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Realistic Humanism

Luc Dardenne as a Philosopher and Filmmaker

ABSTRACT

Luc Dardenne is not only a successful filmmaker together with his brother Jean-Pierre. He is also a stimulating philosopher who has reflected on the influence of Emmanuel Levinas on the brothers' cinematic work. This article shows typical constellations of film and philosophy and focuses on the special contribution of a Levinasian perspective on face-to-face encounters, violence and compassion as central topics in the films of the Dardennes. Luc Dardenne has developed his philosophical approach in his diaries and in the essay *The Human Affair*, published in 2012. This text can be used as a key for an understanding of the film *LE GAMIN AU VÉLO* (THE KID WITH A BIKE, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, FR/BE/IT 2011).

KEYWORDS

humanism, realism, responsibility, Levinas, moral philosophy, aesthetics

BIOGRAPHY

Walter Lesch is Professor of Ethics at the Université catholique de Louvain in Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium). The main focus of his research is social ethics (at the Faculty of Theology) and moral philosophy (at the Institute of Philosophy). His areas of interest are fundamental issues of ethics, political philosophy (especially questions concerning migration), gender studies in the context of religion, and representations of religious phenomena in the media.

In his book on the Dardenne brothers, Philip Mosley puts in a nutshell the complexity of their carefully constructed artistic and cinematic work, which he characterises appropriately as an expression of “responsible realism”.¹ This emphasises the realistic dimension of the brothers' achievement that should not be misunderstood as a unilateral celebration of social misery and marginalisation. One of the signatures of today's reality is the films' setting, the suburban land-

1 Mosley 2013. See also Mai 2010.

scape of an old industrial region in Wallonia,² an area where people have to cope with the transformation of economy and society. But this does not mean that the films carry an unequivocal ideological message of committed art. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne are interested in individuals as they really are, with their hopes and fears, ambitions and destructive tendencies. This realism becomes “responsible” because of the directors’ interest in the ethical challenge of facing difficulties and despair without abandoning the necessity of looking for orientation and paths towards a better future. The Dardennes’ characters are often lost in situations of hopelessness and in traumatic experiences,³ but the spectators are invited to follow them as they struggle for dignity and the improvement of their living conditions without any guarantee of success. The characters are neither angels nor demons. They are depicted as more or less restlessly searching people who are trying to make sense of a complicated life without referring to big theories such as philosophical, political or religious traditions.

With the help of a philosophical reading of the films, this article tries to suggest a hermeneutical key that gives access to the notion of “realistic humanism”,⁴ which is, of course, not very far from Mosley’s fully appropriate label of “responsible realism” for the Dardennes’ films. The focus on humanism is inspired by Luc Dardenne’s book *The Human Affair*.⁵ Even though this text does not explicitly make a link to the entirety of the films, it can be read as the most coherent presentation of the sources mentioned in Luc Dardenne’s two published diaries,⁶ which cover the period of the brothers’ activities since the beginning of their shift from documentaries to fiction films.

A preliminary remark is necessary in order to avoid the false impression that Luc Dardenne is the intellectual and Jean-Pierre Dardenne is the more practical part of the duo. On various occasions, they have shown that they are both equally involved in preparing and realising their films – an impressive embodiment of the dialectics of proximity and otherness. The fact is that Luc Dardenne (born in 1954) is a former student of the Institute of Philosophy at the University of Louvain, whereas his brother (born in 1951) studied dramatic arts at the Theatre and Film Academy IAD (*Institut des arts de diffusion*), a college of art founded in 1959 in Brussels and later transferred to Louvain-la-Neuve. As screenwriters for their films, the brothers collaborate closely and are primarily interested in

2 See Dillet/Puri 2013.

3 See Lesch 2013.

4 This expression also refers to the title of Putman’s book (1990), where the notion of realism with a human face implies the epistemological position according to which the world cannot be described from a God’s eye view. Values and facts are entangled and can be accessed only through the communicative action of finite human beings.

5 Dardenne 2012.

6 Dardenne 2005; Dardenne 2015.

the way they want to write their scenarios and work with the crew. Although they do not use a philosophical background as an explicit starting point, the discussion of philosophical and literary references plays an important part in Luc Dardenne's diaries and justifies the spectators' interest in these sources. In an interview with Nathan Reneaud in 2014, Luc Dardenne said, with great understatement, that he was not sure if he could be called a philosopher.⁷ Such cautious self-definition should be used much more often by professional philosophers, who are not always able to produce original philosophical ideas as does Dardenne. In comparison with many academic writers, Luc Dardenne can be considered an independent, profound and convincing thinker, and can therefore legitimately be called a philosopher.

PHILOSOPHY AND FILM: AN OBVIOUS AND COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP

Since the invention of the seventh art, films have regularly attracted philosophers who are fascinated by their powerful representations of reality and by the stimulating imagining of worlds that help the spectators escape their reality. Both tendencies have been present from the very beginning: films are tools of realistic discoveries of the world as it is, and they can function as magical machines of enchantment, entertainment and escapism. Each of these functions is seen as problematic from different points of view. Popular films are often criticised as superficial distractions from the adequate perception of things. Similar controversies are also known in the area of literature and other arts.

Some philosophers look for inspiration in films, and some film directors look for conceptual tools in philosophy. As far as ethical issues are concerned, the American philosopher Stanley Cavell is among the protagonists of a new wave of philosophical investigation of cinema. In his analysis of Hollywood comedies, he coins a term for what he identifies as a specific genre of films: the "comedy of remarriage" that shows the search for happiness by couples as they separate and get together again. Their stories can be read as serious studies of respect for the needs of the other and of the inevitable problems of the naive dream of marital harmony. Known as a filmmaker interested in philosophy, Luc Dardenne has been invited to connect to Cavell's theory,⁸ but the link seems to be less intense than critics inspired by Cavell might have hoped.⁹

7 Cf. Reneaud 2014.

8 Cavell 1981. In his interview with Nathan Reneaud, Luc Dardenne mentions his participation in a seminar about Cavell and admits that he has some difficulty with the author's concepts (Reneaud 2014). See also Dardenne 2015, 180.

9 See Pianezza 2012.

Instead, the Dardenne brothers represent a different approach to the encounter between philosophy and cinema. Their intellectual inspiration comes from the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), who is certainly not known for writing on the cinema, because cinema was not part of his research – on the contrary, Levinas severely criticises art in general. Nevertheless and paradoxically, he has influenced numerous scholars who develop – mostly from the perspective of ethics – the links between his particular philosophical approach and a better understanding of what happens in many films.¹⁰ This strange constellation is even more mysterious when we look at the austerity of Levinasian language, which requires a very careful reading of his sophisticated texts, where no concessions are made to the popular communication of films.¹¹ Nevertheless, the connection between the two discourses has been established because of some powerful visual metaphors in the philosopher's work that unintentionally create a bridge between the visual art of the cinema and the ethical core of abstract writings.

Levinas is one of the great thinkers of the contradictions and catastrophes of the twentieth century. As a Jew born in Kaunas (formerly in Russia, today in Lithuania), he personally experienced the violence of political regimes in the East and West. After his studies in France and Germany, he became a French citizen in 1931 and was a prisoner of the Germans during World War II. Many members of his family were killed by the Nazis. It was the trauma of the Shoah that motivated Levinas to develop a philosophy that tries to understand the crimes of human beings who are capable of the worst. He sees the origin of moral responsibility in the encounter with the other whose face expresses vulnerability and reminds us of the biblical commandment “You shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13). The nakedness of the other person's face reveals the possibility of her destruction as well as recognition of her existence. This visual contact creates a morally relevant connection from which no human being can escape. One person becomes the hostage of the other's demand, without any possibility of hiding from it. It is only the existence of a third-person perspective that helps us arrive at objective rules of justice.

Levinas's prominent use of a vocabulary rooted in optical phenomena in his philosophical ethics has made him a major reference point in the area of film studies. With the powerful *mise-en-scène* of the self chosen by the other in the brutality of being taken hostage, Levinas offers a provocative and highly contro-

10 See Downing/Saxton 2010; Girgus 2010; Lengyel 2015.

11 Levinas's main philosophical concepts can be found in his two major books: Levinas 1969 and Levinas 1978. For a concise and reliable introduction to Levinas's philosophical universe, see Morgan 2011. For a first contact with his major ideas, see Levinas 1985, a dense interview presenting the most relevant topics in an accessible way.

versal way of thinking about concepts like otherness, totality and infinity, and of translating these abstract notions into everyday experiences.

LUC DARDENNE, LOUVAIN AND LEVINAS

The Dardenne brothers, and particularly Luc, have contributed much to the relevance of Levinas in the world of cinema. This is not surprising as Luc's years as a student of philosophy at the University of Louvain¹² put him in touch with this thinker, who is very influential in Louvain intellectual circles because of the long-standing tradition of phenomenological research in the context of the Husserl archives.¹³ In 1976, when Levinas was still less known in France (even though this was the year of his retirement from the Sorbonne), the University of Louvain awarded him an honorary doctorate. Dardenne had the opportunity to meet Levinas when he came to Louvain-la-Neuve in 1980 for a series of lectures on the topic of death and during his time as a visiting professor, when he held the Mercier Chair.

Even if Luc Dardenne mentions other great philosophical writers he admires, especially Cornelius Castoriadis, Ernst Bloch and Hannah Arendt, Levinas has without a doubt influenced him most. Luc approached Levinas in Paris about a documentary on Bloch (not yet realised) and was deeply impressed by their conversation, which opened his eyes to the difficulty of acting as a free and responsible person. When Levinas died in December 1995, the Dardennes were busy with *LA PROMESSE* (*THE PROMISE*, BE/LU/FR 1996), the first film in which they fully apply their very personal style, after a great number of documentaries and two fictional features that they themselves consider failures. In January 1996, Luc Dardenne noted in his diary that Levinas died while they were shooting their film. Without this philosopher's radical interpretation of the face-to-face encounter and the relevance of the human face, they would not have imagined their scenario as they did.¹⁴ In the film, Igor discovers his moral responsibility in the corrupt world of his father, Roger, who rents out apartments to illegal immigrants. One of them, Amidou, has an accident from which he will not recover. Igor promises to take care of his wife, Assita, and their baby. It is the encounter with the injured Amidou's face that allows Igor to find a way out

12 The Catholic University of Louvain was officially split into Dutch-speaking and French-speaking parts in 1968. After the formal separation, the Institute of Philosophy remained in the old Flemish town for one more decade until the final relocation of the Institut supérieur de philosophie to Louvain-la-Neuve in Wallonia in 1978. Luc Dardenne wrote his dissertation for the licentiate degree in 1979, about Castoriadis's *Imaginary Institution of Society*, under the supervision of Jean Ladrière. Dardenne published a detailed review of this book in the *Revue philosophique de Louvain* (Dardenne 1981). The Dardennes were artists in residence at the University of Louvain (UCL) in 2006, and received honorary doctorates at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in 2010.

13 Levinas is one of the authors who introduced Husserl and Heidegger to the French public.

14 Dardenne 2005, 56.

of a world of lies and exploitation and to connect with the different cultural values that shape the life of Amidou's widow. The last scene shows Igor finally telling Assita the truth about her husband's death and confessing his complicity in Roger's ruthless behavior.

The brothers have stuck faithfully to their Levinasian ethics of filmmaking as their international recognition has grown. Luc Dardenne is interviewed in two significant sequences in Yoram Ron's documentary *ABSENT GOD: EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND THE HUMANISM OF THE OTHER* (IL/FR/BE 2014).¹⁵ His appearance in the documentary stresses not only the cultural impact of Levinas in the context of the cinema, but also Dardenne's capacity to use a philosophical language to make explicit his and his brother's ambition to make a good film. Their success at the Cannes Festival since 1996, the two Palmes d'Or they have received (for *ROSETTA* (FR/BE 1999) and *L'ENFANT (THE CHILD)* (FR/BE 2005)), and other prestigious awards confirm the possibility of a coherent œuvre outside mainstream cinema and without popular ideological references.

Before his acceptance in secular contexts by a larger public, Levinas received international attention mainly from scholars of religion who were attracted by his Jewish background and the biblical and Talmudic references in his work. In spite of the legitimate reading of his philosophy by people interested in the intersection of philosophy and religion, Levinas explicitly defined himself as a secular philosopher. His ethical theory insists on the priority of the experience of responsibility and goodness, which can open up a path to the religious sense of transcendence. But this does not work the other way round: a prefabricated idea of God does not open us up to the encounter with the other who is the concrete person we meet face-to-face, and always exceeds the closed totality of a worldview.

The same criticism of totality can be found in Levinas's sceptical view of aesthetics and works of art that cannot be occasions of authentic experience if they imprison the spectator in the illusion of perfection and absoluteness without taking into account the rough reality of human relations. In a certain sense, Levinas is not only the ethical but also the aesthetical thinker to whom the Dardenne brothers feel closer than to any other writer. In an article published in 2007, Sarah Cooper has convincingly shown how we can read Levinas with the Dardenne brothers and vice versa.¹⁶ Her careful analysis, which covers the period from *THE PROMISE* (1996) to *THE CHILD* (2005), is fully confirmed by the films and publications since 2007. "The Dardenne brothers", Cooper writes, "exchange death for life in the refusal to repeat radical acts of the suppression of alterity. ... Halting the repetition of literal or symbolic killing extends to

15 This remarkable independent film has not found large distribution so far; it can be rented or bought on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/absentgodeng/99223052> [accessed 4 April 2016].

16 Cooper 2007.

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."¹⁷ The camera's closeness to the characters does not diminish the distance between us and them; it makes the recognition of otherness possible whenever the spectator is lost in an unbearable reality and is at the same time challenged by an ethical imperative, for we can hardly remain indifferent to what we see.

In the corpus of texts we should consult to make the interaction of Luc Dardenne's two roles as filmmaker and philosopher plausible, one publication gives more weight to the second of these roles: his philosophical essay *The Human Affair*, published in 2013. The author starts with Nietzsche's declaration of God's death, which changes our relation to our own death and leaves us alone with our anxiety. From the very beginning of an individual life, we are condemned to death and can respond in two ways to this intimidating expectation: with violent reaction towards all the other mortal beings with whom we struggle for a decent place in life, or with empathy for the humanism of the other, who captures our attention and our responsibility. In the second case, the common destiny of the fragile human condition opens a space of care and consolation, a moral behaviour beyond the destructive battle for egotistic self-preservation.

Societies built on fear will always trigger violence and mistrust. A truly human civilisation is only possible within the framework of an education that opens minds to trust and solidarity and thus shows the indestructible core of every person. Such sentences sound like the naive and well-meaning advice of moralistic idealists in a precarious and destructive world in which only survival counts. This is exactly the point where cinema becomes a serious partner for philosophical reflexion, because films can provide the laboratories for testing the chances of a realistic humanism.

EMPATHY FOR THE KID WITH A BIKE

Even if Luc Dardenne does not suggest a kind of applied philosophy in his essay, he makes a clear connection with his identity as a filmmaker and screenwriter in the preface of the book. The preface is written as a letter addressed to Maurice Olender, the editor of the series *La librairie du XXI^e siècle*, in which the essay is published. The author writes that his reflections started in the context of the preparations for the film *LE GAMIN AU VÉLO* (THE KID WITH A BIKE, FR/BE/IT 2011), which the brothers began to discuss in 2007. The plot is the amazing story of a young boy called Cyril, who was abandoned by Guy, his father, and is looking for

17 Cooper 2007, 85.

someone who can appease the violent forces that are about to destroy him.¹⁸ By chance, the boy meets Samantha, a local hairdresser, who becomes a witness to Cyril's despair and decides to support the boy by offering him recognition, love and consolation. She succeeds in finding Cyril's bike, which his father had sold to make money, and brings it back to the boy, who has been placed in a children's home and now gets permission to visit Samantha at weekends. This is their first film shot during the summer months, and so *THE KID WITH A BIKE* (2011) is different from other Dardenne films because of its brighter and more colourful mood. The filmmakers even introduce music (Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 5), which had been banned from their soundtrack for a long time.

Samantha's character remains enigmatic if we want to know exactly why she is willing to be there for Cyril.¹⁹ According to the standards of common morality and rational calculation, nothing obliges her to accept such an important change in her life. But she simply does so, and gives a chance to the improbable appearance of human goodness that can help overcome fear and violence. She even sacrifices her relationship with her boyfriend, who does not appreciate the intrusion of the boy into the life of the couple. She also makes an effort to convince Cyril's father to act in a more responsible way, but has to accept that his refusal is definite.

The story of Cyril and Samantha is one example among many of an experience of goodness threatened constantly by the lack of compassion for others. Cyril is seriously tempted to find a substitute for his missing father in the criminal gang led by a dealer who uses him for an attack on a newsagent. The robbery fails when the newsagent's son Martin appears and is also assaulted by Cyril. Martin is unable to accept Cyril's apology in a victim-offender mediation and later finds an opportunity for revenge. In a dangerous pursuit, he hits Cyril with a stone, leaving him unconscious. When Martin's father joins the scene, he thinks that his son has killed Cyril and is ready to hide the crime to protect his son. To their surprise, however, Cyril gets back on his feet and leaves.

In *THE KID WITH A BIKE* (2011), the integrity of human life is at stake because of a high level of aggression and hatred that does not provide suitable conditions for human flourishing and forgiveness. The film shows people who risk killing others intentionally or accidentally and who themselves can become victims of the uncontrollable behaviour of others. In this constant struggle, people are alone in their vulnerability. According to Luc Dardenne, the solitude of the hu-

18 Dardenne 2012, 7–9.

19 See Pippin 2015 for an in-depth discussion of the difficulty of understanding what the Dardennes' characters do: try to imagine what the characters will do after a Dardenne film ends. We are not able to do so because objectively the characters themselves do not have any certainty about what could happen next. "This is not a sign of some flaw or absence in their character, some lack of sufficiently stable dispositions to project into the future. Or it is that, but not merely that. It is at bottom an objective problem" (Pippin 2015, 783).

man affair is God's affair as well, insofar as divine authority does not intervene in the human jungle of violence where individuals can be eliminated like figures in video games. After God's death, human beings have to find a way to live without eternal consolation.²⁰ This is the human condition shared by believers and non-believers. They both see reality with a limited range of vision, analogically speaking through the lens of a body camera and not from the privileged and secure vantage of a God's eye view.

CONCLUSION

Samantha's altruism could be read as an unbelievable modern fairy tale. Cynics may do so, and disregard it. As a philosopher and filmmaker Luc Dardenne succeeds in the twofold task of thinking and showing the possibility of a humanism exposed to destructiveness and the vulnerable face of the other. This face is the only authority that can repeat the commandment "You shall not murder".²¹ The fundamental choice of non-violence is the only hope humanity has when it comes to avoiding the abyss of mortal strategies of selfish survival and brutal domination.

From *THE PROMISE* (1996) to *LA FILLE INCONNUE* (*THE UNKNOWN GIRL*, BE/FR 2016), the Dardenne brothers have successfully undermined the mainstream film industry and suggested a new look at its ethical foundations. They leave spectators with more questions than answers because the vulnerability of the face of the other does not tell us precisely what to do and which rules to develop and to apply. Ethics as a *prima philosophia* in the Levinasian sense is at a different level from a normative moral philosophy with its obligation to differentiate argumentatively. According to Levinas, ethics cannot tell exactly which rules should be applied – with the exception of the most fundamental norm, "You shall not murder". By making us think about what makes us human, Levinas as well as the Dardennes offer a secular version of the sacred.²² According to Arthur Rimbaud, as quoted by Luc Dardenne, "morality is the weakness of the brain".²³ We should begin to learn that morality can become a responsible attitude when it is no longer a boring moralizing stance but the freedom to change the logic of domination. In this concrete and secular sense, ethics is open to

20 Dardenne 2012, 9.

21 See Aubenas 2008.

22 For a revisiting of the category of the "sacred" as an ethical equivalent of dignity, see Joas 2013. In Levinasian terms, the notion of sacredness should be differentiated from what he calls holiness. Sanctity or holiness is related to personal otherness, whereas sacredness is also used for objects, which do not demand the same unconditional respect we owe to a human being. In the context of ordinary language, both terms are strange because of their religious background. They are certainly helpful as markers of alterity.

23 Dardenne 2012, 140.

transcendence, in going beyond what is evident and looking behind the film images (“au dos de nos images”), even those shot for the best films,²⁴ for the pure image as a trace of that which remains invisible.

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne have the extraordinary gift of being able to bring us closer to the emergence of ethics without preaching a set of rules. If the vertigo of responsibility cannot be completely avoided in a world of fragility and suffering, the brothers nevertheless offer a glimpse of hope in the encounter with redeeming otherness that opens the self to the joy of life.²⁵ This is the artistic gift of humanism without illusions and of realism without cynicism. If there is any message in the Dardenne universe, it is more moral than political.²⁶ This is the difference between their reference to Levinas and the way Jean-Luc Godard uses the philosopher in order to make a political statement. In Godard’s film *NOTRE MUSIQUE* (*OUR MUSIC*, FR/CH 2004), Levinas is directly quoted in order to condemn violence and injustice.²⁷ One of his texts is being read by the Israeli journalist Judith Lerner as she visits Sarajevo and the Mostar bridge. We see her with a copy of the paperback edition of Levinas’s book *Entre nous*, a collection of essays dealing with the ethical priority of the other.²⁸ Unlike in Godard’s film, in which Levinas is quoted directly verbally and visually, his presence in the films of the Dardennes’ cannot be pinpointed to a particular scene. Instead, his influence is expressed subtly, yet insistently, in the humanist attitude that pervades the brothers’ whole œuvre. In the films by the Dardennes, the philosophical inspiration creates an entanglement of ethics and aesthetics because the visual language becomes an experimental expression of the moral values that are at stake. There is no need to quote philosophical books because realistic humanism is an attitude that can convince without big theories.

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24 The Dardenne brothers clearly belong to a secular culture. It is therefore correct not to study them in a “postsecular perspective”, which implies a quest for alternative spiritual experiences. See the contributions in Bradatan/Ungureanu 2014.

25 Dardenne 2012, 189–190.

26 Luc Dardenne interviewed by De Jonghe/Soudan 2012.

27 Atterton/Calarco 2010, ix.

28 Levinas 1993.

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