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 FILM-PHILOSOPHY
 

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Luc Dardenne (2005) *Au dos de nos images (1991-2005), suivi de Le Fils et L'Enfant par Jean-Pierre et Luc Dardenne*

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Numerous awards, including two *palmes d'or* at Cannes – for *Rosetta* (1999) and *L'Enfant* (2005) – have brought the filmmaking brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne recognition and celebrity well beyond their native Belgium. The publication of Luc Dardenne's journal, *Au dos de nos images (1991-2005)* just before Cannes 2005, may well have been designed to further their fame.<sup>1</sup> Luckily, *Au dos de nos images* is short on self-marketing and long on engaging thoughts and observations about the Dardenne brothers' conception of an ethical and embodied cinema.

Near the beginning of his journal, Dardenne describes the idea for an autobiographical film that would illustrate the paradox of directing films with one's brother. It begins with a dark screen; a voice cries 'lights!' and a bedroom lights up, two boys lying on twin beds, a light switch on the wall between them. One boy yells 'dark!' and the other flips the switch; the room is again plunged in darkness. 'Light!' cries the first voice, and once again we see the boys. 'Dark!' cries the second; and so on, 'twenty four times a second', until the father puts an end to the game with an imposing 'Lights off!' This parable illustrates what I would call two contrasting forces found in the Dardennes' filmmaking. First, they are inspired by a complete openness to others, which goes beyond collaboration and becomes constitutive of the authorship of a Dardenne film. Behind this playfulness, however, another figure casts a more ominous and authoritarian shadow: the

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<sup>1</sup> The title can translate as both 'Behind Our Images' and 'On the Shoulders of Our Images'.

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father, principle of control, but also of transmission. Much in *Au dos de nos images* oscillates between these two poles.

One is naturally tempted to compare *Au dos de nos images* to journal-like works by other filmmakers, especially Robert Bresson's *Notes sur le cinématographe* (1975), whose films are cited by many as an influence over the Dardennes. But the differences outnumber the similarities. The short, pithy, and undated aphorisms of Bresson's *Notes* record his sudden epiphanies on an elusive notion of the cinema as artistic expression. Bresson was attempting to give birth to principles that would define him as an *auteur*. In contrast, Dardenne's book contains dated entries arranged by chronological order and deals with the particulars of daily life, including conversations, thoughts on historical and daily events, even his reaction to holiday greeting cards sent by acquaintances. There is no intense search for artistic identity, but rather, often formulated with reference to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, a porous relation between self, art, and others:

I have to get out. Just get out. Encounter something, someone, a matter, a surface, an unknown and foreign body, I don't know what, but get out of myself, be reached, touched. I can't take being inside anymore. (11)<sup>2</sup>

This strange move, in which the author becomes author only in relation to the other, inspires a gamut of film practices that blur the line between aesthetics, ethics, and politics.

The first step in the Levinas-inspired – and certainly not Bressonian – aesthetics is the transformation of 'I' into 'we'. Hence Dardenne's personal journal, this most individualistic of literary genres, contains a plural in its very title – 'our' images – and a photo of both brothers on the cover. Luc informs us that he speaks equally for Jean-Pierre, that Jean-Pierre speaks for Luc, and that during filming the brothers perform tasks interchangeably. The borders start to crumble between the Dardennes and all the other bodies it takes to make a film: actors, crewmembers, and even certain objects make a contribution that goes beyond their necessary presence to become essential, determinate. Luc Dardenne thus carves out a clear distinction between authorship and authority, granting the latter to the combinatory machine of bodies that produces the film. His view of authorship implies a willingness to sign one's name to a process in which the personal subject relinquishes the mastery and individualism that have always seemed implicit in the concept of *auteurisme*. Authorship is not authority, but responsibility to the other who helps constitute the self.

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from the text are my own.

The Dardennes' debt to the social sphere of their native Seraing, Belgium – a blue-collar community that has largely disappeared and been replaced by immigrant workers – is mostly autobiographical. But it becomes political once they realise that the film industry simply does not share this interest. According to Luc Dardenne, mainstream cinema and television bury human experience under profit-making images. The dispossessed and exploited disappear from the steroid-pumped trash that accompanies popcorn and cola, and are sentimentalised when they do make the screen. The journal opens in the aftermath of their *Je pense à vous* (1991) – 'a bad film that we just made' (10) – whose failure is attributed to collaboration with professional actors, crewmembers and producers accustomed to more popular productions. Dardenne does not shy away from moral indignation when speaking of the industry; at one point he denounces it as a monumental construction of 'lies' and 'evil'. He only emerges from a depressed and uncertain state when he and his brother decide to circumvent even the relatively marginal Belgian film industry, opting for self-production, unseasoned collaborators, and a disregard for the pleasure of the viewer.

This new freedom brings them closer to their goal of 'reconstructing human experience' and making films that are, at the same time, 'a handshake' (10). I was particularly convinced by Dardenne's theory of the camera, expounded in fragments throughout the book, and in part inspired by Levinas' expression: 'ethics is an optics' (1969, 23). The Dardennes embrace a camera that, according to Luc, 'doesn't wait' and 'doesn't know' but 'seeks to follow' (18). Their hand-held A-Minima is not used for so-called documentary effect, but because in the hands of its operators it is 'more subtle, lively, felt, and complex' than any machine-produced movement – a notion that leads Dardenne to coin the phrase 'body-camera' (*corps-caméra*) (175). The body-camera gives a limited, embodied perspective to a viewer who now has nowhere to relegate those people that s/he usually avoids in the cinema. Those who drop their popcorn can reach toward the film in an almost tactile experience. This notion goes far in explaining how, in a film like *La Promesse* (1996), one can practically touch the texture of the father's shirt, smell the oil in the garage, or even feel the revolting warmth of the motorcyclists' urine.

The body-camera is not so much about technique as about how and where the operator holds the camera: it overflows the actively cultivated intimacy between camera, operator, director, and actor. Dardenne describes the importance of rehearsal and the hours spent choosing props, processes in which the characterisation is fleshed out while

the actors (with notable entries on Olivier Gourmet and Jérémie Regnier) move about or try on clothes. Much of this process is already familiar to those who have read interviews with the Dardennes, or who have seen the informative featurettes containing interviews with them and Gourmet on the New Yorker Video DVD of *Le fils* (2002).

Behind the critique of the film industry and the development of a new aesthetics lies a constant reflection on contemporary moral vacuity. Nowhere is this expressed more poignantly than in Luc Dardenne's fixation on the theme of the family, considered through a dizzying number of stories: the autobiographical film (titled *Pater Noster* (*Isä Meidän*, Veikko Aaltonen, 1993)); religious stories (Abraham and Isaac, Cain and Abel, Jesus, the cult of the Dead); Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, *Lear*, *A Winter's Tale*); mythology (Oedipus, Chronos); and other literary and journalistic sources. By stripping social life to its bare bones, Dardenne can analyse almost any significant social issue at its most intimate and emotional level. These issues include Belgium's difficulties, as a nation made up of different identity groups, in confronting its colonial and anti-Semitic past and in facing the traumas of the present, including crime, loss of communities, and the difficulties of immigrant *déclassés*. In Dardenne's family, the key is the father, an ambivalent figure who shoulders an immense moral burden. The contemporary father, principle of transmission and education, has not forsaken authority, but responsibility. He perpetuates the amnesia of the status quo and collaborates with the media and its blindness: Dardenne has a particular loathing for violent video games, and writes indignantly of a father, from a poor family, who retreats into a room in order to play them in the absence of his children. With this type of father the child can only become a criminal, or educate himself, like the two boys who become filmmakers in their bedroom.

Dardenne seeks out a less selfish but also less assured father. He has a habit of summing up the films with a negative expression: *Le fils* is about a father who learns the 'impossibility of killing'; or *L'Enfant* is about a father who cannot not sell his child. The ideal Dardenne father is like the body-camera: he does not know, but he follows and feels. Lacking certitude, his body careens frantically through space, condemned, as the Dardennes instruct Olivier Gourmet in *Le fils*, to act out the phrase 'I don't know'. In a number of asides, Dardenne wonders aloud, without concluding, at the absence of women as teachers in their films. I felt that the answer to the father's predicament might be located outside of an 'oedipal' understanding of the father: Dardenne's short mention of

Deleuze's philosophy – with its insistence on becoming and 'becoming-woman' – might further help overturn the narrow and forgetful Western paternity he resists.

This search for responsible transmission actually may have brought the Dardennes back toward the film industry. The irrepressible Belgian director Harry Kümel has recently cast doubt on the sincerity of Benelux filmmakers, who are so affected by limited funding that they turn to commercials, teaching, or simply leaving 'these blessed, little, rich countries of ours' and are 'rarely active in our profession of choice' (Mathijs 2004, xiii). Published, as I have mentioned, just a month before the Cannes festival at which the Dardennes entered the exclusive circle of *double palmés d'or*, this book bears the symptoms of skilful marketing; something like a commercial, or even like the compromised experience of *Je pense à vous*. But this would be a cynical conclusion, which assumes that the Dardennes would do better to remain marginal and 'pure'. What separates this book, and the Dardennes' recent films, from *Je pense à vous*, is that they appropriate media and the industry to bring visibility to bodies that the media and the industry normally efface. The Dardennes enter the mainstream on their own terms, and perhaps to change its course. Will it indeed change? I don't know.

## Bibliography

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