

Visionary Critique

Gender, Self and Relationship in ROSETTA and TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT

ABSTRACT

The films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne stand out for their complex, multi-dimensional female and male characters whose representation disrupts gender stereotypes in numerous ways, both in how the characters themselves are depicted and in how they are shown to relate to other individuals and their social context. In this contribution, I explore the themes of self, relationship, solidarity, family and work – all of them recurring issues in the films by the Dardennes – using gender as my primary category of analysis, and focusing in particular on the treatment of these themes in ROSETTA (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, FR/BE 1999) and DEUX JOURS, UNE NUIT (TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, BE/FR/IT 2014). I argue that whereas ROSETTA (1999) offers a critique of the damaging effects of the masculinized capitalist system on individuals and their relationships, TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT (2014) can be understood as a vision of alternative possibilities of solidarity and women's empowerment and agency even within the persistent context of masculinized capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne, feminist theory, gender studies, Christian social ethics, relational autonomy

BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

The films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne stand out for their complex, multi-dimensional female and male characters whose representation disrupts gender stereotypes in numerous ways, both in how the characters themselves are depicted and how they are shown to relate to other individuals and their social context. Consequently, it is somewhat surprising that the category of gender has not been used more extensively in the analysis of their films before.¹ Therefore, in this contribution, I will explore the themes of self, relationship, solidarity, family and work – all of them recurring issues in the films by the Dardennes – using gender, understood as “a field of social power with which people establish relationships of great complexity”,² as my primary category of analysis, and focusing in particular on the treatment of these themes in *ROSETTA* (FR/BE 1999) and *DEUX JOURS, UNE NUIT* (TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT, BE/FR/IT 2014). As I will show, the analysis of these two films, in the context of the larger work of the Dardennes, offers a number of interesting insights. First, it is noticeable that the films do not treat gender in isolation – and this might partially explain the lack of studies focusing on this aspect so far – thus underlining the idea that identity and relationships need to be analyzed with attention to the intersection of various factors in addition to gender, such as ethnicity, nationality, and class. Second, the films remind us of the need to maintain the dialectical tension between individual self-determination and the impact of context: they show, on the one hand, that an individual, his or her thoughts, feelings, experiences, and actions, can never be fully defined through identity categories such as gender but is a surprising, singular, mysterious reality;³ on the other hand, the films also acknowledge that the larger social context, shaped as it is by the predominant gender binary, has a strong impact on the individual’s existence. Third, the films’ images and stories develop a vision of subjectivity as relational autonomy that contributes to feminist endeavors to think subjectivity and relationship in a way that enables the good life of women and men and promotes the common good.

The theoretical framework for my analysis is shaped by feminist theory and gender studies, feminist ethics and Christian social ethics. Feminist theory and gender studies have underlined the importance of acknowledging the full equality of women and men, promoting women’s agency and including women’s experiences in all reasoning.⁴ Recent developments have complicated these commitments by calling attention to the diversity of women’s experiences around

1 To my knowledge, McMahon (2012) is alone in using gender as a central category of analysis as she focuses on relationships between fathers and sons in her discussion of the deconstruction of the political in the films of the Dardennes.

2 Williams 2000, 258–259.

3 Cf. Mai 2010, xiii.

4 Cf. Cahill 2014, 28.

the globe, as well as to the different ways in which men are affected by patriarchal structures. Also, as mentioned above, it has become clear that it is not sufficient to focus on gender in isolation from other factors that shape the lives of individuals: depending on its intersection with other categories such as class, religion, ethnicity or ability, gendered identity can take many different forms.⁵ Feminist analyses of work and capitalism have also shown the systemic disadvantage of women in the labor market due to masculinized ideals of work and workers that create an “asymmetrical vulnerability of economic dependency” for women.⁶ Feminist and gender-sensitive ethics share numerous concerns with Christian social ethics, most and foremost the affirmation of the equal dignity of all human beings, the acknowledgement of being-in-relationship as a fundamentally human way of being with consequences for the understanding of subjectivity, intersubjective relationships and social relationships, the importance of family, the dignity of work as a form of self-expression as well as a means to meet the needs of oneself and one’s family, and a certain skepticism toward capitalist understandings of work and economic relationships.⁷ Besides these shared interests, however, feminist and gender studies have also critiqued in particular Catholic teaching on gender that promotes the naturalization of gender and a theory of essentialist gender complementarity with regard to gender roles, especially as far as parenthood and the division of wage work and care work are concerned.⁸

I will set the scene with some more general observations about the treatment of gender in the films by the Dardennes, and then focus on the analysis of *ROSETTA* (1999) and *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014). I will argue that whereas *ROSETTA* (1999) offers a critique of the damaging effects of the masculinized capitalist system on individuals and their relationships, *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014) can be understood as a vision of alternative possibilities of solidarity and women’s empowerment and agency even within the persistent context of masculinized capitalism.

COMPLEXITY, AGENCY, AND DIVERSITY: GENDER IN THE FILMS BY THE DARDENNES

Across their œuvre, the Dardennes are equally interested in male and female protagonists. Different from, for example, the camp approach to gender bending of Pedro Almodóvar, whose films disrupt conventions by exaggerating

5 Cf. Kamitsuka 2007; Beattie/Fenton 2011.

6 Albrecht 2002, 143.

7 Cf. Albrecht 2002; Cahill 2011; Cahill 2014; Clark 2010; Scholz 1997.

8 Cf. Hinze 2009, 71–78.

them,⁹ in the films of the Dardennes gender stereotypes are not even allowed to form, as both men and women, as protagonists and in supporting roles, are developed as multi-dimensional, complex characters with a capacity for change, expressing strength and weakness, flawed and exemplary behavior, vulnerability and violence, openness to others and self-absorption. Roger in *LA PROMESSE* (*THE PROMISE*, BE/FR/LU/TN 1996), for example, is a criminal ruthlessly exploiting the despair and dependence of illegal migrants for his own profit. Without any attention to his son Igor's needs – endangering, for example, Igor's apprenticeship as a car mechanic and thus a future beyond criminality – he involves him in his illegal activities, forces him to adopt equally ruthless attitudes toward others and beats Igor brutally when he tries to help a migrant woman, Assita, whose husband had an accident and was left to die by Roger. Yet Roger also has a softer side, especially with regard to his son, with whom he tries to bond in various ways and for whom he cares as well as he can. Although Roger is, in relationship to his son and the migrants who depend on him, in a position of power, which he maintains through physical violence and domination, it becomes clear how fragile this power is when his son, with Assita's help, ties him up so that Assita can make her way to safety. In chains and without his glasses, Roger appears naked and helpless, his dominant masculinity stripped down to utter dependency on the assistance of a child and a woman – help which he is denied by them, as he had denied it them and others before.

While the films emphasize that individuals are not defined by their gender, they also acknowledge the impact of the social context of the patriarchal system, for example in the exploration of the particular vulnerability of Assita, an African migrant woman in *THE PROMISE* (1996). She is subjected to gendered violence when Roger's assistant assaults her sexually, from which she cannot seek protection for as an illegal immigrant she is dependent on Roger, and because her husband died, she is even more isolated. Although twice exposed under these conditions, Assita is represented as a strong, resourceful woman who actively embraces her identity as mother and wife and uses her agency to protect herself and her child. Here and in other cases, the films maintain the balance between, on the one hand, the affirmation of their characters' agency and freedom in how they define their identity and determine their life circumstances and, on the other hand, acknowledgement of the social conditions that expose them to violence or discrimination.

In addition to its development through the plot, this balance is further underlined through visual means. For example, characters are often represented as being a part of a larger situation in street shots that contextualize them,¹⁰

9 Cf. Knauss 2014.

10 David Walsh sees this differently: he criticizes the lack of context that “diverts attention from the structures responsible for human suffering and creates the impression, inadvertently or not, that the

yet given the lack of establishing shots, the preference for shots from a middle distance or close up, and the often blurry background, it is clear that the focus remains on the individual rather than their social context (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Film still, *THE PROMISE* (BE/FR/LU/ TN 1996), 01:24:43.

Furthermore, the characters' agency is affirmed by how their actions seem to establish the scene, with the camera appearing to pick up on an action that is already in progress.¹¹ Characters often appear restrained by tight framing that uses framing objects within the image such as doorjamb to further delimit their scope and thus reflects interior and exterior limitations on their agency. But this impression is counteracted by the way in which characters guide the camera, which often follows their lead and occasionally stays behind to let them go into the distance or out of the frame (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Film still, *Two Days, One Night* (BE/FR/IT 2014), 01:28:00.

In addition, the shift between closely observing actions in all their details in seemingly documentary duration shots and elliptic cuts that leave large gaps in

blame for social ills lies at least in part with their victims" (Walsh 2009, 70).

¹¹ See Mai 2010, 54.

the narrative creates the impression that action (and characters) develop freely in the off, outside of the controlling observation of the camera (and audience).

The films emphasize complexity not only with regard to the individual personality of a character, but also with regard to the intersection of different factors of oppression or privilege, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality and economic status. In *LE SILENCE DE LORNA* (*THE SILENCE OF LORNA*, BE/FR/IT/DE 2008) the protagonist Lorna inhabits shifting positions of control, power and vulnerability that correspond to the instable connection between gender, motherhood, economic status and citizenship. With Fabio, Lorna is part of a scam to gain Belgian citizenship through marriage, taking advantage of the system of heterosexual marriage and the citizenship privileges that come with it. Once Lorna has won citizenship through marriage with a Belgian drug addict and her husband dies, the plan is for her to marry (in return for a generous payment) a Russian in order to pass citizenship on to him. Although a migrant and a woman, Lorna is in a situation of relative power as long as the scheme runs smoothly, because as the bride with the Belgian passport she is indispensable to Fabio, even though it is Fabio who negotiates the conditions with his clients. Also, because her “anchor-husband”, Claudy, depends on her financially and increasingly emotionally, Lorna controls their relationship with regard to sleeping arrangements and physical contact, and even by setting him up as an abuser so that their divorce will be fast-tracked. In addition, Lorna seems to be the main financial contributor to her and her boyfriend’s project of buying a snack bar with her double income from the marriage scam and her legal employment in a laundry. Her (relative) economic stability and financial power are underlined in several scenes that show her depositing money in the bank or negotiating a loan, whereas her boyfriend meets up with handlers on street corners at night in order to be shuttled across Europe to work illegal and dangerous temporary jobs. Yet once Lorna is – or thinks she is – pregnant, the balance tips, because at this point she becomes worthless as a potential wife and thus is no longer of interest to Fabio’s scheme. Her gender, once an advantage in the heterosexual system, now is a problem and she falls back into a relationship of gendered dependence, exploited by both Fabio and her boyfriend, who place the responsibility on her and make her pay. Thus whereas in an early scene the camera follows Lorna’s lead as she moves around her apartment and interacts with her husband, in this later scene, when she is no longer in control of her situation, she literally takes the backseat, sitting in the back of a car as her money is distributed among the men and she is taken away to an unknown destination. Yet Lorna, and with her other characters in the films of the Dardennes, both male and female, is not a passive, helpless victim, even when she is placed in a situation of disadvantage, dependency and exploitation. Sensing that something is not right when she is driven away by Fabio’s assistant, she does not submit to

her fate, but instead takes the situation into her own hands, knocks the driver out with a stone and runs away through the forest, determined, as she explains to her unborn – imaginary – child, to make a better life for them both.

It is noticeable that the films are firmly inserted into a framework in which heterosexuality normatively structures sexual, familial and social relationships.¹² While this system is not openly questioned through the inclusion of LGBTQI identities or relationships, the Dardennes subtly challenge it by shifting the focus from heterosexual, intimate relationships to broader networks of relationships that underline their social dimension and the dynamic interaction between different forms of relationship. But even more importantly, they challenge the naturalization of motherhood and fatherhood implied in heteronormativity by showing the insufficiency and failure of biological family relationships and offering alternative models. Biological mothers and fathers, such as Roger in *THE PROMISE* (1996), Cyril's father in *LE GAMIN AU VÉLO* (*THE KID WITH A BIKE*, FR/BE/IT 2011), Bruno in *L'ENFANT* (*THE CHILD*, BE/FR 2005), or Rosetta's mother in *ROSETTA* (1999), are represented as irresponsible and exploitative, and as neglecting, leaving or even selling their children. In a clear critique of essentialist notions of the innate mothering qualities of women and conservative notions of family values as they are promoted, for example, by Catholic teachings on gender and gender roles,¹³ biological parenthood is shown to be insufficient to establish caring, supportive relationships between adults and children in a family community that equally protects and empowers. Such communities are instead created through non-biological relationships of care and parenting, most explicitly in *THE KID WITH A BIKE* (2011). Not based on biological instincts, but rather on the ethical (and emotional) claim on Samantha that Cyril makes by holding on to her in a situation of need, her commitment to him is absolute, but not blind. When he asks her to live with her permanently *after* he has stabbed her with a pair of scissors and has hit a man and a child with a baseball bat, she accepts without hesitation or fuss, but then also takes him to the police to take responsibility for his actions, a process of which, because of one of the typical elliptic cuts of the Dardennes, we see only the result, when Cyril signs a contract with the man he hurt and apologizes in front of Samantha and a mediator. The family created by Samantha and Cyril does not allow for authoritarian dominance – when her boyfriend attempts such behavior, she leaves him – but is instead marked by openness, care and empowerment: not by coincidence is the boy most himself when he can ride around the streets on his bike, unrestrained and free, knowing that he will be able to return to the safety of Samantha's home.

¹² Cf. Warner 1993.

¹³ See Hinze 2009 for a detailed critique.

Thus in their films, the Dardennes pay close attention to the complexity of identity in which the impact of social factors such as gender is carefully negotiated with individual self-determination. I will turn now to the analysis of *ROSETTA* (1999) and *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014), with their respectively more critical and more affirmative visions of self, relationship, family and work.

ROSETTA: WORK AS FREEDOM, RELATIONSHIP AS BURDEN?

What at first glance is most remarkable about Rosetta, the protagonist of the film *ROSETTA* (1999), is her intense bodily presence and energy, even if – or, perhaps, in particular when – she seems to lose her fight against the world of capitalism, damaged by unhealthy eating habits and living conditions and physical as well as psychological demands that go beyond the capacities of a teenager. This impression is mediated by the handheld “corps-caméra”, as the Dardennes describe the merging of the camera with the bodies of its operators to form a being of its own,¹⁴ that follows Rosetta, moves and even breathes with her, so that her body – her face; her hurting, cramping belly; her hands that want nothing but work – becomes familiar like our own (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Film still,
ROSETTA (FR/BE 1999),
00:49:53.

Commenting on the first sequence of the film, when Rosetta races through the factory after being sacked, hunting down a colleague she considers responsible for her losing her work and holding on to the lockers so hard that they are pulled away with her as she is removed by security, Joseph Mai writes, “our perspective is entirely and helplessly within the movements of bodies.”¹⁵ Rather than

¹⁴ See Mai 2007.

¹⁵ Mai 2010, 69.

perpetuating the dualistic split between body and mind with its gendered associations of women with their body and men with their mind,¹⁶ the film avoids the objectification and sexualization of Rosetta's body and instead echoes the feminist concern that we are our bodies, men and women alike, experiencing and expressing ourselves through our bodies, emotions and actions.¹⁷

Yet Rosetta's embodied self is situated in a social context that is marked by gendered violence against women in their bodies, which the film notes in a disturbing scene when Riquet, Rosetta's colleague and friend, follows her to the campground where she lives. Feeling threatened, Rosetta attacks him and they wrestle on the ground in a way that could easily be read as an attempt at rape as Rosetta's skirt rides up and it becomes unclear who fights whom. Although Riquet only came to tell her the good news that she got a job with his boss in a small waffle factory, viewers are left with a sense of the potential dangerous slippage of friendship into predatory behavior and the precariousness of the young woman's physical integrity.

This sense of permanent threat is further underlined by the way in which Rosetta tends to stake out a situation, looking carefully around a corner before entering it or checking over her shoulder for potential enemies. As Mai notes, *ROSETTA* (1999) is indeed intended by the directors as a film about war,¹⁸ and Rosetta is the lonely soldier who has to fight for her daily survival against the capitalist system at large and its male representatives in particular, such as her employers who hire and fire her as best fits their capitalist needs, without attention to her predicament as an underage young woman who carries the weight of responsibility not just for her own existence but also for her mother's, or the campground supervisor who relentlessly uses his power over the necessities of life (water, gas, electricity, free movement, access to food) and exploits her mother sexually.

The film centers on Rosetta's urgent desire – and need – to find paid work so that she can support her mother and herself. Rosetta can be seen as a typical example of a woman who is disadvantaged by the masculine identity of the economic system with its ideal of the autonomous, independent worker,¹⁹ and is made vulnerable by her commitment to a relationship of care with her mother. As Christine Firer Hinze describes the ideology of domesticity, the ideal worker, conventionally male, is complemented by the female whose family and care work enables the ideal worker to dedicate his attention and strength to work outside the home.²⁰ While in the late 20th century, the ideal worker role was

16 See for the long history of the gendering of body and mind Lloyd 1984.

17 Cf. Moltmann-Wendel 1995.

18 Cf. Mai 2010, 70.

19 Cf. Albrecht 2002, 148.

20 Cf. Hinze 2009, 72.

expanded to include women, the caregiver role has not come to include men. In general, women who engage in paid work in addition work a “second shift” at home. For women, relationships of care – according to complementary gender theories the form of relationship they are naturally most suited for²¹ – thus become a liability which might limit their educational or job opportunities, pushing them into low-income unqualified jobs.²² Rosetta is one of these women: she works at a minimum wage in precarious jobs that do not even afford unemployment benefits because she is fired when her probation period comes up, and yet she cannot not accept these jobs, because she needs her wages to care for her mother, whose alcoholism puts not just economic, but also emotional stress on the young woman. Rosetta is caught in the vicious circle of needing work so badly that she cannot afford to be choosy, but ends up with jobs that do not offer her the stability she needs to make a significant change in her mother’s and her own life, thus contributing to the perpetuation of the system.²³

While in the film, the world of work is critically shown as marked by the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism, of which women in particular are the victim because of their twofold obligations to their paid work outside the home and unpaid family work at home, it also emphasizes the positive aspects of work, paralleling thus the view of work in Christian social ethics. Rosetta wants a job not only because of the wage it pays, but also because of the social recognition it affords her. Her insistence on paid labor as a sign of normalcy might be seen as consequence of precisely those mechanisms that create her vulnerability – the ideal worker role and its complementary devaluation of relationships and family work – yet it also underlines the value of work as more than a means to make a living. When Rosetta is shown mixing the batter in the waffle factory, selling waffles in the stand or washing her apron, the badge of her status as a regular worker, with the camera focusing closely on her competent, economic gestures, it becomes clear that work is for her an existential human need and the expression of her individual capacity, and thus fundamental to her human dignity (fig. 4). While the film criticizes the exploitative capitalist labor system and the way it disadvantages women such as Rosetta, who have dependents for whom they care, it never suggests that care work is the kind of work that more fully corresponds to Rosetta’s feminine genius than wage work, as secular and religious complementary theories of gender would propose.²⁴

In tracing the complexities of Rosetta’s attempts to negotiate wage and care work, and her place within these worlds, the film notes the ambivalent value of relationships for Rosetta. Relationships are for her both a sign and a cause of

21 Cf. Hinz 2009, 75.

22 Cf. Clark 2010 for a discussion of the gender aspects of care work.

23 Cf. Albrecht 2002, 143.

24 Cf. Hinz 2009; Cahill 2014, 31.



Fig. 4: Film still,
ROSETTA (FR/BE 1999),
01:13:13.

weakness because they imply emotional and material dependency and exploitation, the typical traps for women in patriarchal society, which she experiences in particular in consequence of her relationship with her alcoholic mother. Instead of furthering her relationships, Rosetta therefore strives for autonomy and self-reliance, and refuses welfare and gifts that she has not earned herself. Rosemarie Scullion²⁵ argues that Rosetta has internalized the demands of neo-liberal capitalism that thrives on individualism and the pursuit of one's own best self-interest: when Riquet slips in the lake, Rosetta hesitates to help him out, because she might be able to take over his job, and she uses her knowledge about his illegal waffle sales to have him fired. While Rosetta represents the neo-liberal, precariat subject, according to Scullion, Riquet offers an alternative of solidarity, even if not without his own "ethical lapses" when he pursues Rosetta and physically threatens her.²⁶ When he offers Rosetta his hand to help her up at the end of the film, when she is at the lowest point and about to commit suicide, Scullion argues, his "gesture begins to release her from her abject pose ... a generous, forgiving act that holds out the possibility of restored trust."²⁷

However, in order to fully understand the importance of relationship and solidarity in the film, it is necessary to take two additional factors into account, namely Rosetta's relationship of care with her mother, and Riquet's independence – as far as we know – from others, which mirror the typical gendered reality of relationships and care in neo-liberal societies. Riquet acts only for himself when he offers to let Rosetta share his under-the-counter waffle sales, but he does so with the presumption that Rosetta is as autonomous as he is. Yet in Rosetta's situation, a legal job has a different significance than it has for Riquet:

²⁵ Cf. Scullion 2014.

²⁶ Scullion 2014, 77.

²⁷ Scullion 2014, 78.

it means dignity, normalcy, social recognition and permanence, as well as more material benefits such as unemployment insurance. While Rosetta's struggle to find a job even at the cost of betraying a friend – her only friend – could be read as an expression of ruthless neo-liberal individualism, it can also be read as the painful consequence of her commitment to her primary relationship of care and solidarity with her mother. She uses her income not to improve her own situation egotistically, but to ensure that her mother and she herself are able to live a life of relative dignity in their trailer and to establish a routine that will help her mother to control her addiction or even go to rehab. Given Riquet's earlier presumption to know what is good for Rosetta, and her continuous rejection of offers of help, his final gesture of helping her up is all the more significant: at this point, Riquet simply offers his strength, holding out his hand, and allows Rosetta to decide for herself to accept it. The film's final focus on Rosetta's face affirms her as a subject even in this moment of dejection, and underlines a new understanding of relationship, not as a burden or limitation, but as an extension and affirmation of the self.

The film's complex treatment of relationship is complemented by its sober look at the sphere of the family. From the perspective of Christian social ethics, Hinze underlines that the family is a sphere in which the vulnerability of the human person can be expressed in a protected space and the need for relationality is met, but "as the locus of special vulnerability – bodily, emotional, psychic – family and household are also places where the negative effects of sin and finitude can cut and scar intimately and deeply."²⁸ Rosetta's family life is certainly not romanticized: living in (consciously) temporary quarters in a trailer park with her alcoholic mother, Rosetta experiences family mostly as a sphere of dependency, exploitation and despair, in which she is forced to take on burdens that go beyond her strength. For Rosetta, the roles of mother and child are switched: she takes care of her mother, earns the family's income, offers emotional support for her mother, tries to protect her from sexual exploitation, and defines moral codes of conduct for her, for example when she insists that her mother can start drinking only after 6pm, or that they won't accept gifts. When the exhaustion of having to care for an unresponsive mother and struggle for recognition in the labor market finally is too much, and Rosetta attempts to kill both her mother and herself, this can be taken as a warning that the continuous demands on women to sacrifice themselves on all fronts will end in catastrophe without greater structural and financial support for caregivers, in addition to a complementary social discourse of gender equality and protection of women's

28 Hinze 2009, 68.

rights and further reflections on what it means to be male in the world of work and family.²⁹

The film ends with a fleeting sign of hope that Rosetta might yet experience relationships as mutual and respectful, affirming her sense of self and dignity rather than creating dependency. Yet overall, the film offers a critical perspective on the damaging effects of neo-liberalist capitalism on women, in which relationships of care can become burdens for women and make them vulnerable in different, more immediate ways than men.

TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RELATIONSHIP

Without denying the continued problematic aspects of the capitalist organization of relationships and labor, *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014) can be seen as a vision of how gender, self, relationship, family and work can interrelate in a way that is empowering for individuals and supportive of the common good, a vision that can be understood in terms of the universalization of an ethics of care and the socialization of the feminine. Universal care feminists acknowledge the positive value of care work, mutual responsibility, relationship and solidarity, but critique the notion of difference feminism that women are inherently more capable of living these values than men. Instead, they argue for the need to “achiev[e] social consensus around an understanding of caring activities as valuable and necessary practices that respond to universally-shared conditions of human embodiment.”³⁰ Along similar lines, Gloria H. Albrecht calls for the socialization of the feminine as the general recognition “of the social value of the stereotypical virtues of the feminine. That is, who we are as moral agents-in-relationships-of-care-and-trust should not (cannot, does not) metamorphose in the commute to and from the workplace.”³¹ The film provides a glimpse into the socialization of the feminine in its representation of its female protagonist, Sandra, her husband, Manu, and her relationships with friends and colleagues. This vision is limited to an individual case and does not claim a more structural change, but it nevertheless shows that the world of work and relationships as we know it is not the only possible one.

While Sandra was on sick leave, her employer realized that the work could get done without her, and thus, when she returns, he asks her colleagues to vote either for her keeping her job or for each of them receiving a one-time bonus of one thousand euros. She now has a weekend – two days and a night – to

²⁹ See Hinze 2009, 81–82.

³⁰ Hinze 2009, 84.

³¹ Albrecht 2002, 150.

gain her colleagues' support. Sandra's exposure to a hostile situation and her ultimate loneliness in her struggle are underlined by the camera that is often positioned to shoot her from slightly above or at a distance (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Film still, *Two Days, One Night* (BE/FR/IT 2014), 00:19:57.



She appears small, frail and dejected, a visual reflection of her interior situation as she is recovering from depression, and feels invisible and non-existent, psychological states that, in a rare exception in the films by the Dardennes, are made explicit in dialogue, in addition to their visual rendition. Furthermore, the colleagues who support her are mostly invisible and inaudible presences that interact with Sandra by phone. She is discouraged by the task that she has in front of her, and needs medication to combat her depression. More than once, she is ready to give up, and only her husband's encouragement or the news that another colleague will support her make her continue until at one point, the series of disappointments becomes too much for her and she attempts suicide.

Yet Sandra is not simply the helpless victim of a hopeless situation. Even when having to face potentially hostile colleagues, she moves with purpose, energy, and strength, and in the moment of greatest physical weakness after her suicide attempt, she gathers all her psychological strength and decides to continue. She insists that she does not want to be pitied and seen as a victim, and the film respects this wish of its character: when she has a breakdown and cries in a parking lot, the camera is positioned in relation to the actress in a way that hides her face from view, as if to protect her privacy, and avoids using her emotions to manipulate the viewers (fig. 6). In contrast, Sandra faces the camera frontally when on the day of the vote she challenges the foreman about his attempts to sway the vote against her, showing the confidence that she has developed in this weekend of fighting for herself. This new self-confidence is visible even when she walks away from the factory after the ballot is cast and she loses by one vote: far from being discouraged, she walks upright and with a small smile on her face as she talks with her husband on the phone, satis-



Fig. 6: Film still, *Two Days, One Night* (BE/FR/IT 2014), 00:27:52.

fied with their efforts and determined to immediately start looking for a new job. When the camera stays behind as she moves away, walking away into her future, the image underlines the idea that even if she lost against the capitalist instrumentalization of self-interest, she has developed agency and a new sense of self-worth.

In a departure from their usual practice of working with relatively unknown actors, the Dardennes cast Marion Cotillard as Sandra, experimenting again, after working with Cecile de France in *THE BOY WITH A BIKE* (2011), with the possibility to integrate a well-known actress into their “family” of cast and crew members, and quite deservedly, Cotillard was nominated for and won a number of best actress awards for her intense representation of Sandra.³² Yet even if Cotillard stands out as an actress and her character is at the center of the interest of the film, she does not dominate film or cast, because, as usual in the films by the Dardennes, supporting characters are developed with complexity and receive considerable attention as well, underlining that although Sandra might feel alone, she is in fact embedded in a supportive, empowering network of relationships.

In focusing on Sandra not as an atomic individual, but as a subject-in-relation-ship, the Dardennes reflect a central concern of feminist theory and Christian ethics, namely the affirmation of the importance of relationship for the flourishing of the subject and the realization of the common good, together with the critique of the traditional gendering of the autonomous subject as masculine and the relational subject as feminine.³³ Sandra is shown to be a part of a large network of different relationships, most importantly the one with her husband in addition to relationships with her children, friends, colleagues, the foreman of the factory and her employer. As she visits her colleagues at their homes,

32 Among other nominations and awards, Cotillard was nominated for an Oscar and a César and won the European Film Awards.

33 Mackenzie/Stoljar 2000, 5–11; Scholz 1997.

further relationships of family obligations or religious affiliations are introduced with their impact on her colleagues' decision to support her or not, underlining the interdependence – although to varying degrees – that exists between all members of a community.³⁴ Relationships are shown to be of existential importance, both psychologically and materially. Sandra's relationships with her husband, family and friends help her to see herself as a valuable human being, and the building of relationships with her colleagues is the only means to at least attempt to keep the job she needs to support her family. The value of relationship is further underlined by the way in which Sandra's interactions with her colleagues are represented. She calmly explains her situation, responds to queries and listens to her colleagues' arguments, and even if they refuse to support her, she takes her leave with a handshake or kisses on the cheeks that signal the possibility to continue the relationship in spite of disagreements. The theme of relationship is visually developed through the directors' choice to show characters in the same frame even if they represent opposing views, so that while their opinions contradict each other, they are still united in one frame (fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Film still, *Two Days, One Night* (BE/FR/IT 2014), 00:57:30.

Additionally, as in other films, pans from one person to another during a conversation trace their relationship instead of slicing it up through cuts in the classic shot/reverse-shot technique, often used for dialogue.

Most remarkable from the perspective of a feminist development of Christian social ethics is the way Sandra's relationship with Manu, her husband, is depicted in a vision of universal care ethics. Disrupting stereotypes of the female family worker who provides emotional support for her husband, and the authoritative male head of the household who is the breadwinner and steps in to fix the situation if a woman is in difficulties, the relationship between husband and wife is one of true partnership. Both share in the work at home – preparing meals, looking after the children, offering emotional support – and paid work.

34 See Scholz 1997, 24.

However, this is not simply a matter of arithmetically dividing up the work, but of justice and of responding to actual needs: because Sandra is in a more vulnerable position at the moment, both because of her sickness and because of the threat of losing her job, Manu takes over a larger part of the stereotypically feminine role of caregiver for both his wife and the children. But most importantly, his support of Sandra is offered in a way that their relationship empowers her³⁵ and helps her to develop an agency based in her sense of herself as a subject, underlining the feminist vision of relational autonomy. Manu encourages Sandra to fight for her job and to stand up for herself, persuading her to continue even when she is ready to give up, but he does not take over for her. She is on her own when she has to ask her colleagues to give up their bonus so that she can keep her work – not an easy task – but he provides the safe space where she can rest when discouraged and shares her joy at having gained the support of another colleague. This vision of relationship that empowers the subject to develop agency is extended, with different degrees of intensity, beyond the husband-wife dyad into the family and Sandra's circle of friends and colleagues. When Sandra takes up the fight for her job, her whole family is shown gathered around the dining table, with adults and children working together to help set up the series of visits to her colleagues. In contrast to the image of family relations in *ROSETTA* (1999), here the children are not forced to take over roles that are too much for them so that relationship becomes a burden, but each member of the family contributes according to their own capacities to the wellbeing of the others.

However, the film is not one-sided in this positive image of empowering relationships. As Sandra visits her colleagues and listens to their reasons why they cannot support her, it becomes clear that different relationships might sometimes impose competing claims, and that negative relationships – feeling let down by a colleague or even encountering violence – can damage a subject as much as the positive ones can empower her. The relationship of Sandra's co-worker Anne with her husband can be seen as a counter-image to Sandra's relationship with Manu: although only partially developed in the film, it becomes clear that Anne's marriage is inserted into a framework of masculine authority and physical domination. Here, gender relations are oppressive rather than empowering, and Anne's husband's disregard for the needs of his wife and her right to make decisions within their partnership extends to a disregard for Sandra's existential needs when he puts his own material interests first. That Anne leaves this abusive relationship and finds her own voice as she decides to vote for Sandra can be seen as a consequence of Sandra's example and a further

35 Mosley (2013, 1) notes as a general characteristic of the films by the Dardennes “a will to empower their protagonists and so liberate them from economic circumstances, personal relationships and mental states that oppress, restrict and destabilize them in one way or another”.

instance of mutually empowering relationships between individuals. Not by coincidence is it Anne's appearance at Sandra's house to tell her of her support that saves Sandra from her suicide attempt.

Furthermore, the film offers the exploration of a particular form of relationship, solidarity, and its value in contemporary society over against the capitalist logic of individualistic self-interest. As Sally Scholz argues, feminist theory and Christian social ethics are united in their equal support of the moral duty of solidarity in response to the real fact of interdependence among people.³⁶ In the situation from which the film departs, the factory owner pitches the workers against each other by making them choose between receiving a bonus (and thus putting their individual self-interest first) or allowing Sandra to keep her job (thus prioritizing solidarity with Sandra). Although the employer denies any preference for one choice or the other, he is shown to be a representative of the logics of capitalism by making his workers choose between these two alternatives. This impression is further confirmed when at the end, after the narrowly negative outcome of the ballot for Sandra, he offers to give her job back at the cost of letting one of the temporary workers go, expecting her to choose self-interest over solidarity. Instead, Sandra remains committed to solidarity and refuses his offer.

Scholz³⁷ underlines that solidarity asks a person to put herself into the place of another in an act of respect and mutuality – something that Sandra (sometimes literally using these words) asks her colleagues to do as she represents her situation to them, and does herself as she tries to see the situation through their eyes. The importance of solidarity is most clearly expressed in the case of Sandra's colleague Timur, who tearfully realizes his moral obligation to respond to Sandra's previous act of solidarity when she had taken the blame for him for damaging materials. In addition, solidarity impacts the self-identity of a person as a self-determined, autonomous being-in-relationship, which is reflected in Sandra's encounters with her colleagues and their mutual solidarity, which provide, to use Scholz's words, "a forum for identity formation" and "a source of dignity".³⁸ This formative experience enables Sandra in her final conversation with her former boss to stand up for herself and her values and to leave the factory and walk into her future with self-confidence and dignity. Informed by the practice and experience of solidarity, her resistance against her employer, who has been in a position of authority over her and even tells her where to sit during their final conversation, can be seen as the final act of liberation from

36 See Scholz 1997, 24; Scholz adds critically that the Catholic Church does not yet fully apply the duty of solidarity to itself with regard to the recognition of the equal personhood of all human beings and their inclusion in all levels of decision making (26).

37 Cf. Scholz 1997, 25–26.

38 Scholz 1997, 26.

structures of gendered and economic domination through which she fully becomes who she is.

One final aspect for gender and feminist theories to consider in the context of this film is its attention to the diversity of women's and men's experiences. As mentioned above, one of the issues that have shaped the development of feminist theory over the last few decades is the increasing awareness of its own bias toward the experiences of white western middle-class women and the need to include the diversity of women's experiences in its reflections.³⁹ In addition, masculinity is not just one thing either, but men's studies have shown that patriarchal society affects men in different ways, too, depending on in how far they fit the mold of the ideal white heterosexual man.⁴⁰

The Dardennes consistently underline the singularity of experience and existence at the same time as they recognize the effect that social identity categories might have on their characters. In *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014), the diversity of men's and women's experiences is particularly visible in the "slices of life" presented to viewers as Sandra visits her colleagues at home. Her co-workers represent a variety of ways of life in the Belgian working class, including families with Belgian and migration background, white and black, living in social housing or their own homes. Viewers are offered glimpses of their diverse material living arrangements – Sandra never enters their homes, but speaks to her colleagues on the doorstep or outside, remaining on the margins of their lives – family life and leisure activities. An even better insight into their needs and aspirations in life is afforded through the reasons they offer for not being able to help Sandra, which range from being otherwise unable to meet the needs of the family to having to support a daughter in college or wanting to buy new furniture. While from the outside, some of these reasons seem more valid than others, Sandra – and with her, the film – does not judge them: each is an expression of the dreams and hopes of individuals for the good life; after all, Sandra herself needs her job to be able to pay the mortgage on her house and to fulfill her own dream of a good life for herself and her family. The film thus underlines that any evaluation of the competing claims of individuals will have to depart from the actual immersion in their situation and the appreciation of their experience.

The same range of forms of existence is noticeable when it comes to the representation of men and women in the film. Many of the families that we encounter with Sandra are organized – as far as we can tell – according to the model of the mother being responsible for the sphere of the home and the father being involved in activities outside the house. Furthermore, the male characters of the foreman and the factory owner can be seen as examples of

39 Cf. Cahill 2014, 27–28.

40 Cf. Connell/Messerschmidt 2005.

a traditional view of masculinity as authoritative and ruling through division rather than building community, oriented toward individual profit instead of the common good. Yet the non-gendered ethics of care in Sandra's family and the empowering relationship between Sandra and Manu show that different forms of relationships and community in which an ethics of care and the virtue and duty of solidarity become normative are indeed possible, even under the still-persisting conditions of patriarchal, capitalist society.

CONCLUSION

The two films I have discussed here in more detail, as well as the work of the Dardennes more broadly, represent a variety of issues that lie at the intersection of feminist theory, gender studies, feminist ethics and Christian social ethics, and thus provide important material for further reflections from the perspective of gender on the flourishing of the individual and the common good. I have argued that their contribution is particularly focused on three aspects. First, the dialectical tension between individual freedom and the impact of social identity categories is expressed in their representation of complex, non-stereotypical characters while acknowledging the impact of patriarchal society, especially in terms of family and work relationships. Consequently, while the effects of the patriarchal gender system have to be included in any analysis of social relationships and individual existence, the films remind their viewers to be careful to allow for the individual appropriation of gendered identity, so as not to delimit the singularity of the subject through stereotypical expectations as to what being a woman, man, intersex or transgendered person means for an individual. Second, the films' representation of gender in the context of other social factors, expressed for example in the ways in which gender, employment status and family relationships together have to be taken into account in order to understand Rosetta's experience of self, underlines the need for the intersectional analysis of individual existence and social contexts. Finally, the films' exploration of relationships as both a burden and a source of empowerment contribute to the further development of the concept of relational autonomy as a concept of subjectivity that negotiates the singularity of the self with its need for relationship. These aspects are developed in two ways in the films: in *ROSETTA* (1999) through the critique of problematic developments, yet with a concluding suggestion of hope, and in *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014) through the development of a vision of an alternative way of being that results from a universalized ethic of care and solidarity within the continuing problematic conditions of the masculinized logic of capitalism. Through critique and vision, the Dardennes thus contribute to the ethical labor of reflecting on the conditions that enable the good life of all human beings, doing justice in their depiction of

individuals, their relationships, and social contexts, to the immeasurable, sometimes frustrating, and certainly liberating complexity of human existence.

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