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Reality and Paternity in the Cinema of the Dardennes

I increasingly meet people who don't exist. I don't know where they are (perhaps in their image?), but they are not there. This is a strange society that produces individuals who are not there, who do not exist for others, who do not exist for themselves, for whom nobody exists. At the end of the film, Bruno will exist.

Luc Dardenne, Au dos de nos images, 1991–2005

Something possible, otherwise I will suffocate

Ingrid Bergman, Europa 51

ABSTRACT

The Dardenne brothers' filmic production aims at restoring the missing link between human beings and the world that has been progressively undermined during the ultimate development of late-capitalist society. This contribution deals with their search for a new contact with reality and a concrete belief in the world, focusing on the theme of body and paternity, in the epoch of their evaporation. However, in order to rethink the paternal function in a post-political and post-ideological age, the Dardennes have had to radically come to terms with its ambiguity and oscillation between abandon and adoption, self-preservation and transmission, forgiveness and revenge. With regard to this ambivalence, this contribution focuses on two films by the Dardennes, *LA PROMESSE* (*THE PROMISE*, BE/FR/LU/TN 1996) and *LE FILS* (*THE SON*, BE/FR 2002), which represent significant descriptions of what (the body of) a father is capable of, suggesting, at the same time, interruption and filiation as possible experiences for a new beginning.

KEYWORDS

Dardennes, belief, immanence, paternal function, interruption

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Isabella Guanzini is Professor for Fundamental Theology at the University of Graz and member of the interdisciplinary research platform "Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society" of the University of Vienna. Her research interests focus on the philosophical reception of Christian categories, the relationship between theology and psychoanalysis, philosophy of religion and aesthetics.

ANTI-GNOSTIC BELIEF IN THE WORLD

Gilles Deleuze maintains that cinema has an essentially “Catholic quality” because of its “special relationship with belief”¹ and its mise-en-scène of the link between human beings and the world. He agrees with Rossellini’s conviction that the less human the world becomes, the more it is cinema’s duty to produce belief in a possible relation between human beings and the world, because everyone is involved in the production of the world. The act of believing unfolds new horizons in history and makes the creation and expansion of life possible, allowing singularities to come together and to build a common world. Consequently, to believe not in a different reality but in a possible relation between subjects and reality, to believe in life, in humanity and in love has to become the main issue of cinema (and of philosophy) for Deleuze.

This belief has collapsed, however, together with the revolutionary faith in a possible transformation of the world. The link between subjects and world has gradually been broken, leaving both in an undefined state of suspicion and suspension.

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. ... The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible, which can only be restored within a faith. Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world. Man is in the world as if in a pure optical and sound situation. The reaction of which man has been dispossessed can be replaced only by belief. Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. ... Restoring our belief in the world – this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad).²

The problem of belief has changed its sense, ceding place to a still more urgent question that has surfaced. The new problem seems, at first, not to be related to believing or not believing in God, but rather to believing in this world and in this life in all its possibilities, intensities and movements. It is the question of believing in the immanent quality of the material world, in its infinitely productive, connective and affective tension in view of a possible “production of the common”.³ The exhaustion and lassitude of this belief deprive subjects of their capability to encounter the world, to sustain experiences, to react to everyday violence and to respond to events in order to transform them. The modern suspicion and mistrust of the world continue to permeate the relations between experience and subject, deconstructing the physical presence and the

1 Deleuze 1997, 171.

2 Deleuze 1997, 171–172.

3 Hardt/Negri 2004, 196–202.

disruptive weight of life, love and death. In this way, believing in the world has become the most difficult task, which has to catalyse the present possibility of thought and narration, since it is for Deleuze the problem of thought and narration.

This intense search for the possibility to maintain a relation with the world and perpetuate life despite the intolerability of the world – or *because of the intolerability of the world* – seems to characterise the Dardennes' cinema as well. According to Luc Dardenne, "What is more important for a film is to reconstruct some human experience. That is a shock, due to the absence of such an experience in our present."⁴ The Dardennes resist the "destruction of experience"⁵ and memory that affect the post-political micro-society of the disaffected, sub-urban Belgian community, representing its acute crisis of conscience and action.⁶ They describe the expropriation and the marginalised life of discarded singularities in a world in which experience has transformed into something unbearable. Their films aim to offer the tactile and raw substance of the actual world that appears to be dominated by the reifying ultimate development of the consumer society, in which "all that is solid melts into air".⁷

By means of their disruptive and de-aestheticised realism, the Dardennes seek to reconstruct a possible consistency of experience within the brutal dispositif of post-industrial society. However, the missing link between subjects and the world cannot be replaced by knowledge, a dream state, morality or the faith in another world, but by a fundamental belief in this world and in its materiality. The films of the Dardennes represent the hopeful search for the signs of humanity within the deterritorialised scenery of Seraing and Cockerill in the Walloon region. Here they observe closed factories, depopulated districts, post-apocalyptic atmospheres, under- or unemployed people and exploited illegal migrants – the stigmata of late-capitalistic society. In *LA PROMESSE* (THE PROMISE, BE/FR/LU/TN 1996), young Igor does not resign himself to this wasted underworld, but gradually reacts to this inhumanity, breaking its perverse circle through his hope for another future. In *ROSETTA* (FR/BE 1999) the 17-year-old resilient Rosetta continues to struggle to find a job and some glimmer of identity despite the degradation and exhaustion of her familial and social milieu.⁸

4 Dardenne 2009, 7 (my own translation throughout the article).

5 Agamben 1993, 11–16.

6 "Why does this land refuse to watch itself? What do they fear? Why do they have this contempt of social life, of history? Why do they escape toward something called 'imaginary'? It is symptomatic that nobody has made a film on the deportation in camps of twenty-five thousand Jews" (Dardenne 2009, 35).

7 Marx/Engels 1992, 6.

8 Through "her story, which Luc calls the 'portrait of an époque', the film taps into the employment malaise of 1990s Europe. ... In 1998, the year *Rosetta* was shot, more than half of Belgians under 25 years old had not found a job six months after finishing their schooling, with the worst numbers in French-speaking Wallonia" (Mai 2010, 65–66).

She continues to believe in the world, stubbornly seeking to escape the destiny of abjection and affliction that wounds her mother's experience. In a very frantic and disturbing scene, Rosetta chases her dysfunctional mother, a long-term alcoholic, through the desolate landscape of the campsite where they live in order to convince her to join a rehabilitation centre:

Mother: I don't want to go out! Leave me alone!

Rosetta: Come on. It's the only way out of it. They'll look after you.

Mother: I don't want out of it.

During the struggle with her mother, Rosetta falls into the lake near the campsite, crying desperately for help. During her distressed attempt to extricate herself from the muddy water, her mother simply goes away, abandoning her to the possibility of death. Despite the unbearable fatigue and dereliction of Rosetta's life, she resists, believing in her dignity and struggling for her future.

Their "responsible realism"⁹ is the expression of the Dardennes' obstinate adherence to reality and belief in this world, its materiality and its weight. According to Luc Dardenne, "We have lost touch with reality, we have become unable to produce, to tell, to show reality. We have never been so lonely, confused in madness as such, dismayed in a world that has the consistence of a fantasy. This situation distresses us terribly."¹⁰ With their refusal of aestheticism, the Dardennes seek to recreate a relation with raw reality in all its intensity and violence, which the camera simply tries to follow and to show, as if the camera itself does not know what exactly could happen.

Starting from this "secret agreement" ("eine geheime Verabredung"¹¹) between Deleuze and the Dardennes' filmic perspective, this contribution aims, on the one hand, to emphasise the "discourse of the body" that is the main vehicle of their realism and belief in the world. On the other hand, it seeks to explain the loss of this elementary faith in the consistency of experience by focussing on the topic of paternity and its present decline, a constant question in the Dardennes' films, especially in *THE PROMISE* and in *LE FILS* (*THE SON*, BE/FR 2002). These films – but also *L'ENFANT* (*THE CHILD*, BE 2005) and *LE GAMIN AU VÉLO* (*THE KID WITH A BIKE*, BE/FR/IT 2011) – seem to establish a particular connection between paternity – in all its dimensions – and reality: the lack of the paternal function seems to interfere with the subject's perception of the world and the elementary encounter with the other. From a Lacanian perspective, the symbolic function that the "Name-of-the-Father" supports undergoes a huge transformation process in globalised societies that are increasingly dom-

9 Cf. Mosley 2013.

10 Dardenne 2009, 36.

11 Benjamin 1991, 694.

inated by abstractions. The “discourse of the capitalist”, whose social effects are harshly portrayed in the Dardennes’ stories, weakens the perception of the limit, the power of interdiction and the regulation of desire that characterise the paternal function. Only the encounter with at least one paternal figure, in all its dimensions, ambiguities and inadequacies – Olivier, Hamidou, Bruno and Samantha – seems to make the access to reality, and the belief in it, possible again.

“THE SPIRIT IS A BONE”: THE AFFECTED BODY

Both Deleuze and the Dardennes resist the dissolution of immanence and strive to encounter “a world of captures instead of closures”,¹² which is able to emit signs, disturb automatisms and affect the indolence and drift of their subjects. Luc Dardenne writes, “To go out. To go out simply. To encounter something, someone, a matter, a surface, a foreign, unknown body, I do not know, but to go out of myself, to be reached, touched. I cannot stand to stay inside any more.”¹³

The “new realism” of the Dardennes therefore corresponds not to an aesthetic style but rather to a way of encountering the material substance of the world in the thorough search for the possibility to perpetuate life. To achieve this encounter with the materiality of the world, the cinematographer has to penetrate bodily the texture of reality, like a surgeon who has to feel and cut the skin of the world. In this sense, the perpetuation of life can only be concretely achieved by believing in the body, which is inseparable from its capacity to be affected. The brothers Dardenne are absolutely captured by the question of “what a body is capable of”,¹⁴ by the ensemble of the infinite possible interactions and connections among bodies, since the deserted suburbs of the world – mirror of the global human condition – do not even know what a body can do. Deleuze writes, commenting on Spinoza,

As long as you don’t know what power a body has to be affected, as long as you learn like that, in chance encounters, you will not have the wise life, you will not have wisdom. Knowing what you are capable of. This is not at all a moral question, but above all a physical question, as a question to the body and to the soul. A body has something fundamentally hidden: we could speak of the human species, the human genera, but this won’t tell us what is capable of affecting our body, what is capable of destroying it. The only question is the power of being affected.¹⁵

12 Deleuze 1993, 81.

13 Dardenne 2009, 9.

14 Deleuze 1990, 226.

15 Cf. Deleuze 1978.

Roger and Igor, Assita and Hamidou in *THE PROMISE* (1996), Rosetta and Riquet in *ROSETTA* (1999), Olivier and Francis in *THE SON* (2002), Bruno and Sonia in *THE CHILD* (2005), Lorna, Claudy and Sokol in *LE SILENCE DE LORNA* (*THE SILENCE OF LORNA*, BE/FR/IT/DE 2008), Cyril and Samantha in *THE KID WITH A BIKE* (2011) and Sandra and Manu in *DEUX JOURS, UNE NUIT* (*TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT*, BE/FR/IT 2014) – are able to tell us what a body is capable of: destruction and consolation, responsibility and exploitation, legacy and abjection, murder and adoption, violence and salvation.

Each body – not only the human ones – represents not merely organic or inorganic material, but also the place of an insistence and a hope, from which the belief in life can continue and persist, achieving a possible significance:

But 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. We tend to think that the closer one gets to the cup, to the hand, to the mouth whose lips are drinking, the more one will be able to feel something invisible.¹⁶

Consequently, the Dardennes aim at filming “the letter and not the spirit”, since the spirit can only emerge through filming faces, precise gestures and small things. When in *THE SON* (2002), Olivier teaches Francis the skills of his trade, through his very concrete and even brusque carpenter’s gestures, something else seems to emerge. The closer the camera approaches the different wood grains and the more it focuses on the exact dimensions of Francis’s toolbox or on the robust Olivier’s leather belt, the more a transcendent dimension shines through. The phenomenon of (the spiritual) generation here seems to gain its consistency from the very materiality of the world: paternity and filiation occur progressively through the oiling of a measuring stick, through the recognising of different types of wood, through a final dramatic struggle between two bodies that does not end in tragedy. In their films “the spirit is a bone”:¹⁷ it is precisely by maintaining the contact with the letter, with the material, that the spirit acquires depth and consistency, preventing the body itself from becoming invisible. So long as Rosetta is keeping contact with her rudimentary world of objects – the broken bottle with which she catches fish on the marshy riverbank, or her pair of boots, which she stores in an unused drainpipe in the woods – she can resiliently but precariously continue to survive, preventing the loss of the last scraps of her humanity. In a similar way, Assita’s nylon shopping bag, which she always carries with her and which contains everything she owns, seems to be the materialisation of her whole biography and memory, her soul. In the material and texture of this cheap, striped object on which the camera fo-

16 West/West 2009, 132.

17 Hegel 1977, 336–340.

cuses, her spirit appears. At the same time, this object leaves marks and traces of its passage in the viewer's memory like notches in wood.

Faith can have no object but the world and the body in its bare and material presence: this corresponds to an ethical or religious need to believe in this world and to bear witness to life, before words, discourses and symbols. "Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world", writes Deleuze.¹⁸ The curt, hard tone of the Dardennes' cinema does not offer convenient symbolic resolutions in order to give words back to the body as the source of experience and seed of life. The discourse of knowledge, of the revolutionary and the philosopher and of the anarcho-syndicalism have been substituted by the "discourse of the body",¹⁹ as an anti-Gnostic "testimonial discourse"²⁰ that demands an "acute awareness of a need for both individual and collective responsibility in human relation".²¹ In this way the Dardennes avoid any imaginary participation, narcissistic projection and immediate compassion,²² exposing the viewer to the encounter with the Real (in the Lacanian sense) and its traumatic disturbance, which cannot be spoken but only expressed by physical bodies, faces, places and sounds.

In the proximity of things, among bodies, the Dardennes find a presence of humanity: "a fire, a heat that irradiates, that burns and isolates from the sad cold, which reigns in the void, in the exaggeratingly big void of life. It is our way not to despair, to continue to believe."²³ To forget ideas and to restore the belief in these faces, bodies, places and sounds as they are, in their cruelty and beauty, before or beyond words, is one of the main tasks of the Dardennes' cinema.

Something happened that has made this restoration necessary: something that deals with paternity and its evaporation within the Belgian social field as sign of the (post-ideological) times.

WHAT REMAINS OF THE FATHER?

The Dardennes reflect a deep concern for the marginalised and distressed characters of the broken world of Seraing, which becomes the symbol of the globalised, depleted and deserted post-industrial landscape. They describe the ultimate consequences of the "discourse of the capitalist",²⁴ which dominates the

¹⁸ Deleuze 1997, 172.

¹⁹ "Artaud said the same thing, believe in the *flesh*: 'I am a man who has lost his life and is searching by all means possible to make it regain its place'" (Deleuze 1997, 173).

²⁰ Mosley 2013, 2.

²¹ Mosley 2013, 2.

²² "Narcissus has never felt so beautiful as when he can despair of himself" (Dardenne 2009, 127).

²³ Dardenne 2009, 102.

²⁴ Lacan elaborated his four discourses after the political events in France of 1968 in the seminar

present world order and is organised around objects and no longer subjects, dissolving certainties and basic orientations and weakening the fundamental trust in the world.

They suggest a profound connection between the general disorientation of their characters – who seem to act without being able to explain why – and the neglected fabric of late-capitalist working-class life. In their films, human beings seem to emerge from symbolic, ideological, political and physical ruins and to resiliently resist their own ultimate collapse. They describe the intolerable human condition of the post-movement and post-ideological globalised post-working class, which has metabolised its defeat and abandoned any utopian revolution.²⁵

It is true that our characters belong to the working class or at least to what used to be the working class. You might say that Roger in *La Promesse* is *déclassé*, a man who no longer belongs to a class. He does not have a job, although we can guess that he once did have a job ... The working class is no longer the working class. It is no longer structured as it was at the beginning of the last century. We are truly at the end of an age, of industry, of what we have known for a hundred years.²⁶

The geo-aesthetic scenery informs and determines the development of the characters, who attempt to cope with this destructured social reality every day, trying to survive and to find a way out of the suffocating bubble of the global world. The Dardennes show that within capitalistic discourse, the subjects are reduced to instrumental bodies in the production circuit, which does not allow any exteriority, exception or ideals. Thus, the legitimacy and efficiency of any master figure is undermined, together with any other symbolic mandate necessary to determine the identity of the subjects. “In such times you see people who are a bit lost, who try to live by exploiting those worse off than they”.²⁷ Consequently, the Dardennes suggest that capitalist discourse systematically dissolves otherness, inter-subjectivity and sociability, producing subjects who are no longer named by anyone but only by themselves.

The Dardennes’ characters testify to the decline of the symbolic order of industrial society and its enemies, together with the evaporation of the Name-of-the-Father as a sign of symbolic investiture,²⁸ of a possible orientation, even a fragile filiation. In this way, they show the consequences of the dissolution of the paternal function, connecting it with the trick of capitalistic reason that

L’envers de la psychanalyse. In a conference in Milan in 1972, he introduced the “Discourse of the capitalist” as the “cleverest discourse that we have made”, which corresponds to the main language of post-industrial society (Lacan 1978, 11).

25 Cf. Zonta 2005, 63–64.

26 West/West 2009, 132.

27 West/West 2009, 132.

28 Cf. Santner 2001.

takes advantage of the diffused dismay of the subjects and forecloses every relation with law, limit and authority (Lacan would call it “castration”²⁹) by promising the subject the “phantom of liberty” and self-realisation.

The brothers Dardenne ask about what remains of the Father in the epoch of his evaporation³⁰ and in the time of his irrevocable decline, in order to at least leave this “territory” empty (and therefore still existing). Luc Dardenne records, “The cinema addresses something that does not exist anymore, the void, the nothing, the Other, who is never there. Without the Other, we would eat the flesh of those too similar to us, we would drink their blood. We would be sated by the heart of our reality. God is dead. The place is empty. And above all it must not be occupied.”³¹ They aim neither at re-establishing a new patriarchy, nor at proclaiming the inexorable disappearance of the father, but attempt to come to terms with his death and the possibility of inheriting at least the paternal desire, without regret or deconstructive nihilism.

Roger and Igor and Olivier and Francis (as well as Bruno with Jimmy and Samantha with Cyril) embody extreme experiences of the son-father relationship, which enlighten the traumatic deadlock in the encounter between generations, against the human background of a general difficulty with communication.

As *La Promesse* suggests, we feel that these days it is as if we adults no longer want to die to allow the generation coming after us to live. In order to educate someone, you have to know how to die so that he or she can live; so that, simply put, they can take your place. We adults want to be immortal, we want not to die. Somehow it is as if, when all is said and done, we have this desire to eat our children, like the Greek god, Chronos.³²

In this sense, they suggest that the social issue has to be linked to a major theme of their films, namely the question of relationships and the anti-pedagogical problem of paternal vocation. What does it mean to be a father in the time of the evaporation of every symbolic function? What does “to inherit” mean in the epoch of the death of the father, or in the time of Chronos, who kills his children? In economically deserted societies, where families dissolve, fathers are no longer able to transmit a legacy, but are even willing to kill or prevent their sons from living effectively.

29 The Lacanian notion of castration (or castration complex) deals fundamentally with the child's encounter with the law and prohibition, that is its acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father and the consequent entry into the symbolic order. It involves the primordial loss of an original *jouissance* (the loss of the breast during weaning), namely the primordial interruption of the child's symbiosis with the mother. Castration then represents a submission to the Name-of-the-Father as the founding signifier who marks the child symbolically, allowing the son to be named by the Other and consequently to accede to desire. Cf. Lacan 1938; Lacan 1999, 219.

30 Cf. Recalcati 2011.

31 Dardenne 2009, 14; cf. Recalcati 2011, 11–23.

32 West/West 2009, 126.

THE PROMISE (1996) is the *mise-en-scène* of this dramatic impasse to generate something that lasts, to transmit a legacy that could induce belief in the world, the other and the future. Roger seems to correspond to the “father of the primal horde” whom Freud portrayed in *Totem and Taboo*:³³ omnipotent, pitiless, incestuous, beyond every law and controlling bare bodies. The symbolic function of the father is degraded here to its imaginary semblance, which dissolves every asymmetric dialectic and pursues an ambiguous and symbiotic commitment to illegal business, surrogate sexuality and deceptive intimacy. Igor’s imaginary relationship with his father has to be interrupted; the unlimited power of the totemic figure of his father must be disturbed in order to offer the son the possibility to disentangle himself from the undifferentiated, wordless morass of the paternal *jouissance*. Igor has to experience exile in order to reach a humanised life where only the encounter with the face of the other can generate a different destiny.

CHRONOS AND KAIROS

The dying body of the Burkinabe Hamidou, who fell down from a scaffold and whom Igor tries to save by tying his belt around his injured leg, represents his *kairos*, the insurgence of an imminence, a crisis, a decisive moment that significantly occurs and informs Igor’s consciousness.³⁴ Hamidou’s last words and breaths, with which he pleads with Igor to take care of his wife, Assita, and of his little son, Tiga, after his death, demand a response that will determine the humanisation of Igor’s experience, generating in him a new awareness of his existing body in a broader human constellation. In assuming his responsibility towards Hamidou, Igor radically contrasts the decision of his father to leave Hamidou to die. With his promise, Igor keeps him alive and begins to actually live himself. The *perpetuum mobile* of Chronos, who reduces everything to a knowable and expendable sameness, not allowing any encounter with singularities and exteriorities, is interrupted by the mysterious force of an urgent *interpellation*, which calls the subject from the outside, endowing him/her with a new symbolic responsibility. This demand from the Other must be primarily interpreted not as the awakening of compassion and piety, but as a provocative and traumatic presence, which breaks Igor’s imaginary and morbid rela-

33 Cf. Freud 1990.

34 In ancient Greek rhetoric, the word *kairos* originally designated the “proper time”, or “opportune moment” for an action or a ritual performance. The New Testament notion of *kairos* deals with the meaning of history in the moment of its qualitative fulfilment. Paul uses the term *kairos* to indicate what the Judaic tradition called “messianic time”. *Kairos* is God’s time, which contrasts with the human understanding of time as *chronos* in its progressive linearity and automatism. For Paul Tillich, time as *kairos* is the “moment at which history has matured to the point of being able to receive the breakthrough of the manifestation of God” (Tillich 1963, 369).

tionship with his father/semblance. Luc Dardenne writes in his diary, “There is something heavy, oppressing in existence. From here the irrepressible need for a break, an outside, emerges. A request for air is radiated with all our gazes, by all our words, by all our faces, by all our oppressed bodies. Extreme need for something that does not exist. Our epoch has serious breathing problems.”³⁵ The Dardennes seem to continuously struggle against the bubble that suffocates and de-humanises subjects and does not allow them to breathe, trying to tear its thickness through the hard materiality of the bodies of strangers.

In the *kairos* of Hamidou’s request, together with his gradual encounter with Assita’s mysterious face, body and gestures, Igor experiences a new beginning and a new birth that is a resurrection: “The resurrection of bodies. Why of the bodies? Because only the body can die and consequently only the body can be resurrected. And since only the body can be filmed, there is a relation between cinema and resurrection. It is an idiotic consideration, but it continues to amaze me.”³⁶ Here, resurrection represents the possibility of interruption and a new beginning and the unpredictable emergence of *kairos* as a propitious time for decision and action in contrast to the deathly repetition of the same. The father of the horde (as identified by Freud) has to be abandoned in order to open a new humanised horizon. At the end of *THE PROMISE* (1996), when Igor wants to confess the truth about Assita’s husband, Roger reacts violently and the relationship between father and son comes to an end. Igor chains his father’s foot to a block in order to prevent Roger from hitting him and to permit Assita to escape. The father assumes the figure of an enchained animal, who wriggles trying to release himself from his cage.

Roger: Igor let me loose! In God’s name, let me loose! Come here! Come here and let me loose! Tell her I’ve got the money for her return. All she wants. I’m begging you. Wait! I’ll give her this. She can go where she wants. Just let me loose. What do you want to tell her? What’ll it serve? She leaves, we never talk about it again. Give me my glasses, at least. The house. It’s for you. I did everything for you. Only you. You are my son.

Igor: Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

Roger: Give me my glasses and let me loose. I’m your father. You can’t do this. Let me go, Igor, I’m begging you.

Igor leaves his chained father alone and accompanies Assita towards her undetermined future.

In *The Human Condition*, which Luc Dardenne was reading during the shooting of *ROSETTA* (1999), Hannah Arendt very clearly affirms this necessary qual-

³⁵ Dardenne 2009, 32.

³⁶ Dardenne 2009, 60.

ity of action as the interruption of automatic processes: “The life span of man, running toward death, would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.”³⁷ In this sense, the demand/interpellation interferes with the inhuman cycle of corruption, exploitation and murder, so that human affairs are not entirely abandoned to despair and ruin. In the time of the crisis of symbolic investiture, the Dardennes believe in the possibility for subjects to be called and named: only through this process are they able to begin a new course of (ethical) life. The Dardennes aim to film “the appearance of the human, to grasp the passage of goodness in the simple human trade”.³⁸ They passionately wait with their body-camera for this contingent, eventual transition into human life, as if they were not perfectly conscious that it could really occur.

Furthermore, in the Dardennes’ films, the *kairos* seems to be fundamentally related to the encounter with the other, namely with a symbolic father. Within these devastated human constellations, they obsessively focus on the possibility to meet at least a father – Hamidou, Assita, Olivier, Riquet, Samantha, etc. – to encounter an exteriority, to experience a moral debt, to be interrupted by a law or by the face of the Other, who comes from the outside.

On Bruno’s way there is the law as well. Bruno does not change thanks only to Sonia’s love. He needs to experience something that allows the law to begin to exist for him, that things could gain weight, that he could finally be there, be blocked, be in debt, that he could see for the first time what he has done, finally able to say: “It’s me”.³⁹

Such a revelation seems to occur even outside the plot, beyond the narration, through the real encounter between bodies and faces. The camera follows the various forms of contact among the actors “from behind”, as if any abstract and previous frame could not determine and enclose characters, with the action being generated by their movements, encounters and sudden decisions. It is something that cannot be defined since it is something that ties two bodies together, forbidding them not only to disappear, but also to find their place, to rest; that is, they must remember to exist. Life realistically appears in continuous movement that cannot be simply fixed or represented in its occurrence. It remains open to the possibility of a new beginning. Consequently, revelation

37 Arendt 1998, 246.

38 Dardenne 2009, 45.

39 Dardenne 2009, 121. “We have to forget Dostoevskij’s Sonia. Sonia is a woman’s body, an erotic nature. But we have to remember Dostoevskij’s Sonia as well, because Sonia’s erotic nature is not enough to provoke Bruno’s conversion” (Dardenne 2009, 121).

is something in the Dardennes' films that can break the sphere, allowing the viewer to breathe as well.

In this perspective, the "anti-pedagogical" possibility of a father – or of the rest of the father – appears to be crucial, with all its ambiguities and consequences. Furthermore, Roger has to be abandoned so that Igor can have a destiny and hope; Bruno has to meet an external injunction – both of love and of law – in order to begin something new; Olivier has to come to terms with his internal dramatic struggle with Francis, who killed his young son, in order to be a father again.

PROMISING AND FORGIVING AGAIN

"What does being human mean today? To view as human beings, not in general, but in the concrete and extreme situations that the present society generates", asks Luc Dardenne.⁴⁰ The Dardennes are deeply convinced that there is a necessary link between humanisation and filiation. If this link is weakened, the sense of the community of initiation and destiny, that is, of human life, necessarily becomes barbarised.

The Dardennes show that a father could only really be a father if he does not kill: *THE SON* (2002) represents this last possibility for a father (Olivier) to refuse to kill, even (maybe) becoming the father of his son's murderer (Francis). Olivier's work as a carpentry instructor in a rehabilitation centre for young offenders, with its world of measures, thicknesses and corners, and his involvement in teaching his students and transmitting a trade are not enough to take him outside his obsessions, to let him live again. In order to be able to be a father again, he must not kill Francis, who, at the age of eleven, killed his son. The interdiction against murder appears here as the main possibility for the transference of legacy in the filial relationship. The prohibition of murder has primordially founded human society and has to be continuously transmitted in order to preserve humanity: "It was Olivier who attracted us. We asked ourselves what a human being is and came to the definition that certainly a human being is an individual who succeeds in not killing."⁴¹ This represents what remains of the father in the epoch of his evaporation. Olivier at least breaks the circle of violence and murder: despite his despair and anger, he chooses not to eat the child (as Chronos did) so that the future appears possible. He refuses to kill the murderer of his only son, permitting another outcome of the story. If the experience of filiation actually begins with the transmission of practices and gestures in Olivier's workshop, the very act of paternity takes place in the continuation of life

⁴⁰ Dardenne 2009, 8.

⁴¹ West/West 2009, 127.

beyond the possibility of death. Olivier's success corresponds to the interruption of a repetition, to the release from the prison of his past and to a new beginning in his and Francis' life, without forgetting.

Something happens between Olivier and Francis on a Saturday morning, when the man takes the boy along to a remote lumberyard, both to teach him the different types of wood and to come to terms with the past, the present and the future of his paternity. The drive to the lumberyard, shot from behind, showing the backs of Olivier and Francis's heads, alludes to Abraham and Isaac's dramatic walk to Mount Moriah: the Dardennes present the sorrow and temptation of a father, who has to be a father after the death not only of his son, but also of God.⁴² In the last sequence of the film, after Olivier's revelation that Francis is the murderer of his son, the boy escapes into the woods with the man chasing him. In the end, Olivier catches Francis, and struggling with him, he wraps his hand around his throat and seems to be tempted to kill him. His hesitation, which dramatically expresses his oscillation between recrimination and forgiveness, the desire for revenge and wish for adoption, ends with a long shot of Olivier weeping next to the boy until he disappears among the trees into the woods. Olivier does not have to forgive the murderer, but he must not kill again:

Forgiveness between Olivier and Francis has not to be omnipotent. This does not deal with forgiveness but with the impossibility of murder. How can one not see at the same time forgiveness here as well? We do not know how the end of the film will be, but we do not have to fall into reconciliation, where nobody remains unforgivable. Olivier cannot completely substitute his son. In the film the point is the father and not forgiveness. In not killing Francis, Olivier is the father, who will perhaps permit Francis to reconnect with life.⁴³

This reconnection with life after death – the death of a son, the Father, an illegal immigrant – represents a fundamental issue of the Dardennes' filmic production. It deals with the possibility to reconnect with reality after the end of the grand narratives, after the time of protests and the age of revolutions. They suggest that, at the time of his evaporation, the Name-of-the-Father has to be understood in its whole legacy.⁴⁴ This means that the viewer has come to terms both with the "primordial father of the horde" (Roger), who teaches his son to lie, steal and kill, and with the "father of work" (Olivier), who tries to remain a father, oscillating between revenge and forgiveness.

In both cases, it is not possible to encounter the father face-to-face but only from behind or by catching glimpses of his gaze between his glasses and his

42 "How can we inherit meaning from our childhood Bible readings when God can no longer be found?" (Dardenne 2008, 19). See Mai 2010, 94.

43 Dardenne 2009, 85.

44 Dardenne 2009, 76.

eyes. The Dardennes' body-camera shows the unbearable tension that accompanies Olivier's movements towards Francis and their common past by following him from behind, showing his back and neck in extreme close-ups. This view from behind emphasises the opacity of his experience, allowing at the same time a close proximity, as if his whole broken history was to appear like an indelible inscription on his back. Moreover, the constant motion of the camera, focussing on Olivier's back, gives the viewer the unsettling impression that anything could happen, accentuating the character's unpredictability and ambiguity. Luc Dardenne recorded, "To film the back. The human enigma, that is situated in the obscurity of the back. The great ellipse".⁴⁵

The Dardennes suggest that what remains of the father is this great ellipse of his back: what remains are the invisible signifiers that have marked his existence and are now inscribed on his back, like notches in the wood of his carpentry, which only the viewer can grasp as they see his oscillation between forgiveness and revenge, promise and removal, abandon and adoption. Only the promise or forgiveness – as the Dardennes, together with Hannah Arendt, seem to suggest – can unexpectedly decide between life and death, interrupting life's natural tendency to ruin and allowing concrete belief in the world. Promise and forgiveness destabilise the automaton and the irreversibility of destiny by releasing the subject from the unbearable consequences of morbid action and by connecting subjects in a new common destination. Promise and forgiveness both deal with temporality: the promise aims at establishing a new relation between life and future, while forgiveness seeks to look backwards into the past, interrupting the burden of guilt and generating reconciliation with the unforgivable. They both come to terms with the oppressive irreversibility of repetition, enabling subjects to tear down the walls of the sphere that encapsulates them and to go outside. As Arendt claims,

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart.⁴⁶

It is important to underline that promise and forgiveness depend on the presence of the Other – the Dardennes would say of a father – since nobody can forgive themselves and nobody can bind themselves by a promise alone. In this

45 Dardenne 2009, 95.

46 Arendt 1998, 237.

sense, both Arendt and the Dardennes suggest the necessity of plurality and proximity, not in order to reconcile the irreconcilable, but to fight against the loss of belief and trust in human beings. They both fight “against that falsely lucid thought according to which all human efforts and all human action are useless”.⁴⁷

If it is true, as Deleuze argues, that “restoring our belief in the world” should be the “power of modern cinema”,⁴⁸ the Dardennes seem to correspond with this anthropological, ontological and even religious purpose. One could refer for example to Moses, who wanted to see the glory of the Father, but could only grasp His passage: “And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (Exod. 33:21–23). In the cinema of the Dardennes, the fathers are often encountered from the back as well, in all their corporeality, efforts, ambiguity and exposure. The back seems to represent here what remains of the father today, before he passes away again.

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47 Dardenne 2009, 28.

48 Deleuze 1997, 172.

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