

In Search of the Human

The Work of the Dardenne Brothers Editorial

Close-ups of human faces and hands, shots that are anchored around human individuals, with landscapes or cityscapes only present in so far as they represent the environment in which these individuals live and act, a camera that moves and breathes with human bodies, scenes defined by the actions and interactions of the characters, narratives of human despair and resilience, broken relationships and offers of trust – without wanting to delimit the multifaceted œuvre of Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, these prominent aesthetic and narrative elements of their films underline one central theme across their work, the search for the human. What is the human being? What are the conditions that hinder or promote human flourishing? How can human beings exist in an industrialized, technicized society? How can they maintain their humanity under dehumanizing conditions? These questions are not explicitly religious, let alone specific to Christianity, and they are treated in the films of the Dardennes without direct reference to religious traditions and their bids to make sense of human existence. And yet, with their exploration of what it means to be human and to interact with other human beings in a context that often inhibits good relationships and the good life, their films provide much food for thought for theology, the study of religions, and philosophy as they reflect on central anthropological, existential, and ethical questions.

The three articles in the theme section of this issue offer different perspectives on the Dardennes' search for the human, spanning their work from *LA PROMESSE* (*THE PROMISE*, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, BE/FR/LU/TN 1996) to *DEUX JOURS, UNE NUIT* (*TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT*, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, BE/FR/IT 2014).¹ From a philosophical-theological perspective, Isabella Guanzini draws on Giles Deleuze's notion of "belief in the world" to discuss how the Dardennes contribute to its (re-)creation in a secular world, focusing in par-

¹ The most recent film by the Dardennes, *LA FILLE INCONNUE* (*THE UNKNOWN GIRL*, BE/FR 2016) had not yet been released at the time of preparation of this issue and unfortunately could not be included in the discussion in a more substantial way.

ticular on the theme of paternity as one moment when belief in the world has been disrupted and might be recreated. Walter Lesch's philosophical-ethical contribution explores the subtle, yet decisive influence of Emmanuel Levinas and his philosophy of the ethical claim of the other on Luc Dardenne, and Luc Dardenne's own philosophical contributions in his writings and cinema. In my contribution I introduce the perspectives of gender studies, feminist ethics, and Christian ethics to ask how the interaction of individual freedom and social structures shapes the lives of men and women in the worlds of family and work.

With their varied approaches, the three articles explore specific aspects of the vast question of the search for the human in the cinema of the Dardennes. In this editorial, I will focus on two more general issues, namely the two main strategies that I think characterize on a fundamental level their filmic search for the human, with their particular interest for theology and religious studies. One strategy is to focus closely on the material world as it is, as the condition for the existence of human beings, in a realist (but not naturalist, as Philip Mosley points out²) mode of filmmaking. More than simply empirical facts, the material world and in particular the materiality of human bodies are revealing of a particular situation and of human existence within it, with its tensions, disruptions, anxieties, and hopes. Thus, the directors' visual focus on the surface of the world and human bodies is not superficial but rather allows the materiality of the world to assume its full importance as the condition of human existence: these are the objects, the textures, the material encounters, the skin, hair, and clothes, and the gestures and actions in and through which human beings exist and express themselves. The materiality of the world and of human beings is shown to be the place of human existence, rather than instruments or hardware to be used, and thus is attributed a particular and quiet dignity of its own.

From a theological perspective, it is interesting to note that the Dardennes' attention to the materiality of the world and the concreteness of human being and acting is deeply situated in the empirical, yet at the same time transcends it in the "integration of the empirical and the transcendental, of the visible and the unseen."³ The capacity for transcendence of the material is realized in two ways in the films of the Dardennes: through close-ups and steady, long shots of what is in front of the camera, attending to the material world in its mysterious presence, and through an elliptical style with cuts that often leave large gaps in the narrative and underline the impossibility of visually capturing reality and human existing and acting within it. Focusing on the visible and allowing the invisible to claim its space, the filmmakers delineate the different ways in which the material integrates the transcendent: first, in the ability of what is to

2 Cf. Mosley 2013, 9.

3 Mosley 2013, 17.

transform and become something new; second, when simple, concrete physical actions express a complex human reality that goes far beyond a simple act;⁴ and third, in the possibility for viewers to experience an intersubjective relationship between the materiality of the film and its images and their own embodied existence,⁵ as they are invited to “enter into a physically and morally charged space”.⁶

Offering images of pure materiality and physicality with their capacity for transcendence, as Isabella Guanzini shows in her contribution, the films of the Dardennes contribute to restoring belief in the world, a belief that, according to Giles Deleuze, was disrupted in modernity and to whose re-establishment cinema can make a major contribution today. In a way, belief in the world might be seen as a secular form of faith – within an immanent horizon – in the reliability of reality, the events we experience and the relationships with other human beings for which there is no evidence but which is a matter of trust. From the perspective of the study of religions, this provides interesting material for a reflection on the nature of faith and belief in what is often called a post-secular society, in which the material world becomes the primary point of reference. From a Christian theological perspective, the transcendent quality of the material that the realist filmmaking of the Dardennes suggests is an additional interesting contribution to the ever-new task of thinking about the material world as the space of encounter with the divine.

In addition to their focus on material and existential aspects, the Dardennes pursue a second strategy in the search for the human by employing an ethical mode that asks about how to relate to the material situation in which human beings find themselves. How do dehumanizing conditions distort the human being and its relationships, and how is it possible to discover glimmers of hope in despair? How is it possible to disrupt the cycle of violence and hatred in simple, small gestures of solidarity and care? Here, too, attention to the concrete is favored over against generalizing statements: the Dardennes offer “dramas of interpersonal relationships that are microcosmic versions of the agonies at large in the lower social strata.”⁷ In my own contribution, a gender-sensitive reading of the social-justice issues related to the world of work and family that are raised in the films, I note how close attention to the concrete individual case allows the directors to investigate a situation in all its complexity and tensions, rather than offer easy solutions, without denying the effects on the individual of the larger structures of injustice in late capitalist societies. In their films, the Dardennes critically describe broken relationships, ruthless competition, and

4 Cf. Mosley 2013, 7.

5 Cf. Mosley 2013, 15, with reference to Vivian Sobchack.

6 Mosley 2013, 14.

7 Mosley 2013, 12.

the exploitation of others for one's own gains, and yet they are not satisfied with the criticism of what is, but also show imaginatively what might be when hope emerges from the possibility of human beings to resist dehumanizing dynamics, to relate to their situation freely, and to find means to transform it in smaller or larger ways.

The ethical dimension of the Dardennes' cinema is not limited to the narrative representation of issues of ethics and social justice. Joseph Mai underlines the use of a specific style of filmmaking that serves to create "an ethical space" in cinema⁸ in which viewers become involved in a relationship of solidarity with the characters, a style that creates empathy without being overwhelming, that encourages reflection without providing the answers. In this issue, Guanzini describes this style as a combination of proximity and opacity, created for example through the typical over-the-shoulder shots (often in close-ups) in which the camera follows a character from behind and slightly to the side, showing the back of their head or a half profile. This shot design results in a feeling of closeness with the character, yet does not provide a complete point-of-view shot, and thus furthers identification with a character at the same time as it inhibits such identification: as viewers, we can only guess the feelings and motivations of the person we are (nearly) aligned with and whom we observe closely, but who ultimately remains a stranger to us. As Walter Lesch's discussion of the influence of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas on the work of the Dardennes, and in particular Luc Dardenne's own philosophical contributions, shows, it is precisely the stranger as the other who poses an ethical challenge to us – that we respect them in their otherness and take responsibility for them in their shared destiny of mortality.

This ethical commitment evident in the work of the Dardennes, described as "responsible realism" by Philip Mosley in his monograph on the Dardennes or as "the artistic gift of humanism without illusions and of realism without cynicism" by Lesch in this issue, is given substance by their attention to the capacity of the material for transcendence that I have discussed above. These modes of searching for the human interconnect and enrich each other, enabling the directors to combine their critical realism with a vision of how to be human within the material conditions of existence and the dynamics of interaction that have both the potential to inhibit human flourishing and the capacity for transformation.

The three articles in the open section pursue different themes. Alyda Faber offers a reading of Frederick Wiseman's documentaries through the lens of the concept of parable as "unstory" and as a moment of disrupting logical, linear explanations of reality. As she argues, parables create visceral reactions in

8 Mai 2010, 62.

viewers, sensations of pain, bewilderment, or joy, instead of motivating specific actions. Similar to the work of the Dardennes, this mode of realist filmmaking does not necessarily allow to know the world, other human beings, animals, or objects, but rather it challenges viewers to acknowledge the other (animal, human, natural) in its otherness.

The following two articles, by Alexander D. Ornella and Sofia Sjö, discuss different filmic visions of “doing gender”. Ornella’s analysis of the BBC sitcom *REV.* (BBC2, UK 2010–2014) shows how masculinity is always a matter of negotiating between external expectations and self-image as well as between different forms of masculinity. Rather than the natural way of being a man, masculinity is an unstable construct that permanently shifts under various pressures, in particular the ones exerted by the ideal of a clerical masculinity envisioned by the Church of England, which provides the institutional context of the series. While *REV.* (2010–2014) does not represent an unproblematic image of masculine roles, it does underline that they are just that – roles that change and shift under the influence of social institutions as well as individual visions of life.

Sjö’s analysis of the ways in which gender and religion interact in two Scandinavian films continues these reflections on how films are involved in constructions of gender and religion, and on how cinema imagines the influence of religious traditions on gender roles. Sjö shows that different forms of religion are gendered quite differently, and explores how religious themes can open up alternative visions of masculinity and femininity. In addition, Sjö calls attention to the fact that today films often provide the main source of information about religion and religious ideals of masculinity and femininity, especially in a context such as that of the Nordic countries, which are relatively secularized.

Each in its own way, the articles in this issue share a common interest in the search for the human as they explore various filmic visions of the conditions of human existence in material reality and in relationship with the world, the interactions between delimiting social structures and individual freedom, the capacity of humans to transcend their situation, and the negotiation of external expectations with individuals’ ideas about their own futures as men and women.

In its early stages, I planned this issue with my friend and colleague Dr. Davide Zordan of the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Italy, co-editor of this journal. Like me, he was fascinated by the theological potential of the cinema of the Dardennes, and we spent many a coffee break talking about their ability to trace the effects of social structures in the lives of individuals in a both critical and hopeful mode, the ways in which they draw their viewers into these ethical explorations, and their attention to the beauty and depth of everyday material reality. We were both looking forward to the opportunity to broaden our conversations and en-

gage with the thoughts of other authors on these questions in the preparation of this issue. A year ago, in October 2015, Davide Zordan passed away, much too early. I dedicate this issue to his memory.

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