

## 'Occupy without Counting': Furtive Urbanism in the Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

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1.

We begin with three passages from Deleuze and Guattari's 1440 Plateau:

Smooth space and striated space - nomad space and sedentary space - the space in which the war machine develops and the space instituted by the State apparatus - are not of the same nature (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 473).

The striated is that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms, and organizes horizontal (melodic) lines and vertical (harmonic) planes. The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favor of the production of properly rhythmic values, the pure act of the drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and the horizontal (ibid., 477).

In a smooth space-time, one occupies without counting, whereas in a striated space-time one counts in order to occupy (ibid., 478).

Taking up a thread from the serialist composer Pierre Boulez, the authors extract a concept of space whose 'occupy without counting' directive, though born within the discourse of music theory, seems particularly applicable to cinema - that medium most akin to music insofar as it utilises time as an elemental raw material in its sculpting of space. Boulez's major contribution to

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compositional technique - namely, a hitherto unthinkable treatment of time - is for Deleuze and Guattari an event to be exploded well beyond the horizons of its originary discipline. As Schoenberg did with tonality, Boulez places musical time into a state of continuous variation, rigorously employing differential calculus to free it from its traditional striations. This procedure calls to mind notions of spatio-temporal relations similar to those Deleuze develops from 1966's *Bergsonism* and 1968's *Difference and Repetition* up through his two-volume *Cinema* text. The non-pulsed, smooth time of Boulezian 'occupation' operates in accord with the semiotic 'openness' Deleuze ascribes to cinematic movement as well as with the concepts of deterritorialisation and nomadism so vital to the Deleuzoguattarian lexicon. Whereas a closed system operates through knowledge, an open system - a film, for example - operates through affect. Deleuze seeks in cinema what Boulez had found in sound - synchronic and diachronic axes fused on a diagonal plane. The spectatorial space-time occupied by a 'properly rhythmic' cinema(tography) neither counts nor can be counted because counting is a thoroughly statist undertaking. Diagonal trajectories and differential flows ceaselessly refuse the staticity necessary to any sort of count. Cinema, like music, has the potential to operate in a purely anarchic mode, as a temporal phenomenon comprised of heterogeneous movements and recurring motifs. Continuously variable tempos and time signatures bar all attempts to 'keep' time, which must be experienced as objective affection rather than subjectively possessed. Thus film analysis, as Deleuze might have it, should concern itself not with criticism or judgment but with an attunement to the 'properly rhythmic values' produced by a given body of work.<sup>1</sup>

All of which, to my mind, come to a head in the films of the Belgian co-auteurs Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, whose scrupulous naturalism, *vérité* aesthetic, and persistent concern for all things displaced lay the necessary

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<sup>1</sup> To use Deleuze's terminology, such 'properly rhythmic values' can be defined with great precision by logging patterns of perception-images, action-images, and affection-images (each of which are explicated in the opening chapters of *Cinema 1*)—a rather technical analytic task for some future Deleuzian film scholarship.

foundations for a cinema that understands precisely what it means to ‘occupy without counting.’ Their work exposes the problematic productions of both interpersonal relations and urban spatial striations that occur within the context of global market capitalism and neoliberal ‘democracy,’ ultimately revealing the possibility, evasive and indefinite as it may be, for a community bound by something other than economic exchange and political representation. Accordingly, their protagonists ‘occupy’ everything from city spaces to social positions in the most precarious of ways - as nomads, thieves, or black-market entrepreneurs. Their characters, much like their camera, remain perpetually in motion, neither pausing nor cutting and so ever-repudiating a proper count. Since commentaries and interviews hitherto have sufficiently addressed the societal concerns (e.g. immigration, parent-child relations, the working poor) and persistent themes (e.g. responsibility, fidelity, forgiveness) of the Dardenne catalog,<sup>2</sup> this article will be concerned less with the representational content of the films and more with how they cinematographically present and resonate as objects of spectatorial affection. The Dardennes reconfigure perception according to its *affective* rather than *intelligible* capacity. Their work, in turn, remains ‘open’; the absence of stable situations at both diegetic and cinematographic levels renders impossible the verification of any would-be objects of a proper count.

In a 2003 *Cineaste* interview, the Dardennes concisely define cinematographic meaning as the shifting relations between bodies (West and West 2003, 15-18). Not only does this materialism betray a distinct debt to Bresson,<sup>3</sup> but it also brings us right back to Deleuze, for whom cinema’s movement-image reduplicates pure objective consciousness prior to the intervention of an individual subject.<sup>4</sup> Unique in this capacity, film adopts a

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Sarah Cooper’s fine article in *Film-Philosophy* 11.2.

<sup>3</sup> For Bresson’s formulation of objectivity in film, see *Notes on Cinematography*. The closing paragraph, for example: ‘DIVINATION—how can one not associate that name with the [...] sublime machines I use for my work [...] [which] carry me away from the [subjective] intelligence that complicates everything’ (Bresson 1977, 72).

<sup>4</sup> In the first two chapters of *Cinema 1*, Deleuze argues that film presents pure movement extracted from bodies or things, flowing matter; the shot, accordingly, functions as the concrete intermediary between the changing whole and a set with parts. As avatar of

principal of universal variation. In its simplest articulation, this maintains that every image is singularly indefinite and indistinguishable from its actions and reactions within an ever-changing image-environment, precluding closure and comprehensive meaning in the name of prolonged transformation. Film's operative principle is one of pure duration - the dynamic interplay of relative movement (the relations between parts) and absolute movement (the state of a changing whole) (Deleuze 1986, 18-24). This 'Whole' of relations, as Deleuze has it, is phenomenologically processed as duration and opposed to any sort of chronological, metered sense of time. Duration 'is in no way indivisible, but that which cannot be divided without changing in nature at each division' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 483). In short, the concept of the movement-image, as the diagonal entwining of time and space, delineates the potential for film to 'occupy without counting': a double-edged occupation, of both screen surface and spectatorial attention, realised without imposing linearity or affording semantic closure with each passing shot. The meaning of each object, image, or body constantly transforms well beyond its immediate presentation, crisscrossing affectively to become a 'properly rhythmic' Whole. As a topographic exploration of such 'occupation,' cinematographic studies might, in turn, become a sort of 'nomad science' whose variables remain in a state of continuous variation and whose objectives remain committed to a Deleuzian ontology of the virtual and the intensive.<sup>5</sup>

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One particularly distinctive feature of the Dardennes' raw aesthetic is the staggering length of many of their shots. In *The Son* (*Le Fils* 2002), for example,

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reality, cinema operates according to the formula: movement as mobile section / qualitative change (Deleuze 1986, 1-28).

<sup>5</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari's chapter on nomadology in *A Thousand Plateaus*, wherein 'Nomad' or 'minor science' 'operates in an open space throughout which thing-flows are distributed, rather than plotting out a closed space for linear and solid things. It is the difference between a *smooth* space and a *striated* space' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 361). For a thorough explication of nomad science and virtual/intensive ontology, see Bonta and Protevi 2004 and De Landa 2002.

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an in-car shot of the two protagonists, a man and his son's murderer, lasts over five minutes, first sweeping back and forth from a backseat position and then seamlessly switching places with the boy in the passenger seat, a maneuver remarkable for both its aesthetic import and the implied agility of the camera operator. Or the frantic chase scene that opens *Rosetta* (1999), in which the viewer is pulled unblinkingly across a factory floor and then through an adjoining office area with only a single cut along the way. The tension in scenes such as these foments exponentially with each passing frame. Every shot feels as though it has always already surpassed its breaking point. An intensive empathy, founded on vibratory movement alone, draws us into a diegetic world ungoverned by the artful edit. Eschewing the cut whenever possible generates a fluidity that would otherwise give way to a more metered temporality and an increasing discontinuity in bodily relations - a fluidity that lends itself directly to a sort of spectatorial comprehension preceding any overt knowledge of a given situation.

In his seminal work on film theory, Bresson stipulates that the director (or rather, in keeping with his own terminology, the cinematographer) 'bend [...] sense to rhythms' since 'nothing is durable but what is caught up in rhythms' (Bresson 1977, 31). Bresson's sense of rhythm, as it appears in both his writings and films, is much akin to the concept of non-counted rhythm that Deleuze and Guattari extrapolate from Boulez's serialisation of duration and oppose to dogmatic meter in their musical model of smooth space.

Meter, whether regular or not, assumes a coded form whose unit of measure may vary, but in a noncommunicating milieu, whereas rhythm is the Unequal or the Incommensurable that is always undergoing transcoding. Meter is dogmatic, but rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments, or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another. It does not operate in a homogeneous space-time, but by heterogeneous blocks. It changes direction [and] [...] is never on the same plane as that which has rhythm (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 313).

As the Dardennes' more recent films demonstrate, 'a work is always the creation of a new space-time' (Deleuze 2006, 289). Freed from the extradiegetic music that all-too-frequently correlates directly to cutting patterns in contemporary cinema, movement-images assemble rhythms internally, out of the continuously varying relations between the material elements on the screen. Like Dziga Vertov's *kino-ear*, the camera here functions as a cinematographic consciousness on its way to establishing 'a new space-time' through the whole of its circumscription.

Movement, obviously, is key, and the Dardennes have capitalised on this point perhaps more than any of their contemporaries. Both their camera and their characters exist in a state of permanent unrest. We see a world through the non-rational I of a handheld camera that seems to tremble every step of the way, leaving us with a radically destabilised viewing position whose spatial proximity to its objects remains all too close yet in constant flux.

An infrequency of cuts preserves, through continuous movement, a shared image-space anterior to separation. Accordingly, the Dardennes work to undermine the shot-reverse shot convention that has determined cinematic ontology since the classical era. Purely objective, the eye of their camera never allows us to see from the perspective of a particular character. This is perhaps most obvious in *The Son*, where we most often observe Olivier from behind as he observes something farther on, just out of our line of sight. The vision-machine is no longer a transparent entity that sees-as - no longer a vehicle for the presentation of singular points-of-view. Rather than cut back and forth between two speaking subjects, the Dardennes' camera - always already there - affectively triangulates a given scene and, along the way, reveals a spatial alterity *between* those subjects concealed by the classical shot-reverse shot form. This between-ness - this space of relations catalytic to the cinematographically smooth - is precisely the site of spectatorial affection; permeated by the whole of a scene rather than mere edited parts, the viewer endures the same franticness and intensity that propel the image-event, caught up in the rhythm of a new space-time.

3.

To repeat: 'In a smooth space-time one occupies without counting, whereas in a striated space-time one counts in order to occupy.' Since we have sufficiently gone over how the Dardennes foreground the former by keeping both camera and characters in perpetual motion, I would like to turn to some explicit representations of smoothness and striation that manifest in their films. The most obvious of these is perhaps their bleak vision of urban space that serves not so much as a backdrop but as an enveloping mood. Characters therein must confront the many physical striations that underpin the normalised flow of the city. Exemplifying this point, *The Promise* (*La Promesse* 1996), *Rosetta*, and *The Child* (*L'Enfant* 2005) each feature similar images of their respective protagonists methodically (and with a degree of difficulty) crossing a four-lane highway that serves to separate out the less desirable areas from those more readily harnessed for economic production.

The more critical dissection of space in their films takes two distinct forms; the first is character-based and has to do with the unsanctioned appropriation and improper use of spaces that otherwise belong to the properly striated city. We should note the obvious applicability of Deleuzoguattarian *deterritorialisation*, most concisely defined as 'the operation of the line of flight [...] by which 'one' leaves the territory' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 508). To deterritorialise is to expose that which has been statistically counted to an indeterminate open. Enter the Dardennean protagonist: a patently nomadic figure, constitutionally inseparable from some radically transformative event: '[He] distributes himself in a smooth space; he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principle' (ibid., 381).<sup>6</sup> In short, the metered city, occupied by the nomad, becomes smooth, permeable, and desegregated;

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<sup>6</sup> And a bit further on: 'The nomad can be called Deterritorialization par excellence.' 'With the nomad [...] it is deterritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorializes on deterritorialization itself. It is the earth that deterritorializes itself, in a way that provides the nomad with a territory.' We should note that substituting 'city' for 'earth' should make what the Dardennes are doing all the more clear.

distinctions between habitable and inhabitable dissolve; spaces othered by normative social activity no longer go unseen. Many images come to mind: Bruno, whose childish persona positions him as the title character of *The Child*, intermittently squats in an abandoned work shed along a contaminated river. In *The Promise*, an illegal African immigrant in an interim labor camp creates a barnyard in the midst of an urban construction site, transposing her native rituals over new territory. The same film shows us fifteen year-old Igor; upon entering into the promise around which the film revolves, he slowly becomes itinerant himself, exchanging the signifiers of his stability (the ring to match his father's, the key to his go-kart) for the safekeeping of the aforementioned immigrant and her infant son.<sup>7</sup> The entire second half of the film, in fact, depicts the protagonist and his charges in constant transit, occupying a space-time characterised as purely in-between.

A second predominant mode in which the Dardennes encounter issues of spatiality involves the critical opposition of regulated and free-flowing movements - of people, of capital, etc. Their films present striated disciplinary spaces - prisons, workshops, factories - on one hand, and, on the other, smooth spaces more conducive to transit or more open to unforeseeable potential; the first type is embedded in normativity, whereas the second evades socioeconomic categorisation. Cinematographically speaking, the Dardennes affirm the Bressonian conviction that 'the sight of movement gives happiness' (Bresson 1977, 34). Their penchant for vehicular tracking shots borders on obsession. The recurring image of Jérémie Renier cutting through the city on a bike (in *The Promise* and then again in *The Child*) provides a concrete link between their earliest and most recent major works, invoking a figurative line of flight from urban striations. Vehicles themselves embody potential movement and, as such, figure heavily in the Dardennean idiom; a definitive empowerment accompanies the ability to travel, as we see in *The Promise* when Igor steals his father's van, or in *The Child* when Bruno and Steve procure the scooter

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<sup>7</sup> We recall that they even seek unauthorised refuge in a mechanic's garage known to go unoccupied on weekends.

necessary to their criminal enterprise. Even the stationary mobile home 'caravan' in *Rosetta* hints at a nomadic potential not yet actualised.

4.

Through editorial restraint, objective camera positions, nomadically inclined protagonists, and recurring images of transportation, the Dardennean project makes present the becoming-smooth of both urban and cinematic striated space-time. The most immediately visible effects of this process entail a revelatory contact with various zones of alterity - people and sites that for one reason or another are excluded from the normative systems of either urban activity or classical cinema. Depicting workers' struggles in their native Seraing, the Dardennes' early documentary shorts commence this trajectory; from the very start we see how the cinema-space gives voice to the concerns of those who cannot properly be heard, those who do not count.<sup>8</sup>

But this is the most rudimentary manifestation of their affair with alterity. Beginning with *The Promise*, cinematography itself explicitly enters into the fray. The space *between* subjects, which is customarily repressed through shot-reverse shot separation, is weighed and treated by the Dardennes in a manner generally reserved for the framed space of the speaking subject. Their cinema thinks, as it were, in relation to territory rather than subject-object categories. Likewise, the *out-of-field* - sets of sound-images whose elements are not enclosed in the shot - is granted the affective capacity of the shot once musical scoring is stripped away. Deleuze most presciently defines the concept as 'what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present' - 'a more radical elsewhere subsisting outside homogenous space and time' (Deleuze 1986, 16-17). So many critical events, in these films, occur just beyond the frame: the child-for-cash exchange in *The Child*, for example, or Amidu's fatal fall and the arrest of the illegal migrants in *The Promise*. Off-screen sound-images, for the Dardennes, not only assist the movement-image in the construction of

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<sup>8</sup> For a brief discussion of their early documentary projects, see Andrews 2006.

rhythms, but also generate emotional responses more natural and thus more arresting than those constructed by an invasive, extra-diegetic soundtrack.

One final sense of alterity, this time in the form of behavioral undecidability, is central to the Dardennes' cinema: the constant awareness that things could always have been otherwise. Upon a first screening of *The Son*, we look at Olivier over Francois's shoulder with the sense that he will avenge the murder of his son; at any time, in fact, it seems he may kill the boy, just as Rosetta may at any time kill herself or Igor may at any time break his promise. The Dardennean protagonist, it seems, eternally threatens to spill over into and thereby create a wholly other world. With no grounding information, we are introduced to her rhizomatically, as it were - that is, in the middle of a life-changing event wherein each decisive action and reaction will determine the configuration of her entire identity-to-be. One familiar with Deleuze's virtual-actual ontological schema should see how it might serve as a helpful framework for our discussion of alterity. Embedded in situations that demand a revolutionary decision at every turn, characters like Rosetta, Igor, Olivier, and Bruno exist for us in an open process of becoming, never fully actualised as counted members of a closed set. In committing such intensive events to film and entering into them devoid of any sort of foreknowledge, the Dardennes affectively map out all possible actions, only to exit with a discomfiting lack of closure, never certain of how to take an ending or of what might happen next.

5.

Dardennean cinematography might be boiled down to two distinct yet intertwined theoretical indices. The first cites Bresson, who concisely delimits 'cinematography film' as 'emotional, not representational' (Bresson 1977, 49).<sup>9</sup> The second brings us back to *A Thousand Plateaus* and the close vision-haptic space couplet that delineates nomad art:

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<sup>9</sup> We might here also refer to his recurring mantra to 'communicate impressions, sensations' rather than 'sense' (42), or his concept of automism, which guards against thought and communicates without the intervention of an intelligence alien to the immediate situation (11-18).

The first aspect of the Haptic, smooth space of close vision is that its orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in continuous variation; it operates step by step [...] Where there is close vision, space is not visual, or rather the eye itself has a Haptic, nonoptical function. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 493-94)

And just pages earlier:

Smooth space is filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things. It is a space of affects, more than one of properties. It is *haptic* rather than optical perception. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 479)

As a sort of hyper-hermeneutics, haptic vision is precisely what the movement-image demands. Whereas optical vision only grasps an image or re-presentation, the eye of haptic vision becomes subject to affect and emotion and the seeing I, in turn, dissolves in a perpetually shifting field of intensities.

Perhaps more striking than any other aspect of the Dardennes' cinematographic style is the intense proximity between the camera and its object. As *The Son* opens, the credits roll over an abstract image. As the shot slowly pulls out, this fuzzy aggregate of darkness and light is revealed to have been an extreme close-up of Olivier's tool belt. The tighter the zoom, the less sense we are able to make of the object and the more we must rely on our purely haptic sensibilities. Positioned too close for reliable optical processing, we must feel our way through the image, as a peculiar sense of sympathy slowly develops out of this unrelenting nearness. Rarely do we see from a distance; events are experienced as purely immanent, devoid of both expository information and visual enframing. We are always late in accessing what lies around corners, behind walls, over shoulders, or through windows. In short, we come wholly emptied and, more often than not, are presented with little more than a face. As Luc Dardenne suggests, 'perhaps filming gestures and very specific, material things is what allows the viewer to sense everything that is spiritual, unseen, and not a part of materiality' (West and West 2003, 17). Rather than what is actualised in an image, close vision-haptic space imparts affects and rhythms that belong more properly to the Deleuzian sphere of virtuality.

Indeed, 'the closer one gets, the more one will be able to feel something invisible' (ibid., 17). The images themselves present without representing, belong as processional material but refuse the staticity required for inclusion in the count.

Close vision-haptic space - the *modus operandi* of nomad art in general and, as I have been arguing, of the Dardennes in particular - assembles individuation by *haecceity* rather than by interrelative subjectivity.

A haecceity [...] is the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate [...] defined by a longitude and a latitude, by speeds and affects, independently of forms and subjects, which belong to another plane [...] Cease to be subjects to become events, in assemblages that are inseparable from an hour, a season, an atmosphere, an air, a life. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 262)

As such, Dardennean characters are always in the process of self-actualisation on account of their being inexorably bound to a transformative event and the environment in which it occurs - lights, sounds, durations, and bodies all caught up in the same movement of becoming. For Deleuze, the non-pulsed, smooth time of the event prohibits reductive models of individuation by continually relating would-be subjects back to an ever-open whole.<sup>10</sup> Becomings, as evidenced in the Dardennes' cinema, remain invisible, never fully realised; their components - not only the protagonists but the work camp in *The Promise*, the "caravan" in *Rosetta*, the highway shack in *The Child* - all exist apart from the official goings on of the state and its formal economy.

'Without counting' here takes on the sense of *not being counted*, of remaining undetermined by political, economic, and social forestructures and thereby retaining an innate revolutionary potential. The de-classed Dardennean anti-hero embodies what John Rajchman calls 'the new poverty' of those denied citizenship in the global marketplace; as both microcosm and guarantor of that marketplace, the city, through a principled striation, 'seeks to

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<sup>10</sup> 'The first determination of non-pulsed time' states that 'there is a certain type of individuation that is not reduced to a subject (I) or even to the combination of a form and a material. A landscape, an event, an hour of the day, a life or a fragment of life... proceed in other ways' (Deleuze 2006, 158).

protect itself from [seeing] this population' (Rajchman 1999, 110). This accounts for the prevalence of black market exchange in *The Promise* and *The Child*; bars, apartments, metros, garages all become reconfigured as potential sites for unsanctioned economic transaction, and new varieties of labor exploitation arise where neoliberal reforms had smoothed over the classical proletariat-bourgeoisie binary.<sup>11</sup> Rosetta, however, seeks something else entirely: a 'normal life' - to *be counted*, socioeconomically. In a particularly revealing scene, she falls asleep intoning an account of her newfound upward mobility. The film itself, though, in its obsessive closeness and stern refusal to divulge character motives or intent, serves to critique this impulse, interested not in the degree to which she achieves her goals but in how she *becomes*, *how* she mobilises her faculties and performs even the most banal tasks to keep afloat. As with the Dardennes' own cinematography, none of her energies go to waste; despite the fact that Rosetta is both a rat and a scab, detestable by all counts, we empathise with her struggle, as intimate observers of her everyday routines.

To conclude, we should return once more to the explorations of alterity that occur in the Dardennes' films. 'With a machine's scrupulous indifference' (Bresson 1977, 14), their camera presents images that an optically inclined human eye cannot grasp on its own. We might name theirs a cinema(tography) of subtraction, in which affects are produced only with the removal of aesthetic superfluities and conventional models of individuation. What remains is a thoroughly affirmationist art which, as coined by Alain Badiou, 'makes an event of what lies at the edge of what is given to perceptual experience'; its essential task is 'to force [a spectator] to see something' that would have otherwise been ignored (Badiou 1999, 144).<sup>12</sup> Through a twofold procedure that smoothes both cinematographic and city space - that is, the spaces of presentation and representation, form and content, alike - the Dardennes' art becomes manifestly affirmationist, a projection of absolute, haecceitic objectivity.

<sup>11</sup> On 'de-classed' characters, see esp. West and West 2003, 17.

<sup>12</sup> In the same article, echoing Bresson, Badiou aptly suggests that the energy of affirmationism is, when successful, entirely *inhuman* (134). Deleuze similarly values art for its capacity to impart an 'expanded perception [that] breaks with the identity to which memory binds it' (Deleuze 2006, 296.).

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## **Filmography**

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