

From Social Criticism to Hope

The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers

The November 2016 issue of JRFM explores the possibilities of cinema to relate to the world, and its capacity to express social criticism and the hope for a better world through stories and images.

In particular, this issue focuses on the œuvre of the Dardenne Brothers and their specific style of “responsible realism” (Philip Mosley), from their first documentaries in the 1970s to their feature films. Their attention to individual characters within their socio-economic context allows for empathy with their individual struggles, and at the same time points out the larger structural problems restrict them. This criticism of social conditions is transcended by a vision of hope and the possibility for transformation, both individually and socially. The Dardennes represent a valuable case for the study of the social commitment of cinema because their clear vision of the problematic issues within their Belgian context (and more broadly speaking, the industrialized North-Atlantic sphere) is grounded in a particular filmic style. From the perspective of the study of religions and theology, their cinema is interesting for a variety of reasons, such as the ethical challenge to assume, individually and socially, responsibility for the other; the persistence on the possibility of transformation within the conditions of the world as a form of secularized religion; the way in which images, sound and narrative are used to carefully observe a particular situation while, at the same time, transcending its specificity.

This issue then pursues two goals: first, the analysis and evaluation of the critically acclaimed, rich work of the Dardenne Brothers from the perspective of the study of religions and theology; and second, departing from this analysis of the Dardennes’ cinema and through the comparison of their work to that of other socially committed filmmakers in relation to the broader debates about realist filmmaking, a more fundamental reflection on the relationship between cinema and “reality” and the questions of responsibility and hope that may emerge from it.

Therefore we invite articles that focus on:

- issues of style, filmic language and narrative in the filmic representation of social criticism;
- specific social justice issues and their representation in the cinema of the Dardenne Brothers;
- the Dardennes' cinema as a unique possibility of relating to the world in a form of secular religious practice;
- hope as a religious and/or secularized, political principle in the films of the Dardennes;
- the analysis of specific films of the Dardenne Brothers with regard to the relationship between filmmaking, social responsibility, and possibilities for transformation;
- comparison between the stylistic and narrative approach of the Dardennes and other filmmakers;
- the social context of the filmmakers and its influence on their work;
- theoretical reflections on the relationship between reality, aesthetic creation, social commitment, and a transformative imaginary in the work of the Dardennes and beyond;
- other topics related to the overall theme of this issue.

Articles of 25,000-30,000 characters (including spaces) should be posted online for peer review by August 31st, 2016 on the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register. The publication is scheduled for November 2016. For any questions regarding the call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact Stefanie Knauss (stefanie.knauss@gmail.com).

Comics and Animated Cartoons

The May 2017 issue of JRFM deals with a topic rarely discussed in the study of religion, theology and media studies: comics and animated cartoons.

The complex history of comics dates back to figural book illuminations, such as in the *Biblia Pauperum* and the *Dances of Death* in the High Middle Ages. However, when school education became compulsory and reading an outward sign of education, the reputation of sequentially arranged illustrations, partially annotated with speech bubbles (banners), declined. Accordingly, a person who relied on the narrative expression of figural sequences was considered to be illiterate. In the 19th century, Rodolphe Töpfer and Wilhelm Busch paved the way for a renewal of autonomous picture sequences, with the picture being the essential component and the text the explanatory feature. By the end of the 19th century, comic strips had begun to establish themselves in the daily press, and from the 1920s onward, comic culture experienced its first remarkable upswing. Many contemporary popular comic characters can be traced back to this time, most of whom have had a surprising cultural impact. Today, comics are a mass phenomenon.

In theology and in the study of religion, an analysis of the use of religious motifs in comics is far from being complete. Many comics utilize traditional religious motifs and symbols (e.g. Thor as deity, the pentangle as symbol). Protagonists in comics often take on – in their own (and sometimes twisted) way – a savior-like figure who brings salvation (for whatever reason) into an evil (hostile) world. Many narratives also address fundamental and existential human questions. They do not necessarily offer answers to such questions but can provide these questions with a context of hope. Narratives also open up a space to allow for the audience to identify with the characters leaving traces – or imprints – in the audience's everyday lives. As such, comics can have an impact on and become important in a range of socio-cultural contexts and questions: questions of violence, radicalization, a means of empowerment, or a way of uncovering hidden meanings.

So far, the difference between comics and comic book movie adaptations has received insufficient attention. It is also necessary to differentiate between animated and live-action movies based on comic books. Both use the original literary source in different ways to achieve a desired effect for the audience. In a narrower sense, one

of the most important questions is how “encodings of religious presences” (Armin Nassehi) are formally performed in comics and comic book movie adaptations. In keeping with the traditional theoretical problem of the translation of absence and presence and the staging of the indirect, this aspect holds religious potential.

We invite articles that focus on:

- theoretical reflections on the history of comics in the context of religious systems;
- comics and their movie adaptations as a means of expressing existential questions such as ethical categories, suffering, and tribulations as well as love, mercy and hope;
- issues of style, filmic language and narrative in comic book adaptations, especially the differences between animated and staged picturization;
- the comparison between the stylistic and narrative approach of selected comics, especially of Western and Eastern provenance (e.g. Mattel vs. Manga/Anime tradition);
- other topics related to the overall theme of this issue.

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