
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Mortal Ethics:
Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers

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To be ashamed of one's immorality is a step on the ladder at the end of which one is ashamed also of one's morality.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*)

Prior to the productive encounters that can be staged between Emmanuel Levinas's thought and cinema at the level of reception, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne introduce his philosophy to their filmmaking at its moment of inception.¹ Luc Dardenne's diary *Au dos de nos images* (2005) documents their filmmaking from 1991 to 2005, and is interspersed with brief but erudite references to Levinas's work. While Levinasian thinking is one among many cited influences in this text, which also features quotations from the writings of novelists, poets, and other philosophers, along with detailed references to other filmmakers, his work is a signal point of inspiration and ethical aspiration for their filmmaking. The Dardenne brothers seek permanently to unsettle received ideas of what cinema is. In this, their approach is bound up explicitly, but not exclusively, with the ethical underpinnings of Levinas's thought. Levinas's reformulation of ethics as first philosophy creates a fissure at the root of the philosophy of being. The Dardennes' films, in turn, perform a Levinasian-inspired challenge to the being of cinema. At its most extreme moments, to kill or not to kill is the key question that their cinema raises. This tacit rewriting of the interrogative opening to Hamlet's infamous

I am extremely grateful to Emma Wilson for her detailed comments on a penultimate draft of this article. I also thank Benjamin Noys for his helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.

¹ This connection is acknowledged openly by the filmmakers, and has also been taken up briefly but suggestively in forthcoming scholarship. See Martin O'Shaughnessy (forthcoming 2007/2008) and Joseph Mai (forthcoming Fall 2007). I thank Martin and Joseph warmly for sending me their rich articles prior to publication.

Cooper, Sarah (2007) 'Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2: 66 pp. 66–87. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n2/cooper.pdf>>
ISSN: 1466-4615 online

soliloquy, shifts attention away from a self-centered concern with being or non-being, and towards the survival of the other. The passage from being to non-being, which would involve the death of the subject, is displaced here by a preoccupation with killing, or failing to kill, someone else. This particular move from dying to killing lies at the heart of the Dardennes' mortal ethics.

In the epigraph to this article, Friedrich Nietzsche takes us up, or down, the ladder of shame, from immorality towards a questioning of morality itself. Ethics emerge from such an interrogation of morality. Taking Nietzsche's apothegm one orthographic step further, I want to ask here what it means to speak of immortality and mortality rather than immorality and morality in this distinctive post-Nietzschean ethical terrain. The Dardenne brothers question immortality in order critically to address mortality in their films. As we shall see, without making reference to Levinas's work on aesthetics, the filmmakers refer to a general belief in the way in which art is understood to offer human subjects the chance to become immortal. Yet rather than endorse this goal of immortality, or the impossibility of dying, they ask instead whether art – their films included – can institute the impossibility of killing the other crucial to Levinas's ethics. Jean-Luc Godard's well-known association of the tracking shot with morality suggests how such an ethical question can be posed through the matter of film form, as well as thematic content, albeit in relation to an expanded cinematographic palette. Furthermore, the Dardennes develop their observations to account for the spectatorial encounter with their work. Thus, as I shall argue, they open the subjects in their films, the subject of film, and the spectatorial subject to alterity. The Dardennes take an innovative step on the ladder of cinematic survival, rather than shame, as they view beleaguered mortals through a Levinasian lens.

The Belgian brothers began their career in documentary making in the 1970s. Their early social documentaries and forays into fiction testified to a prolific output, even though they were initially critically and commercially unsuccessful.² It was not until the release of *The Promise* (*La Promesse*, 1996) that they were to establish the idiosyncratic style that makes their work immediately recognisable and for which critical plaudits abound. To date, they have made three further fictions: *Rosetta* (1999), *The Son* (*Le Fils*, 2002), and *The Child* (*L'Enfant*, 2005). From *The Promise* onwards, each of the low-budget features is written, directed, and produced principally by the two

² For an illuminating and comprehensive discussion of the Dardenne brothers' early films, in addition to the more recent ones, see O'Shaughnessy (forthcoming 2007/2008).
Cooper, Sarah (2007) 'Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2: 67
pp. 66–87. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n2/cooper.pdf>>
ISSN: 1466-4615 online

brothers. Their signature lies in the presence of seasoned actors alongside non-professionals, and the use of handheld camerawork, direct sound, and only ever diegetic music. Set principally in or around Seraing, an industrial region in decline just outside of Liège, their gritty fictions probe the harsh realities of immigration, unemployment, and existence on the margins of Belgian society. The setting of the films is important, since the river Meuse, the woods, the roadways, and no-man's land of the surrounding area lend a brute materiality to the socio-historical positioning of the characters. This serves the filmmakers' stated aim, which is to look at what it means to be human today, not in general or abstract terms, but in the concrete and extreme situations constructed by a particular society (Dardenne 2005, 110). The Dardenne brothers speak repeatedly of using film as a way of gaining access to humanity, and the vocation of cinema, in their view, is to capture the human gaze (ibid. 16). For the Dardennes, this gaze is double-edged, however, in its simultaneous expression and prohibition of a murderous impulse towards other people. Immediately here, the filmmakers mark an explicit debt to Levinas, since the dual desire and interdiction to kill are fundamental to his concept of the *visage* (face). Yet Levinas challenges the visual appearance of this ethical mode of address. His ethics bear an unstable relation to the phenomenal world, which is provocative when thought through in the context of cinema.³ This instability furnishes a connection between the material world and an immaterial sphere, which the Dardennes strive to render in filmic terms. And this desired move between the material and the immaterial has implications for the way in which film and subjectivity, with its association of body and mind, have been theorised to date.

Face-to-Face Encounters

Levinas articulates his ethics in critical dialogue with the western philosophical tradition principally in his two major works: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (*Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*, 1961) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, 1974).⁴ Western philosophy, for Levinas, has for the most part been an ontology, by which he means that otherness has been reduced systematically to self-sameness, and in which system nothing other than being

³ This Special Issue as a whole constitutes a multi-faceted elaboration of the paradoxical conjunction of Levinas and cinema in this regard. For my own earlier exploration of this problematic, see Cooper 2006.

⁴ All references and quotations from these works will be taken from the most recent editions of the English translations: Levinas 2007 and Levinas 2004 respectively.

can appear (Levinas 2007, 43). Although the phenomenological undertakings of Husserl and Heidegger remain a key point of reference to him throughout his career, Levinas seeks to create a space of transcendence from within the realm of light and appearance crucial to phenomenology (ibid. 27). His key concepts in outlining the possibility of an ethical encounter in *Totality and Infinity* are the *visage* (face) and the *caresse* (caress), both of which are theorised as giving rise to a relation to alterity never fully to be encompassed by any of the senses, least of all sight and touch. These sensory connections to sight and touch are potentially totalising gestures, for Levinas, which reduce alterity to our experience of it alone and thus shrink otherness to self-sameness, rather than creating a possibility for its emergence in and on its own terms. It is language, for Levinas, that allows such totalising gestures to be transcended. The *visage* is first and foremost a speaking face, which utters the words of the commandment 'you shall not commit murder' (ibid. 199).

The concept of the face is central to the four most recent films of the Dardenne brothers, as is the resonance of its commandment. These four films will be my concern here. As Martin O'Shaughnessy notes, all these films revolve in some way around murder and feature both literal killings as well as extreme acts of symbolic violence tantamount to removing someone's life from the social sphere of existence (O'Shaughnessy, forthcoming). The films also create the conditions of possibility for murderous acts to be repeated. Yet each breaks with this cycle of repetition, taking us from murder to a prohibition of this very act. The redemptive, but secular, endings of all four films create a glimmer of hope in their otherwise all-pervasive bleakness, suggestive of a future that could be different from the present or past. The question for the filmmakers, with a Levinasian point of departure in mind, however, is how to make optics and the visible world speak what is essential to ethical human relations but which cannot be encompassed by vision. In short, how can their filmmaking give form to the spiritual optics of Levinas's ethics? It is with this question in mind that I turn first of all to consider the two films that deal with literal killings: *The Promise* and *The Son*.

The Promise focuses mainly on the lives of Igor (Jérémie Renier), Roger (Olivier Gourmet), and Assita (Assita Ouedraogo). Assita is married to Hamidou, an immigrant worker from Burkina Faso employed illegally by Roger, a human trafficker. Hamidou falls from scaffolding in an accident at work, and Igor, Roger's son, attempts to stop the bleeding and save his life. While Igor is attending to him, Hamidou makes him promise that he will look after Assita and their baby if anything happens to him. When Roger

discovers Igor with the wounded body, he removes the belt that Igor was trying to secure to stop the bleeding, and covers him over, thus effectively causing Hamidou's death. The promise Igor made to Hamidou tests his loyalty to his father, since Roger keeps Hamidou's death hidden to avoid trouble with the authorities. Assita's increasing inquisitiveness about her husband's whereabouts threatens to expose Roger's deception, while also placing her own well-being in jeopardy, as Roger will do anything to protect the life that he leads.

The Dardenne brothers explain that the film is of its time in its exploration of illegal human trafficking and its impact on Belgian demographics (cited in Campion 1996).⁵ A French reviewer declares that it also chimes with the reality in France of the 'sans-papiers' (immigrants without papers) and the revision of the Pasqua laws at the time (Lefort 1996). Yet, as the two brothers saw it, its actual subject is that of a son caught between his father and the truth (cited in Campion 1996). Roger, the father, is a continual presence in his son Igor's life, even when he is absent from the screen (the horn of his van, for example, or his voice invade his son's other activities from off-screen space). The paternal presence is carried over in the form of a gift from father to son in one early scene when Roger gives Igor a ring. The ring serves as a visual, material remainder and reminder of his father's presence in several scenes. Igor eventually has it cut off his finger and sells it to obtain money for Assita. This symbolic severance from the father presages the break in the actual relation to come. It is through Igor's increasing proximity to Assita that he gradually changes, and this involves his getting more distant from his father as the film progresses.

In the scenes between Assita and Igor, Assita's gaze is frequently the more direct and unflinching, whereas Igor's eyes are usually the first to look down or away. Luc Dardenne specifies that this is because Igor cannot respond to the moral commandment that he senses through her gaze (Dardenne 2005, 57) – the commandment of the Levinasian face. Igor is fascinated by and questions Assita's religious faith: Islam is suggested through her acquiring a ram in the market, which she intends to slaughter to celebrate the end of Ramadan, but she also has broader spiritual beliefs. From the outset, though, Assita is a voice of authority that corrects and challenges Igor, more reliably finally than his father. Igor's relation to Assita is more estranged in physical terms, and an exchange of words and looks characterises the

⁵ All references to French newspaper reviews are taken from the database of the Bibliothèque du Film in Paris and can be consulted there. No page numbers are available.
Cooper, Sarah (2007) 'Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2: 70 pp. 66–87. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n2/cooper.pdf>>
ISSN: 1466-4615 online

bond between them. But there is one scene towards the end in which Igor clutches onto Assita: he cries and says that he wished he had never helped her. His unsettled relation to her is finally resolved by his being able to confess to her the death of her husband. The confession is said on a staircase in a railway station, as Igor has arranged for Assita to go to stay with relatives in Italy. This final encounter is most relevant here because of the relation to Levinas that Luc Dardenne acknowledges in his diary entry for 19 January 1996. He records that Levinas died during the shooting of *The Promise*, and stresses how much the film owes to their readings of his books, especially his interpretation of the face-to-face relationship, and the *visage* as first discourse. He continues: 'Tout le film peut être vu comme une tentative d'arriver enfin au face-à-face' (Dardenne 2005, 56) (The entire film can be seen as an attempt ultimately to reach the face-to-face encounter). The closing moments of the film flesh out an on-screen encounter that works in keeping with Levinas's ethical vision.

The final confessional scene brings the movement of the film to a halt. Igor is at the bottom of the staircase, Assita a couple of steps ahead, and the confession is spoken from off-screen space first of all as we see only a static shot of Assita's back with the head of her baby just visible at the bottom of the screen. The handheld camerawork, the restless activity, is suddenly given pause. Too ashamed to speak to her face, or just unable, Igor confesses to Assita's back, and their encounter is initiated through words, addressed to her back, before Assita turns around, Igor's lowered head raises to return her gaze and she is the first this time to look, then walk, away. The final image is held as a fixed frame shot, as both disappear into the distance, and the film draws to a close. A promise is always made to a future, whatever it holds, and Igor keeps his promise while also failing to repeat the film's earlier act of murderous violence by revealing, rather than continuing to conceal, Hamidou's death. The camera movements pause long enough here for the difference of these final moments to be registered in contrast to the rest of the film. The reason why I term this final encounter Levinasian is because such a scene bears a particular relation to iconoclasm key to his work on aesthetics, and is something that the Dardenne brothers never refer to in these terms, but which is crucial to the way in which they approach cinema.

In his controversial early essay on aesthetics, 'Reality and its Shadow' ('La Réalité et son ombre', 1948), the artwork, for Levinas, shadows and immobilises being, cuts it off from time and suspends it for eternity, with no possibility of establishing a relation to the future so crucial to his ethics. Furthermore, and more generally, the

Cooper, Sarah (2007) 'Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2: 71 pp. 66–87. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n2/cooper.pdf>>
ISSN: 1466-4615 online

plasticity of images, when evoked in his thinking, is immediately shattered and is characterised by an appeal beyond what the image fixes for vision, hence the fact that the *visage* can never become an object or image for our gaze. Without making direct reference to Levinas, iconoclasm manifests itself in Luc Dardenne's diary when he speaks repeatedly of their desire to challenge the habitual, clichéd images of cinema (such as shot/reverse-shot, point-of-view shots, or establishing shots). The Dardenne brothers' quest for novelty through their filmmaking lies in breaking key cinematic codes in an attempt to start from scratch, but they couple this with recognition that this is impossible. Their resultant, compromised aim is not to buy wholesale into cinematic convention. Among the other ways in which they avoid sedimented tradition, their use of people who have never acted before ensures that their films are not imbued with a pre-made series of associations through their casting. (Actors Émilie Dequenne, Olivier Gourmet, Morgan Marinné, and Jérémie Renier, for example, were all first-time actors in the cinema when they were first cast by the Dardenne brothers.) More importantly, though, with regard to my preceding discussion of Igor and Assita's final encounter in *The Promise*, it is through the filming of the backs of characters that they further their aim towards shaking cinematic preconceptions. It is not the literal image of Igor and Assita standing face to face that establishes a Levinasian connection in the closing scenes, but rather the moment prior to this, which presents their staggered backs to the camera, as Igor utters his confession. It is just such a contorted position that enables the filmic rendering of the Levinasian ethical encounter, which is not confined to *The Promise* alone.

Filming the Body

From *The Promise* onwards, the method of the Dardennes is to shoot in continuity and to watch their characters grow as a result (Dardenne 2005, 166). Their framing brings fictional lives into being but can never fully contain them: their characters' bodies overflow the edges of the frame, rather than being contained within the shots. After *The Promise* the style of their films becomes more radical, and the extreme compression of shots in *Rosetta* is extended into the subsequent films, along with a shift from the intrigue of the first to the increasingly restless tracking of characters' actions. Frequently, the camera follows the characters, although the range of shots is more diverse than this (particularly when we reach *The Child*), and the cinematography does not become rigidly formulaic. The cinematography of the Dardennes is predominantly on a level with those

it films, and views from on high only when the space of filming necessitates this (for example, such moments as occur in *The Child* as the main protagonists Sonia or Bruno are filmed coming upstairs by a camera that is a couple of steps ahead of them). Led by the characters, we are given a sense of 'being with' them that Daniel Frampton speaks about when discussing these films (Frampton 2006, 145–147). With them, but slightly behind them, our frequent point of view is of some part of their backs. This filming of the back is part of the iconoclasm to which I referred above and serves thus to link their filming to Levinas. Luc Dardenne speaks of having wanted to film Rosetta's back in order to 'briser l'image déjà vue et sue par le spectateur' (Dardenne 2005, 129) (break up the image that the spectator has already seen and known). *Rosetta* opens with this in mind, as a handheld shot follows an angry Rosetta, dressed in white overalls and a protective hat, storming through the factory from which she has just been dismissed without good reason. More consistently than in any of the other films, though, it is in *The Son* that the back of the main protagonist is a key focal point of the film.

In keeping with the directors' recognition that Olivier Gourmet's body was central to the conception of the film, *The Son* begins in the darkness and in the small of Olivier's back. The camera is so close to his clothing that it blocks out light or the possibility of establishing exactly where we are: we can faintly see movement in the dark screen but cannot yet ascertain what we are seeing. When the credit sequence finishes, we are enveloped in sound, and initially we hear more clearly than we see, even though the sounds too have no anchor point until the camera pulls back to reveal that we are listening to the noises of a joinery workshop. This is the place in which Olivier works, retraining young offenders and providing them with a trade upon their release into the community. Our first contact with him, still from behind at this stage, is with his refusal to take on a boy whose dossier he is reading. He tells the director that he cannot accept him, yet seems obsessed by him, and we follow Olivier who moves haphazardly through the corridors of the building, as he tries to catch a glimpse of this young boy. Olivier's temperament is presented neutrally throughout (apart from a couple of angry outbursts), but the cinematography suggests that he is off-balance: he wears a belt brace for a bad back, which is seemingly a corrective attempt to re-centre his body, whose disturbance is, however, coming from elsewhere from the start.

We learn later on (through Olivier's ex-partner Magali) that the boy whose dossier he is reading, Francis Thirion, killed his own young son in a bungled car theft five years earlier. Olivier's perturbed and disorienting fascination with his own son's killer

Cooper, Sarah (2007) 'Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2: 73
pp. 66–87. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n2/cooper.pdf>>
ISSN: 1466-4615 online

eventually results in his taking him on in his workshop to train him as a joiner. Olivier's motives for doing this are unclear, and his impassivity, along with his manipulation of tools of his trade, which could also serve as accompaniments to a second killing to avenge the death of his son, create a tense ambiguity. This reigns throughout and it is unclear until the closing moments whether the reluctant relationship that develops between Olivier and Francis will culminate in forgiveness or revenge. As with the confessional moment of *The Promise*, Olivier's revelation that he is the father of the boy Francis killed is made unexpectedly and behind Francis's back, filmed this time from a more oblique angle, keeping both characters in view. This tips the balance of their uneven relation once again, and the ensuing disorientation of the pursuit culminates in a stranglehold filmed also from the side. Olivier is unable to complete his own murderous act, however. Olivier's inability to kill the killer of his son gives Francis a future that could be different from his past, and this father sits finally, exhausted, alongside his unlikely surrogate son. After the revelation and attempted strangulation, the film ends with Olivier and Francis attaching their planks of wood to the car trailer in silence. Indeed, the closing sequence features very little dialogue. It is through the filming of bodily movements and actions that ethical thinking is articulated here and elsewhere, yet the desired opening out towards alterity is inseparable from the verbal dimension. In keeping with the embedding of their films in Levinas's thinking, the Levinasian face-to-face encounter relates thought to words in a way that chimes with what we observe in both the movements of the bodies of the Dardennes' characters, and the movements of the films' images.

The Levinasian ethical command engages the subject from a vertical position of height, rather than a position merely outside of the subject in spatial terms (Levinas 2007, 171), and the command is verbal. This address from a position of height registers the transcendence of the ethical relation. In the Dardennes' films, however, the angle of filming the body does not literally incarnate the Levinasian ethical orientation. By choosing to focus frequently on the backs of the characters, the Dardenne brothers steer us down, rather than up, the topography of the body, from the face to the back. Yet this happens without a loss of connection to the transcendent ethical dimension. The commandment of the Levinasian face speaks through the movements of the bodies in the diegetic space, as well as through the movements of the film (furnished by the camera, then enhanced by the editing), and the back is the point of origin of this mode of address. Luc Dardenne speaks of Gourmet's back as if it were a face: 'comme si ce dos,

cette nuque parlaient' (Dardenne 2005, 129) (as if this back, this neck were speaking). This relates to Judith Butler's discussion of this body part when commenting on Levinas's essay 'Peace and Proximity'. Reading the essay, in which parts of the back are said to cry, sob, and scream, Butler argues that Levinas's description takes us to the limits of linguistic translation (Butler 2004, 133–134). Butler interprets the Levinasian face ultimately as a kind of sound that 'precedes and limits the delivery of semantic sense' (ibid. 134). Similarly, the body of Olivier in *The Son* takes us to the limits of what can be vocalised, while it still communicates his confusion and pain. Gourmet's back is eloquent in its silence, as well as making many of his moves illegible in their ambiguity. The Dardenne brothers not only flesh out an ethics at the borders of the visible world, but also point to where thought, as well as linguistic expression, reaches its limit. The challenge to cinematic codes, the questioning of the image, and this filming of the body are all stages in the disarticulation of a conventional filmic vocabulary.

The verbal address of the *visage* is integral to rupturing the totalising reduction of alterity to self-sameness, but it also displaces and counters thought. For Levinas, thought is bound up with power, and ontology is defined as a philosophy of power on this basis (Levinas 2007, 46). Levinas turns to Descartes's 'Third Meditation' in *Totality and Infinity* and reads thought in relation to something absolutely outside of the thinking subject – in this case, God or the Infinite (ibid. 25; 48–50). It is fully possible, in Descartes's view, to have an idea of God, but it cannot have come from humans in the first instance. Levinas draws on this and equates ethics with a thought that thinks more than it thinks, a form of thinking that overflows any ability to contain it – like the bodies filmed by the Dardenne brothers, which perpetually exceed the frame. Thought meets its first limit in Levinas's work when it is exceeded by language: 'To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it' (Levinas 2007, 51). Furthering his ethical questioning of the ontological foundations of philosophy in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's language in this later text performs the very challenge to being that his writing articulates. The Dit (Said) comprises statements subject to confirmation or interrogation, whereas the Dire (Saying) refers to an underlying situation, which exposes such statements (and the person who speaks or replies to them) to alterity. Ethical language results from the workings of the Saying, which rupture the static pronouncements of the Said. Prior to the ontological structure of signification, Levinas asserts the signifying capacities of sensibility, thereby finding meaning in something other than ontology. This

sensibility is characterised as vulnerable, and it is this very vulnerability that signifies (Levinas 2004, 64). Using distinctly Levinasian vocabulary, but never quoting from *Otherwise than Being*, Luc Dardenne questions how they might project different kinds of images in their films: 'Pourrions-nous projeter une image qui serait comme le visage d'autrui, aussi vulnérable et intense par-delà sa plastique?' (Dardenne 2005, 29) (Could we project an image that would be like the other's face, just as vulnerable and intense beyond its plastic form?). This relates to a later question that Luc Dardenne asks: 'Les images de nos films peuvent-elles provoquer une faille, un trou dans ce qui est?' (Dardenne 2005, 108) (Could the images of our films produce a fissure, a hole in what is?). Like Levinas, then, these filmmakers are seeking a way out of the impasse of being in order for alterity to emerge. The escape route is through the human body, which testifies to the limits of thinking and speaking, as we have seen. Yet their films also test the limits of embodied existence, and this re-conceives the mind-body relation as articulated by Gilles Deleuze, among other film theorists. For Deleuze, rather than exist as an obstacle to be overcome in order to be able to think, the body takes us deeper towards the unthought within thought. In his view, it is life that is concealed from thought and that the body forces us to think (Deleuze 1989, 189). For the Dardennes it is not the body of the thinking subject that takes them to the limits of thought, but somebody else or, rather, someone else's body. The unthought that we encounter here is the ethical relation, rather than the life accessed through the body of the thinking subject, and this subject is thereby open from the outset to an other.

The literal translation of the title of Luc Dardenne's diary is 'on the back of our images', which directs attention thus to something we would not usually see. As the blind spot of one's own body, the human back requires another vantage point in order to be viewed. The invisible camera creates this other position in the Dardennes' films, which Frampton equates with the consciousness of the 'filmmind' (Frampton 2006, 147). Speaking in a more embodied manner, Luc Dardenne uses the term 'corps-caméra' (body-camera) to describe the way in which camera operator Benoît Dervaux and his assistant Amaury Duquenne become one in their movements and approaches to what they film in *The Child* (Dardenne 2005, 175). This is evident in the earlier films too. For Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*, originary responsibility is figured as marked on the body, and more precisely still, in or on the skin. Levinas writes: 'In responsibility as one assigned or elected from the outside, assigned as irreplaceable, the subject is accused in its skin, too tight for its skin' (Levinas 2004, 106). Imprinted invisibly, but indelibly on

the body, Levinasian responsibility is a difficult and painful affair, something that humanity carries with it since time immemorial, on the surface, rather than in its psychological depths. However, contact with the surface of the bodies and objects that the Dardenne brothers film is intended to go beyond the grain of the skin, indeed to treat this skin as a membrane in order to film 'l'affleurement du corps invisible dans le corps visible' (Dardenne 2005, 133) (the brush with the invisible body within the visible body). The unconscious moves that Olivier makes towards his son's killer are an example of the hidden sphere that the Dardennes are trying to discern within the visible body. Beyond the visible world, which in quasi-documentary observational fashion, is the most obvious subject of their filming, lies another dimension, immaterial and invisible in its properties but nonetheless present. The ethical encounter between bodies enables perception of this other sphere.

Film's Soul

The Dardennes make a pioneering move away from theoretical discussions of thought and embodiment in film by locating film closer to the conception of the human soul, in Levinasian terms, than the body or mind. Theirs is not a Dantean concern with the state of souls after death, for the destitution in which their characters exist is indisputably of this world. Furthermore, the Dardennes' interest in the soul does not pertain to the individual subject's survival after death. Discussing *The Son*, Luc Dardenne says that it is the impossibility of killing the boy, rather than a pardon that is the idea behind the film, and he sums up this impossibility of killing as: '[l]'âme humaine selon Levinas' (Dardenne 2005, 95) (the human soul according to Levinas). Earlier in his diary, he paraphrases Levinas's references to the human soul in *Difficult Freedom (Difficile liberté: essais sur le Judaïsme)* (1963), secularising and removing it from the Judaic context of this collection of essays. He continues by transposing his discussion into the realm of art:

L'art est reconnu par beaucoup comme une manifestation de notre possibilité d'immortalité, comme dur désir de durer, comme anti-destin. Pourrait-il être une modalité de l'institution de l'impossibilité de tuer? Pourrait-il ouvrir à cette âme qui se découvre comme impossibilité de donner la mort à autrui? (Dardenne 2005, 42) (Art is recognised by many as a manifestation of our chance to be immortal, as a firm desire to endure, as anti-destiny. Could it be a way of instituting the impossibility of killing? Could it open up to this soul that is discovering itself as the impossibility of killing others?)

This view contrasts implicitly with one well-known association of film and an ability to endure beyond death. André Bazin's definition of the ontology of the photographic image understands photographs to embalm a moment in time and thereby save the photographed subject from a second spiritual death. He extends this notion of self-preservation to filmic images to describe how they capture temporal duration and mummify change (Bazin 2002, 9–17). Cinematic movement and time are cast thus in terms of an eternal passage to immortality, and this is where the Dardenne brothers' conception of the arts offers a different perspective. Their interrogation of realist observation and their clear debt to documentary brings them within the orbit of Bazin's 1945 remarks, albeit belatedly. Yet their interest in the spiritual dimension is less a function of the survival of the individual photographed or filmed subjects through the index of the image, than it is the recognition of an ethical relation founded in the survival of the other. The Dardennes' conception of film in terms of the soul, rather than an individual mind or body, goes further than a thematic concern with there always being someone else's mind and/or body implied or in the frame from the start, whose existence the subject in the diegesis (and the spectator) is implored not to suppress. On the level of film form, the conjunction of Levinas and the Dardennes suggests, rather, that the other is always there *in spirit*, and prevents film from being identified as a solipsistic subject, be it in terms of its body, its mind, or a combination of the two.

In the films, the spiritual dimension is shot through with Judeo-Christian reference points without being anchored firmly in religiosity. The physical and the metaphysical are closely linked. Writing specifically about *The Child* but also highlighting what this film shares with the earlier ones, François Bégaudeau notes the Christian thread that runs through the films, and speaks of *The Child* as 'plein de ces glissements d'une cause matérielle à un effet moral' (Bégaudeau 2005, 24) (full of those slippages from a material cause to a moral effect). Not necessarily in keeping with such causal logic, but certainly retaining a sense of slippage from the material to the moral, the connection is also apparent in the other films, but especially in *Rosetta* in which economic existence is paramount, and through which it is possible to gain access to an ethical and spiritual dimension. Luc Dardenne quotes Levinas: "La vie spirituelle est essentiellement vie morale et son lieu de prédilection est l'économique." Ce constat de Levinas est aussi celui de notre cinéma' (Dardenne 2005, 70) ('Spiritual life is essentially moral life and its place of predilection is the economy.' This observation from Levinas is

also that of our cinema). This location of the spiritual within, or accessed through, the material world suggests the existence of what remains ungraspable or untouchable in what is tangible, and this is a Levinasian point of contact.

The eponymous Rosetta goes on a daily quest for work and struggles for social acceptance, while dealing with an alcoholic mother in the absence of a father. The teenager is her mother's mother from the outset, reprimanding her for her binges, and for sleeping around, but also praising her at one quiet moment for doing some needlework. She survives with no protection from her broken family or the State. Rosetta is a fighter who is trying to be part of the economic system, someone who resists the position to which she has been assigned. When she does not have paid work, she sets traps to catch fish, she sells clothing, and is always on the move. As testimony to her almost ceaseless movement, the sound of her breathing accompanies her activities throughout. She is dismissed from job after job, for no legitimate reason (the film actually gave its name to a youth employment law in Belgium shortly after its release). The person who gets closest to her, apart from her mother, is Riquet (Fabrizio Rongione), who sells food from a roadside van. He becomes her friend and also offers her a lucrative but black market business selling waffles from the van, which she refuses. Rosetta's most serene moment is when she spends the night at his place on some spare bedding. Her whispered words to herself before she goes to sleep form a secular prayer, through which the grammar of her newly glimpsed social existence is rehearsed in the semi-darkness. In the first person, then the second, she says her name, notes that she has a job, a friend and a normal life, and that she will not fall into a hole, before she wishes herself good night. The person who shows her the most warmth is the person she betrays most deeply, however. Prepared to do anything to have her legal position in the work place, she tells the owner of the food van (played by Olivier Gourmet) about Riquet's illegal sideline. She gets his job as a result. Taking his place through such underhand means, even though she reveals Riquet's dishonesty to his boss, does not result in happiness, though. The film shows Riquet's generosity towards Rosetta, but in the closing moments she is able finally to see beyond herself.

The caravan that she shares with her mother is no haven, and its initial intended destiny, should her final decisive act of the film succeed, is to serve as their death chamber. She phones the owner of the food van from the campsite to resign from her job and this in itself is a self-eradicating act of removal from society. Differently from Bresson's *Mouchette* – an acknowledged filmic antecedent – whose final act is suicide,

Rosetta's attempt to gas herself and her mother is thwarted when the gas bottle runs out. She buys another canister from the caravan park owner and struggles back with it, filmed first from over her shoulder, then from in front. The noise of Riquet's bike is audible and gets louder as he circles her and will not leave her alone. He continues to circle her as she drops the heavy canister and throws gravel at him, before picking up the bottle again. She is hassled by him until she eventually falls to the ground in tears. The point at which she sees Riquet as if for the first time, is in the final shot of the film: we see his arm help her up from her prostrate position on the floor. Her necessarily blinkered concern with her own – and her mother's – survival broadens here as she lets someone else in, someone who could help. It is with her tearful gaze towards him off-screen that the film ends. Luc Dardenne writes that they wanted to convey Rosetta's unknowability through her gaze (Dardenne 2005, 73). He thereby figures Rosetta in a manner akin to the Levinasian *visage*, with the connection to an extrasensory, immaterial dimension that this implies. Her unknowability, however, raises a thorny issue in their work more generally concerning the representation of female subjectivity in the family unit.

The Feminine and the Family Romance

The spiritual element of the Dardenne brothers' humanist cinema plays itself out in a godless world: God the father is absent and nothing else will fill his place. The stable authoritative figure of the family father in the socio-historical sphere is also questioned in each of the films. The figure of the father features variously as an ogre (*The Promise*), as a broken man (*The Son*), as an irresponsible adult (*The Child*), or as a notable absence (*Rosetta*). For Levinas it is through the paternal line, from father to son, that one generation connects to another, and that the past and present open out to the future. The status of the feminine in this schema is problematic, both in Levinasian philosophy and in the work of the Dardennes. It is through erotic love between a man and woman in *Totality and Infinity* that a relation to the future is fleshed out in the creation of a son. The concept of the *caresse* (caress) names the non-possessive relation to the female lover on the part of the male subject, which permits his connection to the exterior and future time. The family romance that underpins Levinas's thinking is very traditional, bringing with it a history of woman's confinement to the interior. Even though Levinas affirms that he is concerned with the feminine, rather than actual women, the feminine is still located as central to the home, to domesticity and to the possibility of

welcoming others. In contrast, the male subject has the mobility to venture into the space beyond, to the ethical space that the welcoming femininity of the home makes possible and accessible.

The Promise performs the ambiguity of the status of the feminine in this regard, but adds differences beyond sexual difference to the Levinasian equation. Assita is at once an incarnation of a radically other position from Igor, culturally as a black female immigrant from Burkina Faso, but also a matriarch, closer than one might think to Igor. *The Promise* is about Igor's gradual humanisation which she enables through her presence, but, in this sense, she is very much in his service, and thereby occupies a similarly equivocal position to that which the feminine position holds within Levinas's philosophy in *Totality and Infinity*. In a relevant critique of the Levinasian concept of the caress, Luce Irigaray writes:

[t]o caress, for Levinas, consists, therefore, not in approaching the other in its most vital dimension, the touch, but in the reduction of that vital dimension of the other's body to the elaboration of a future for himself. To caress could thus constitute the hidden intention of philosophical temporality (Irigaray 1991, 110).

The Dardennes' own interest in the development of the male subject recurs in other films. In *The Son Magali*, Olivier's ex-partner, is pregnant by her new partner, and this suggests that she has been able to move on in a way that Olivier has not. However, she is troubled when she hears that Francis has been released, and then faints after she catches a glimpse of the boy later in the film. Her vulnerability and pain are expressed in these moments, yet the film is about Olivier's coming to terms with Francis's existence rather than about Magali's corresponding evolution. *Rosetta* is their most sustained attempt to film a female character. The brothers admit, however, that they approached her as if they were filming the body of a man: 'Notre premier corps de femme, filmé comme celui d'un homme. On l'appelait Rosetto' (Dardenne 2005a) (Our first woman's body, filmed as if it were a man's. We called her Rosetto). Her crippling stomach cramps, from which the only relief is the warmth of a hairdryer, are never named as specific to the female body, even though her mother says that she used to suffer as Rosetta now does. In contrast to the three preceding films, though, *The Child* focuses on a male-female couple and attempts to give equal importance to both Bruno and Sonia through their differing relations to their child.

Like *The Promise* and *The Son* before it, *The Child* also features a relationship between father and son. The unlikely father figure, Bruno (Jérémy Renier) is an irresponsible child himself, apathetic rather than explicitly ill-intentioned, and reliant on crime to make money. *The Child* stages the gradual coming to responsibility of Bruno, but his partner Sonia (Déborah François) is a strong presence in her own right. Her female specificity, albeit conflated with motherhood, is acknowledged, and she does not just serve Bruno's self-realisation. The maternal bond between Sonia and Jimmy is stronger here in familial terms (indeed, correspondingly, when Bruno requires an alibi to avoid being arrested later in the film, his own mother provides it for him). Sonia and Bruno have a playful relationship, but this is ruptured when, unwilling to face the demands of paternity, and indifferent to the baby, he sells Jimmy illegally for adoption. Sonia's nervous breakdown in response to this prompts Bruno to try to reverse his actions. He gets Jimmy back, but has to buy him with interest. Working with one of the members of his young gang of thieves, they borrow a scooter, snatch a woman's bag, and are given chase. Both hide in the river, but his accomplice Steve suffers a hypothermic reaction, and as Bruno goes off to get help, the police find and arrest Steve. Bruno watches this, and we then see him push the broken-down scooter that they used for the theft back through the streets, which is more of a struggle than his act of pushing the pram that is a recurrent motif earlier in the film. He ends up at the police station and confesses to the police chief, in front of his young friend, that he was responsible. Even though the juridical response to his confession is imprisonment, Bruno's final act amounts to the recognition of his responsibility. This break with the logic of repetition in his personal history of wrongs is followed by a tearful reconciliation with Sonia. Her return at the end of the film marks the return of the feminine; both she and Bruno are given equal attention in conclusion.

In contrast with the confessional scenes of *The Promise* and *The Son*, in which Igor and Olivier reveal the secrets they have kept from Assita and Francis, Bruno is filmed from the front, rather than from behind. He addresses Steve, to his side first of all, to return the keys for the scooter, and then confesses to the inspector to being the leader of the gang. The final shots of the film are of Bruno entering the visiting room for friends and relatives in prison. Sonia (who has been absent from the previous scenes) is waiting for him, and when he sits down she offers to get him a coffee from a machine. Sonia and Bruno are filmed separately to begin with, linked by the movement of the camera, as they are seated opposite one another, and are silent until Bruno enquires

after Jimmy. The final moments of the film show them clutching on to one another across the table as both burst into tears – a spontaneous reaction, which features both of them in the frame, reconciled wordlessly. The couple is united at this end point, and the pain of this scene and the apparent misery of a prison sentence of unspecified length, does not entirely suppress the glimmer of hope in Bruno and Sonia's tears. In spite of the bleakness of their material setting and situation, something else is perceptible here that cannot be identified with their tears or confined to the prison we see. In spectatorial terms, the ability to relate to the characters' suffering depends on our being close to both but identified with neither. The immaterial ethical dimension comes to matter here, as elsewhere, through the film's furnishing proximal contact with more than just a solipsistic subject. As with *Rosetta*, *Olivier*, and *Igor*, we see them without being able to be them in identificatory terms, and this positioning firmly outside of the characters' lives is precisely the ethical point.

Spectatorship and Proximity

Each of the films contains contrasting examples of what it means to occupy someone else's place. When *Rosetta* takes Riquet's place as a result of her act of betrayal, this can be seen as the unethical opposite of Bruno's confession in *The Child*, in which he claims responsibility for his actions, rather than leaving Steve to take the blame instead. In *The Son* Olivier lets himself into Francis's bed-sit and attempts to put himself in his place through fitting into his pared down material surroundings. But he does not fit, and this fails as an attempt to understand the boy. More positively, both *The Promise* and *The Son* feature acts of apprenticeship, all of which involve the apprentice (*Igor* in the former, and *Olivier's* reformed boys in the latter) learning a trade by taking the tutor's place once he has shown them what to do. *Igor* pays more attention to his father than the mechanic who teaches him his trade, but there is more of a sense of possibility for *Olivier's* boys to learn and progress differently from their past offences as a result of the contact they have with him. In keeping with the lack of fixity in the different ethical stakes of taking or failing to take someone else's place, the films bear an interrogative relation to cinematic identification. Identification, as theorised by psychoanalysis, names the psychological process and unconscious possibility of stepping into someone else's shoes, in order to feel as they feel. This then stands as a potentially ethical mode of relating to and understanding the plight of others. In film theory, specifically that of Christian Metz, identification is accessed through seeing as they see – a primary

identification with the camera, which then leads to secondary identification within the diegetic space (Metz 1977).⁶ Although Luc Dardenne explains that their filming calls for a moral imagination on the part of the spectator (Dardenne 2005, 131), by which he means that they ask viewers to imagine themselves into somebody else's place, the camera never offers a straightforward position of identification in these terms. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas defines subjectivity in terms of substitution, which bears a surface resemblance to the structure of identification. For Levinas the logic of responsibility is bound up with that of signification, as the 'one-for-the-other' through which signs stand for something and generate meaning, becomes the 'one-for-the-other' of responsibility, of substitution, in which I stand in for, and am responsible for, another human being. His notion of responsibility is more than a matter of identification, however, and is not psychologically rooted, in spite of the superficial similarity between the structures of the two. The Dardenne brothers' cinema is not one of empathy through conventional identificatory routes, but is one of proximity.

However close the Dardennes' camera operators get to the position of the person, the gaze they are filming, or the object of this gaze, they create a space for distance within such proximity. Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* drives less towards thinking a phenomenological experience of things or people in the world than a proximity to them. The proximal point of contact is theorised prior to language but as its condition of possibility: 'proximity qua saying, contact, sincerity of exposure, a saying prior to language, but without which no language, as a transmission of messages, would be possible' (Levinas 2004, 16). Levinas's work on language and thought was related earlier to the disarticulation of conventional filmic vocabulary, and here it can be extended to account for spectatorial relations to the images on screen. The position of proximity, of being placed spatially almost in the position of a character, but not quite, guards against identification on the part of the spectator. Luc Dardenne terms the distance between the camera and the character the space of the 'secret', and this gives the characters an existence of their own, by keeping the spectator always at one remove from the character's position (Dardenne 2005, 130). The characters get in the way of the best position for the camera. It is proximity to, rather than experience of, the characters' vision and perception that emerges as important here, and this is where Levinasian

⁶ This psychoanalytic model has been criticised widely in recent years. See Smith 1995 and Sobchack 2004 for two contrasting but compelling critiques, both of which differ from this Levinasian intervention.

thinking takes us beyond psychoanalytic and phenomenological models. The possibility of seeing or feeling for the characters is replaced by a closeness, which serves paradoxically to register both the other characters' and our own distance from those filmed. It is the ability *not* to take the place of the characters by identifying with an image, that facilitates recognition of responsibility. The space of the secret names the invisible and immaterial ethical difference between positions that can never be identified with one another. It explains how we can be moved without replicating or sharing the embodied emotions we see on screen. Located beyond bodily mimesis, such spectatorial response leaves alterity intact. To engage with the soul of these films is thus to replicate the impossibility of stepping into the characters' positions to see as they see, feel as they feel. This carries the refusal or inability to kill into the domain of spectatorship. As Luc Dardenne writes: 'Regarder l'écran (...) ce serait: ne pas tuer' (ibid. 42) (to watch the screen (...) means: not to kill).

The Dardenne brothers exchange death for life in the refusal to repeat radical acts of the suppression of alterity. Yet the focus on the characters within the images is not about their individual survival but their relation to and dependence on others. The way in which their characters are filmed flags an abiding interest in the risks of taking somebody else's place, and is fundamental to the broader interrogation of killing and its prohibition that has been the subject of this article. Halting the repetition of literal or symbolic killing extends to the spectator's place before the image, whose distance from the experiences viewed from camera positions of extreme proximity is precisely the creation of a space of responsibility. The Dardennes read Levinas's philosophy in relation to art in a more positive way than does the philosopher himself, and their films articulate a relation between his ethics and cinema that Levinas himself never envisaged. More significantly still, their concern with alterity and the soul incarnates a form of filmmaking that creates an original fissure in the ontology of cinema – an ethical one that gives a different space and time to the lives of others. And this, ultimately, is what I would argue Levinas's reformulation of ethics as first philosophy means to the filming of the Dardenne brothers.

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