp. 277-300; Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-68.

¹⁵ Cf. Gillian Rose's discussion of Benjamin in her *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.69.

¹⁶ For an explication along these lines attributed to Hegel, see Robert Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979) pp. 187-196. Cf. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); and, surprisingly, the account of social rules in the foundational work of analytic jurisprudence, H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

¹⁷ See Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholia" *Boundary 2* 26:3 (1999) pp.19-27; Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*.

¹⁸ See, for an early statement, Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981); through her chapter on Hegel in *Mourning Becomes the Law*.

¹⁹ She makes these points in *Hegel contra Sociology* and in *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-structuralism and Law* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

²⁰ Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism*; cf. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 75.

²¹ Compare Judith Butler's discussion of the rhetoric of a region "outside the Law" in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²² Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 2.

²³ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 36.

²⁴ See, for example: Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999); Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005); Robert Gooding-Williams, *Look, a Negro! Philosophical Essays on Race, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004); Melvin Rogers, "Liberalism, Narrative, and Identity: A Pragmatic Defense of Racial Solidarity," *Theory and Event* 6:2 (2002).

²⁵ In addition to the two writers discussed below, note how Cornel West – himself a Christian – includes Emerson and Niebuhr in his (primarily secular) genealogy of pragmatism. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

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- ²⁶ M. Gail Hamner, *American Pragmatism: A Religious Genealogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ²⁷ Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 50 and *passim*.
- ²⁸ Cornel West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 3.
- ²⁹ But West, always carefully nuanced, writes, "Prophetic pragmatism understands the Emersonian swerve from epistemology – and the American evasion of philosophy – not as a wholesale rejection of philosophy but rather as a reconception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism." Cornel West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 230.
- ³⁰ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. 79.
- ³¹ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. x.
- ³² Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. x.
- ³³ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. 60; Eddie Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 11-12.
- ³⁴ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. 60; Cornel West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 4.
- ³⁵ Here we might also think of how Grace's father responds when she accuses him of being a bigot: "I admit, I don't do deals with the Japs. You can trust them when there's big money at stake." Again, there is classification, even "stereotype," but for what might be called pragmatic purposes.
- ³⁶ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 105; c.f., Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). This, of course, is a very loose statement of the correspondence theory.
- ³⁷ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. 126.
- ³⁸ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 55 – she is writing here specifically about the "translation of modern metaphysics into ontology" but it seems as though she would apply her conclusions more broadly.
- ³⁹ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 41.
- ⁴⁰ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. 44.
- ⁴¹ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. 43, repeated on p. 44.
- ⁴² Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. 21.
- ⁴³ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, p. 25.
- ⁴⁴ Legendarily, in *Breaking the Waves* Von Trier was so frustrated by his talented focus puller that he would occasionally jab the focus puller with a stick to achieve the desired effect. See the director's commentary to *Dogville*.
- ⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- ⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, but see also her more recent work such as *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- ⁴⁷ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p. 85; italics in the original.