

Psychology Degree Zero? The Representation of Action in the Films of the Dardenne Brothers

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Since 1996, the Belgian team of Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne have made seven theatrical fictional feature films for which they are willing to claim authorship. There are other fiction films—*Falsch* (1987), the short film *Il Court, il court le monde* (*He's Running, They're All Running*) (1988), and in 1992, *Je pense à vous* (*You're On My Mind*)—but they have in one way or another distanced themselves from these. In the case of the last they have disowned it, furious at studio interference with the final cut. A new film, *Deux Jours, une nuit* (*Two Days, One Night*), was recently released to enthusiastic reviews.¹

All of the films revolve around a basic moral question usually having to do with responsibility; they often involve some sort of recovery from a wrong committed by the wrongdoer against the one wronged; and they all manifest a heightened sense of the complexity of how we might come to

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1. For an especially lucid and helpful account of the brothers' history and their project, see Philip Mosley, *The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers: Responsible Realism* (New York, 2013), pp. 1–75. See also Luc Dardenne's comments in Geoff Andrews, "Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne," *The Guardian*, 11 Feb. 2006, www.theguardian.com/film/2006/feb/11/features

understand the characters dealing with such a question. In several films, part of that complexity has to do with the fact that our attention is constantly drawn to the connections between a character's psychological turmoil, stress, and confusion, on the one hand, and the quite distinctive characteristics of the social world in which they live, on the other. More to the point of the following, I will claim that various cinematic properties of their films involve ways of rethinking and challenging basic issues in our conventional understanding of the relation between agent and deed in ordinary action and in action explanation, and so they intimate an unusual picture of human subjectivity. This bears on another issue: what we need to understand in understanding another and how we might come to understand another in a new way. This of course involves a very big question: what is it to call these aesthetic objects "ways of re-thinking"? In the present context I will limit myself to selected details and hope that a possible form of cinematic intelligibility will start to emerge.

The basic issue at stake is the following. It would not be unfair or anachronistic to say that, in each case, the Dardenne brothers are trying to represent the motivation and decisions (often momentous) of certain characters, but they proceed under two unmistakable assumptions. First, there is often something very difficult to understand, even mysterious, about such motivations and decisions—the films even seem to encourage the proper respect before such complexities. Second, in many of their films, we are shown that the social context (working class and under- or unemployed) within which these decisions must be made is historically novel, a product of free-trade zones, migrant labor, the common market, and globalized capitalism, all creating a new context for labor and power, the implications of which are not yet fully clear. This is a world where a ruthless form of competitiveness is forced on workers (American-style capitalism, as it is now rightly put), where one person's job is another person's unemployment, and where the two persons often know each other.² Or, in another formulation, some characters are migrants in a

2. See Martin O'Shaughnessy, "Ethics in the Ruin of Politics: The Dardenne Brothers," in *Five Directors: Auteurism from Assayas to Ozon*, ed. Kate Ince (Manchester, 2008), p. 73. It is significant with respect to the issue of class analysis and class consciousness in the brothers' view of late capitalism that Rosetta is not "a working-class woman." She is struggling desperately to enter the working class, however exploited it is on traditional accounts. Wage

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strange land, and therefore they live so far outside the normal cycle of production and consumption that in some way their own relation to their inner lives, their own self-understanding, cannot be understood in ways typical for those who live inside that social world. They often have no acknowledged social status whatsoever, and that has a psychological, not just a social, dimension. This all puts added pressure on the problem of struggling, and coming, to understand another. The Dardennes are also acutely aware of what it means to represent such issues in film and are clearly doing all they can to block or interrupt or prevent conventional assumptions about these issues (and their counterpart in conventional cinematic technique) from coming into play.³

This fact is especially important because the acts in question can seem, at first glance, gratuitous, unmotivated, and, in that sense, very hard to understand. A boy, under no pressure, and clearly on the verge of escaping undetected, suddenly confesses to the wife of a man whose death he helped cover up (*The Promise*, 1996). A girl rendered almost insane by her inability to find work (already a great example of the theme just introduced; unemployment itself can be a form of what could be called objective insanity), having informed on a friend to secure a job, suddenly resigns the position (*Rosetta*, 1999).⁴ A man decides to take on as an apprentice and help teach a boy—who he knows murdered his own son five years earlier—and, on the verge of vengeance, releases the boy and works with him (*The Son*, 2002). A street criminal casually and thoughtlessly sells his newborn, but when he sees the overwhelming effect of this on the child's mother, his girlfriend, he immediately retrieves the baby at enormous cost to himself and his future (*The Child*, 2005). An immigrant woman from Albania,

slavery has become a utopian dream; class membership is at least a mode of being acknowledged and solidarity. See the account of “normalcy” as “utopia” in Lauren Berlant, “Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*,” *Public Culture* 19 (Spring 2007): 289–90, and throughout. This issue is also prominent in *The Promise*, as well as with the classless status of the couple in *The Child*, and in the ambiguous working class status of Lorna in *The Silence of Lorna*.

3. The intense focus, often in close-ups, of characters, is something that traditionally suggests insight into their inner lives but in these films is always linked in various ways to outside objects on which we also focus the same kind of close-up attention, as if there really is some link. This can seem a distraction if we do not appreciate the point: a statue (*The Promise*), a pair of shoes (*Rosetta*), a jacket (*The Child*), planks of wood and machines, a leather brace and a pair of glasses (*The Son*), money, many close-ups of money (*The Silence of Lorna*), a bike (*The Kid with a Bike*); see Luc Dardenne, *Au Dos de nos images: 1901–2005* (Paris, 2005), p. 158.

4. *Rosetta* in the end does not fall apart, but, at the end of *The Silence of Lorna*, Lorna has clearly gone insane, lost all hold on an unbearable reality; in political terms, a much darker ending than *Rosetta*, with no path forward. See Mariella Schütz, *Explorationskino: Die Filme der Brüder Dardenne* (Marburg, 2011), p. 45.

having secured her own legal residence in Belgium, is involved in a plot to live with an addict until he overdoses so that she can then, for money, marry and then divorce a Russian eager to emigrate and also to gain Belgian citizenship. But she begins to help the addict get *off* drugs, ruining the plan, and, in the face of terrifying threats of reprisal, continues to refuse to go along even after the addict is murdered by her accomplices (*The Silence of Lorna*, 2008). A woman—who by mere chance happens to be just once in the same place as a troubled boy searching for the derelict father who abandoned him—suddenly involves herself deeply in the boy’s life, ruining her own romantic relationship and assuming responsibilities no one would say she owed anyone (*The Kid with a Bike*, 2011).

These are, of course, films, not treatises, so whatever they render intelligible is rendered cinematically intelligible, a topic worthy in itself of several books.⁵ The cinematic way must be some sort of sensible-affective modality of rendering intelligible, one that has to do with how we are moved, how some features of a moral landscape are made more salient, how some feature grips us, excites our imagination, how we are surprised or puzzled by events we come to see in some new way because we are so surprised or puzzled. What the Dardenne films have accomplished is all the more remarkable because the principal characters are not well educated or articulate or reflective. Almost everything about what is traditionally thought of as their psychologies must be represented in what we see on screen, through what the characters do and in their faces.

In sum, I want to claim that the Dardenne brothers’ films are made in the light of a clear awareness of the possible visual and dramatic intelligibility of our moral lives, and that this awareness results in a novel cinematic style, the powerful credibility of which begins to challenge philosophical and even commonsense orthodoxy about our explanations of what human beings do and why and, further, what it is to understand another and another’s deeds.⁶

5. The bearing of pictorial on philosophical intelligibility is discussed in Robert B. Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago, 2014).

6. That is, there are (at least) two issues here and their bearing on each other is complex. We want to understand another’s actions, and we take that to involve being able to explain why she did what she did. But we also speak colloquially of wanting to understand someone as such, and we sometimes think that a singular-action explanation is not possible unless we understand something like what kind of person would do such a thing. Or we can formulate a credible action explanation, but still say, “I don’t understand how *she* could have done that. That’s not *her*.” Both of these are relevant to what Olivier is seeking in *The Son*.

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It is first necessary to say something about the career of the brothers and their relation to other filmmakers. They began as documentary filmmakers, and their approach was from the start decidedly political. They focused on the Belgian labor movement, especially in the grim industrial area of Seraing, and gradually moved from making what might be called activist films, aimed at consciousness-raising, to more historical work, in effect conceding what is now all too obvious: that the labor movement after World War Two decisively lost its great battle with the owners of capital. In fact it would not be an exaggeration to say that the Dardennes' films are the most lucid artistic explorations we have of the quotidian and lived-through consequences of the absence of any organized, principled resistance to the excesses of capitalism after the collapse of any credible form of leftist solidarity. The task now was to try to understand what happened and to document the enormity of what was thereby lost. Most of all, what was lost was any experience of social unity, at least the sort that is possible in a collective struggle or in genuinely cooperative work.⁷ So in all the feature films we see exclusively working-class characters—small-shop owners, laborers, garage mechanics, carpenters, beauticians, dry cleaners—as well as petty criminals, human smugglers, minor racketeers. What we don't see is also important. There is not only nothing in the way of class or politically inspired identification but also very little in the way of local community or collective life; no circle of friends for anyone, no neighborhood community; families are horribly fractured, parents are grotesquely irresponsible in *The Promise*, *Rosetta* (1999), *The Child*, and *The Kid with a Bike*, and the dire consequences for the children is a major theme. (Luc Dardenne has even said that we live “in the time of Cronos who eats his children.”)⁸ Mostly we sense that each person is radically on his or her own and in that profound zero-sum competition with each other mentioned earlier, such that this feature of life must influence how we try to understand what they do. Normalcy itself, even psychological normalcy, or some fantasy of normalcy, becomes the highest aspiration for some characters.

It has even been said that the brothers are depicting the situation of

7. See the account in Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne* (Urbana, Ill., 2010), p. 9.

8. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 46. For the nature of the inter-generational failure (a *basic* failure in a society's ability to reproduce itself) and its many consequences, see Berlant, “Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal,” pp. 290, 293, 298. Berlant's commitment, here and elsewhere, on the need to understand the affective character of the bond of sociality, especially the affective attachment to forms of “the ‘bad life,’” and at a level that reaches aspects of private intimacy often thought irrelevant to that task (p. 279), is one I share, posed in different terms. See the account of political psychology in Pippin, “Introduction,” *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn., 2010).

“ethics in the ruin of politics”⁹ or showing us postsocial realism. So, in the absence of anything recognizably political,¹⁰ the epiphanic moral moments—the ones that characterize each film and occur in moments of deep, unexpected intimacy—seem inspired by the sheer physical presence of some one particular other person. These moments of moral acknowledgement do not descend from any principles held; they are ad hoc and are unconnected to any group or class or even neighborhood consciousness.¹¹ The wrongs depicted are injustices—wrongs always against someone—but the wrongs and the recovery from them—and remorse, forgiveness, or reconciliation—are always intimately personal. The structural features of the social world within which these wrongs are all too likely to occur are not absent, but these wrongs tend to be treated fatalistically or at least not as possible objects for collective redress.

This is not to say that the feature films are simply grim, merely cataloguing the catastrophe. As already noted, there are stirring moments of resistance, even transcendence, in each film, however individualized and isolated those moments are.¹² These are achievements of a distinct sort, forged inevitably in acts directed against the attempted suppression or marginalization of any robust assertions of their agency. Each of the moments noted above can seem at first gratuitous and inexplicable, but, re-

9. See O’Shaughnessy, “Ethics in the Ruin of Politics.”

10. There is an interesting genre issue relevant to their films. Their work can both be associated with the harder edge of corporeal or neo-neorealism, as in the films of Bruno Dumont or Erick Zonca, or with more traditional social realism, as in the films of Mike Leigh and Ken Loach and Shane Meadows. That is beyond the scope of this discussion.

11. Predictably, the epiphanic and nonpolitical nature of many endings has attracted criticisms from the traditional left. For example, from David Walsh writing about *The Child* but including all their films up until then: “Moreover, their obsessive attention to the particular (exemplified by the irritating and intrusive camera in *Rosetta*, which hardly leaves the central character for an instant) at the expense of the social and historical context ultimately provides a distorted picture of contemporary life. It diverts attention from the structures responsible for human suffering and creates the impression, inadvertently or not, that the blame for social ills lies at least in part with their victims” (David Walsh, “The Dardenne Brothers’ *L’Enfant*: An Argument for a Far More Critical Appraisal,” *World Socialist Website*, 30 June 2006, www.wsws.org/en/articles/2006/06/dard-j30.html). Or, writing later: “All that being said, there is still the matter of the artistic quality of their films. The fact remains, in my view, that their dramas are rather uninspired and, ultimately, contrived. Moreover, their chilly, matter-of-fact ‘realism’ expresses an ambiguous attitude toward the working class characters that borders on the unsympathetic” (Walsh, “The Dardenne Brothers: But What About the ‘Extenuating Circumstances?’” *World Socialist Website*, 29 Sept. 2008, www.wsws.org/en/articles/2008/09/tff5-s29.html). This is an important issue (that what is, in effect, their reformulation of the inner-outer relation in action ought to allow us to look at the outside in some more detail than we are given) but I do not share the aesthetic criticism. I find the idea that *Rosetta*, for example, does not provoke sympathy, or that she is portrayed as “responsible” for what happens to her, bizarre in the extreme.

12. See O’Shaughnessy, “Ethics in the Ruin of Politics,” p. 60.

markably, not in a way that is unsatisfying or frustrating—the way hardened criminals in movies sometimes suddenly recant and become saintly. We are somehow prepared for such reversals; understanding that “somehow” and comprehending the status of such moments seem to be the key questions for each and every film.

Second, the influences on the brothers are clear. There are philosophical influences, at least on Luc Dardenne, who has written a philosophy book, *Sur l’Affaire humaine* (2012). (Luc Dardenne has also written a kind of journal about the making of three of the films, *Au Dos de nos images* (2005)—a title that must be referring to an unusual filming technique used by the brothers, which we shall discuss soon. And together, the brothers have also published many revealing interviews.)¹³ The most frequent names mentioned in *Sur l’Affaire humaine* are Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas (a figure who looms large in what critical commentary there is about the brothers),¹⁴ Franz Kafka, and Sigmund Freud. The cinematic influences are obvious—for *Rosetta* and indeed for the tone and pace of all their films, Robert Bresson (especially *Mouchette* [1967] and *Au Hasard Balthazar* [1966]). (They are especially influenced by Bresson’s resistance to psychological acting, as we shall see below.)¹⁵ For the general *mise-en-scène* in the depiction of Seraing, Roberto Rossellini’s *Germany Year Zero* (1948) and neorealism in general are of obvious importance. (The Dardennes also make extensive use of nonprofessional or unknown actors.) In the treatment of adolescents, a frequent theme, François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) is important; and in *The Kid with a Bike*, Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) is obviously important. They have also singled out Akira Kurosawa’s *Stray Dog* (1949) and Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Street of Shame* (1956).

13. See Dardenne, *Au Dos de nos images* and *Sur l’Affaire humaine* (Paris, 2012).

14. Levinas and the primary ethical imperative not to kill figure also in their own thinking about the films; see Dardenne, *Au dos de nos images*, p. 42. Two Levinasian readings: Sarah Cooper, “Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers.” *Film-Philosophy* 11 (Aug. 2007): 66–87, and Doug Cummings, “The Brothers Dardenne: Responding to the Face of the Other,” in *Committed Cinema: The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne; Essays and Interviews*, ed. Bert Cardullo (Newcastle, 2009), pp. 55–68. See also Cardullo’s generally Christian reading in his “Rosetta Stone: A Consideration of the Dardenne Brothers’ *Rosetta*,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 6 (Apr. 2002), www.unomaha.edu/jrf/rosetta.htm

15. Mosley reports that the brothers admit some influence but now dislike the comparison with Bresson; see Mosley, *The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers*, p. 35. That said, Mosley goes on to show how many points of comparison are possible. See also their extraordinary, brief homage to Bresson, MuddyBoy61, “Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne - Dans L’Obscurite,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdkRpPr7_II

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So much for background. I turn now to my main theme, which could be summarized as the problem in general of the cinematic representation of the relation between what is traditionally thought of as a psychological interior and outer bodily movement and other forms of expression in the exercise of agency and subjectivity. As noted, the specific inflection of that relation in the particular world that serves as the context or the horizon for some of the characters' intelligible doings can be said to add to the difficulty of coming to understand their deeds.

In so far as we can speak of issues being raised in a film, they are raised here most prominently by several striking directorial techniques.¹⁶ I will mention four, and then try to assess the philosophic implications of such an aesthetics. They include (1) a striking lack of congruence between the cuts in the film and the normal beginnings and endings of actions or conversations; (2) the positioning of the hand-held camera very close to the characters and from behind, as if the viewer is too close, following the action rather than seeing it; (3) the invocation of the cinematic conventions about close-ups, and then the frustration or refusal of these expectations; and (4) the display of the psychological lives of the characters in ways such that, very often, individual faces appear somewhat blank or empty, without detectable psychological inward motion, let us say, as if we might be at psychology degree zero in the sense in which Roland Barthes spoke of "writing degree zero."¹⁷ All of these features could be described in ways that might fit other ambitious art films, and the last has especially been used to try to understand a kind of new genre of corporeal realism, as in the unnerving films of Bruno Dumont, or as calling to mind the nonpsychological acting in Bresson's films (such as Michel's demeanor in *Pickpocket* [1959]). There are such similarities, especially to Bresson and Dumont,¹⁸

16. This is another topic in itself. The Dardenne brothers obviously must realize that the unconventionality of their framing, camera position from the rear and instability, de-emphasis on dialogue and exposition, indifference to conventional plot, and so forth are immediately and starkly noticeable to the viewer. This means in effect that each of their films, whatever else it is about, is about itself; each film is a kind of allegory of film, instructing us about what cinematic representability is, can be (and cannot be), must be now. And they are showing us that that issue is inseparable from the philosophical issue of what it is to represent mindedness and action. And since that, for them, is inseparable from the appropriate representation of the contemporary social world, each film is also a political act.

17. See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York, 2012).

18. Not to mention the films, novels, and photography that manifest what Berlant calls a "contemporary aesthetic of self-dispossession," of "emotional underperformance," "the emergence of an inexpressive style," of "feeling of the recessive mode," "the body that's unforthcoming," or "the reticent aesthetic," in Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*," unpub. ms. I want to claim that the brothers Dardenne have a specific register of such

but I think that the Dardennes' use of these techniques, the combination of all of them and the repetition of these unconventional techniques throughout their films amount to an unprecedented, distinctive style. And that style, like many radical innovations in modernist art, is historically indexed, not a mere aesthetic experiment. The assumption is that something about the world as we now understand it would be falsely or not credibly represented if pictured in traditional realist narrative form. Some aspects of such a lived world, especially what are traditionally thought of as psychological aspects, *demand* such stylistic innovations.¹⁹

So first, the cuts in the film and the selection of detail by the camera do not seem to match what we would conventionally expect to be the natural beginnings and endings of some action, and the camera's focus does not seem to isolate what we would normally consider the salient details, given the action.²⁰ People do not enter and exit scenes according to normal conventions, and the scenes do not begin and end in a way that corresponds to the beginning and ending of actions or even conversations. This should be understood as a kind of cinematic interrogation of what really *is* a beginning and an end for action.²¹ There are many jump cuts. Someone is walking somewhere and we begin to follow with the camera, but suddenly there is a jump cut to the destination, and we experience a kind of gap. Have we missed something, or is what we did not see not really a part of what was being done? The unconventional framing of scenes, what the camera directs our attention to, does not help us distinguish what is of major and what of minor significance. This too already suggests that con-

passivity and blankness in mind, tied to the world of the unacknowledged, one could say, that they depict in their films. This has to do with the connection between what *would* be some possible greater-than-zero affective investment in futurity, coupled with possible expectations about understanding and being understood, possibilities of trust and simple security, on the one hand, and the fact that all of these are manifest only by their absence in Seraing on the other. One could summarize such conditions as the possibility of intelligible mutuality of the sort that has to occur in the world they describe only as moments of unanticipated grace.

19. This claim about stylistic innovation could obviously be challenged. A full case for it would have to involve a study of the details of all seven films, especially *Rosetta* and *The Silence of Lorna*. The film I will focus on, *The Son*, is focused so intently on one relationship that this sociohistorical context, while visible, is not as prominent. It is visible in Francis's demeanor, lethargy, and status as a product of the juvenile prison system. The inspiration for this approach is Hegelian; see Pippin, *After the Beautiful*.

20. See the discussion in Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*, p. 54. For Mai, these effects have as a result our sense of a "lack of an external point of view" (p. 55). This is true but I think that this and other techniques are putting under pressure traditional assumptions about the unity of action itself. The point is more radical.

21. So, when does whatever Olivier is intending, by taking on Francis, begin? (I discuss this further below.) When does Igor begin to truly *keep* his promise to Amidou?

ventional views about what a discrete action is or what the unity of an action consists in, how it is to be explained and thus represented, are not in force. The films themselves all begin and end abruptly, going straight from or to a black screen.

The Son opens on a conversation between Olivier and an administrator that has already begun, and we hear the sounds of hammering and sawing going on before the film visually begins. (We might say that Olivier's state of mind is represented on the sound track, as we hear the irritating whine of a piece of equipment, a high pitched aural sign of Olivier's extreme tension in the scene.) What we will learn is that Olivier, a dedicated teacher at a kind of trade reform school for youthful offenders, had been asked to take on Francis as another apprentice. We also learn later that he recognizes the name immediately as that of the boy who murdered his son and declines to accept the boy. We see him (we learn later) somehow *in the process of changing his mind* and accepting Francis (a rather long process; it takes up the first twenty minutes of the film, and the change is occasioned by nothing dramatic or decisive), but he does not seem to be weighing the pros and cons or reflecting on his motives. He looks, throughout, mostly stunned, confused, and anxious. The decision to accept Francis seems at least partially occasioned by a visit from his ex-wife, who comes to tell him that she is getting remarried and is pregnant.²² (Her understandable view in the face of their trauma is to escape the past and begin anew, something we sense Olivier both cannot and will not yet do.)²³ Olivier rushes after her when she leaves, demanding to know why she visited him on just that day, the day he learns of Francis's release, as if that fact means something (as if *something* about their horrific tragedy should, finally, mean something). And it is shortly thereafter that he accepts Francis.²⁴

Moreover, while Olivier seems to have no fixed or determinate idea

22. Olivier's first view of Francis is fleeting, in the cafeteria (where he has clearly gone to catch a glimpse) and, significantly in this film, from the rear. This is immediately ominous. Olivier looks slightly crazed, and there is prominence given to a knife he borrows. His second view is of Francis sleeping, completely vulnerable.

23. It is no doubt significant that the moment that Olivier changes his mind and decides to accept Francis is precisely the moment when his wife announces, in effect, that as a woman she can and will *produce* another son, something that seems to suggest that Olivier will try to reconstitute a paternal relation in a male way, eventually as a legal guardian. This reminds us that the film we are watching is not, as the brothers once envisaged, called *The Father*, but *The Son*. This forces our attention on the pairing of the dead and absent son with Francis, the (unlikely) candidate for a surrogate son. See also Françoise Collin, "Le Fils," in *Jean-Pierre et Luc Dardenne*, ed. Jacqueline Aubenas (Brussels, 2008), p. 213. (This kind of mimetic parental pairing with his wife is one of several instances of such mimetic understanding that I discuss below.)

24. See Mariella Schütz, "Begreifen wollen: Bewegende Begegnung mit dem Mörder in *Le Fils* (Der Sohn, 2002)," *Film-Konzepte* 31 (August 2013): 70–89.

about what he should do in the future, or even how to think about what he should do, even after he accepts Francis, it is fair to say that he still has no fixed or determinate idea why he did, what he is trying to achieve by accepting him. And, early in the film, we know none of this and so are even more in the dark and we have to imagine for quite a while what might be causing the obvious discomfort in Olivier. Later, when we know who Francis is, we might think that Olivier is planning some sort of revenge, which gives the film a great tension throughout on the first viewing. (The film is built for the viewer around two sorts of tension—tension about what had happened and then tension about what will happen. What, if anything, is Olivier planning? It takes us a while to appreciate the irrelevance of the notion of planning.) Without other conventional narrative techniques like shot/reverse-shot dialogues or any establishing shot setting out where we are, with so little in the way of exposition, with no reflective characters discussing what is happening, and with so many jump cuts and so many small narrative gaps, where we are, literally and in the narrative, and what Olivier is up to, can be very hard to establish.²⁵

In the beginning scene, Olivier's anxious pondering is not continuous; it is interrupted by a problem in the woodworking area. A plank that one of the young students is working with becomes stuck and Olivier must release it; an image of blockage and release not unrelated to what has happened, what will happen, to Olivier. The camera, in a nondiegetic turn, shows us his back brace, another sign of the constriction he has had to live under as well as a visible sign of the assistance he needs to bear up under the load he is carrying. And there is again a jump cut as he rushes somewhere down the stairs. (When Olivier releases the stuck plank, he tells the boy how to do this "deux fois!" [two times!], which he repeats for emphasis. It is typical of the brothers' films that there are no throwaway lines. Teaching by imitation—Olivier does something, and then the student tries [a second doing]—is crucial to the film. We will see later that such a mimetic intelligibility, itself central to how realist film narrative works, informs what is in effect a kind of reconciliation at the end of the film, something learned, some mimetic understanding that is not discursively articulable.)²⁶

25. The most extreme example of such a gap, and subsequent viewer confusion, is, in *The Silence of Lorna*, the murder of Claudy offscreen by Lorna's accomplices. We see her shopping for clothes for him after we had seen them become quite close. We assume she is buying him gifts and are shocked when we see her give them to the attendant at the morgue for his burial. We are as shocked as she is by his sudden disappearance from the film and from her life.

26. There are several more doublings in the film. His wife follows him out to a parking lot and challenges him about Francis twice; Francis and Olivier eat together twice; Olivier observes Francis sleeping twice; Francis orders the same food as Olivier, blows the dust off himself the

Such questions—When can an action properly be said to begin and end? What is a part of the action, what not, and why?—are, I have suggested, raised simply by the editing and camera work. What I mean by this is evident in the film’s most pressing issue. We conventionally think—and conventional editing invites us to think—that Olivier begins to decide whether or not to take Francis when the film begins, when he sees the paper with Francis’s name on it, but because we are also plunged in *medias res* as well as at the beginning, that convention is subtly challenged. What thing we are also in the middle of is not remarked on but is obvious. We learn that, after the murder of his son and the collapse of his marriage, Olivier stopped working with his brother at the family lumberyard and began working at a school for youthful offenders, all about the age that Francis will be after he serves his five years. It would not be unreasonable to suspect that Olivier even knows that it is *this* school that an offender like Francis will attend. So the action, in the most general sense—Olivier’s understanding of, and working something out with, Francis—clearly begins much earlier than the film’s beginning with Olivier reading the boy’s name, all even though Olivier’s view of what he is doing is hardly this determinate.

But questions about the unity of action are not altogether representable visually. They depend on the right act description and the agent’s self-understanding. For that we need some dialogue, but there is already something destabilizing or at least interrogative in these unnatural cinematic suggestions about action unity. By destabilizing and interrogative I mean at this point only that the quite plausible understanding of the form of an action and hence its unity (the account that comes down to us from Aristotle)—that actions are undertaken for the sake of some end, properly begin when we undertake something in order to achieve that end, the parts or elements of which must be related to that end within this in-order-to structure (so that smoking a cigarette while one is building a house is not part of the house-building activity), and are over either when the end is achieved or we give up²⁷—does not fit what Olivier is doing when

same way; Francis builds a carrying box just like Olivier’s; and finally, in the closing scene, Francis imitates Olivier carrying and wrapping the wood (and this time seizes a tiny initiative). The theme is also connected to what some see as Christian elements in the films. Each troubled character comes to a point where they can begin again, start a second life: Rosetta, Igor, Bruno, especially Francis, Lorna (in her case, just a fantasy of regeneration), and Cyril (the kid with a bike). There doesn’t seem to me anything inherently Christian about these new beginnings, but they all do depend on some moment of generosity of spirit from another.

27. This is what Michael Thompson calls a “*naïve action theory*” (why are you doing A? I am doing A because I am doing B) and contrasts with “*sophisticated*” action theory (as in I am doing A because I want B, or even because I had a desire for B and I believe that A is a means to

he *accepts* Francis, what Lorna does when she *decides* to help Claudy, not murder him, what Samantha does when she *cares* for Cyril in *The Kid with a Bike*, and so forth. For one thing, such dependence on the agent's self-understanding assumes the possibility of some sort of transparency of the self to itself at least with regard to one's own purposes, and although in ordinary circumstances this is almost always unproblematic, that too, we are being signaled, will be in question, and not in the name of the unconscious or a lack of self-knowledge in principle possible. What is quite credibly shown in the nonstandard representations of the mindedness of many of these characters, especially here with Olivier, is that there is nothing yet to be known, at least (and this is the crucial point) nothing *determinate*, even though he is certainly *acting*; things are not merely happening to him.

Besides this very frequent lack of fit between the cinematic composition of scenes and the conventional unity of actions, we have seen something of the second technique in noting the very close-up position of the camera *behind* the character. This manner of filming is probably the most prominent and distinctive feature of the films: the handheld, documentary-style camera position in relation to the characters being filmed. Especially in *The Son*, the camera seems to be literally following Olivier like a person, staying out of his sight, peering around a corner unobserved (fig. 1), pursuing him, as if embodying our desire to understand and not to miss anything. The action does not seem to be filmed from outside looking in, but from within the scene of the action, as if a truly external point of view was a comforting delusion.

The most dramatic use of the technique was on display right away at the beginning of their first two serious feature films, *The Promise* and *Rosetta*. In the beginning of the latter, Rosetta has been fired, not because she is a bad worker, but because of the unavoidable tardiness caused by the bus system. We will learn that she is a scrupulously, even ferociously, good worker; having and keeping a normal job means everything to her. But her training period has ended and (we assume) her employer must pay her considerably more if she stays. It is easier for him to cycle through such temporaries. It is also interesting that, as the incredibly intense first-time actress Èmilie Dequenne storms toward a confrontation about her dismissal, she closes the door on us, on the unstable, pursuing camera, three

achieving B) (Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* [Cambridge, Mass., 2008], pp. 86, and see 89, 112, 137). We want to know what Olivier is doing by teaching the murderer of his son and of course we mean what he thinks he is doing, but the film does not instruct us to find a mental state (his intention); it asks us to look to what he does, is doing over time, has done, if we want to assess what his purpose could be in taking on Francis. Implicitly, the claim is: that is where *he* must look too.

times. However close we think we are allowed to get to the character, we are reminded that something is unavailable. The gaps in the editing suggest the same thing—something important to any potential understanding is very often not available, at least not if we make standard assumptions about what is there to be understood.

Hence the appropriateness of the title of Luc Dardenne's *Au Dos de nos images*; they film from behind the character (we see a great many backs and backs of heads in their films), very close, and, especially, as noted earlier, as if pursuing the character, hastening after them, trying to catch up, following them somewhat anxiously, as if trying to follow the plot. (For Luc Dardenne, the back is the part of one's body one cannot naturally see, so they are being filmed from a point of view they cannot take, attending to what is hidden from them. The back is also our most vulnerable side.)²⁸

In all of their films, our impression is always of being much too close to the character, and this also has something to do with the psychology of deliberation and action. We do not seem to have sufficient distance to assess properly what is going on. (Philosophers often describe our capacity for reflection as a capacity to stop, and step back from what we were doing, so as to get a sense of things.)²⁹ And since we are following on so close to the characters, we sense that in their experience they too are propelled forward in the action in a way that cannot be said to be guided by reflection in the standard step-wise, *ex ante/post facto* way. They are in effect too close to their own actions as well, without sufficient distance from what they are doing, and the pace of the action is such that isolating moments of inner reflection and outer manifestation appears to be very difficult. There are even occasions when we are so close

28. Filming from behind also gives the depiction the air of realist documentary by eliminating any sense that the characters are before or in front of or for a camera, as well as weakening any possible sense that we, the viewer, are on the outside looking in. We are in the scene by always trying to catch up and in a way, we begin to realize, that is true of the characters too, as if they are trying to catch up with their own deeds.

29. This is not to say there is *no* distance. In this case, being close, but from the back, establishes a kind of tension: with them but not at all from their point of view. Luc Dardenne says that this gap establishes the "secret" of the other, and it helps to create a sense of mystery, an uncloseable gap, about such otherness (Dardenne, *Au dos de nos images*, p. 130). (My suggestion is that this is only so on the misguided assumption that we need to see inside them to know them, know their secrets as if they were contents locked in a box.) Richard Rushton points out how well this sort of tension maps on to Michael Fried's account of the relation between immersion and specularly in his account of Caravaggio's "discovery" of absorptive techniques (Richard Rushton, "Empathic Projection in the Films of the Dardenne Brothers," *Screen* 55 [Autumn 2014]: 312). He also offers a compelling example of how this works in a detailed analysis of several scenes from *The Promise* (see p. 314). Fried's account is not a psychological one, and can be mapped on to different philosophical accounts. For its Hegelian resonances, and so its relevance to this account, see Pippin, "Politics and Ontology: Clark and Fried," *After the Beautiful*, pp. 63–95.



FIGURE 1.

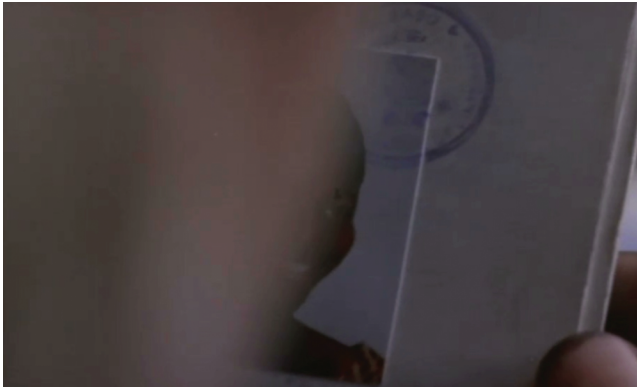


FIGURE 2.



FIGURE 3.



FIGURE 4.



FIGURE 5.



FIGURE 6.



FIGURE 7.



FIGURE 8.



FIGURE 9.



FIGURE 10.



FIGURE 11.

to the characters, so involved with them, so curious about them, that we cannot properly even see what they see; our vision is obscured by the character him- or herself, or by our unusual closeness to the character, because of some over-eagerness to be so close. For example, when the boy Igor looks at a passport in *The Promise*, we are put in the position of looking at what he sees, but we are blocked by his point of view (fig. 2).

Third, as we have been noting, the brothers make extensive use of one of the most potent cinematic techniques, the close-up. It is one of the cinema's versions of the famous Ludwig Wittgenstein maxim from *The Philosophical Investigations*: "The human body is the best picture of the human soul."³⁰ In the films with the most close-ups, like *The Son* or *The Silence of Lorna*, we sense (I

30. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1972), p. 178.

want at least to suggest, fully aware that this is the most tentative of the suggestions that I am making) something different from the treatment of the face as a sign or mark of the interior but that, paradoxically, some attitude or reaction is first of all realized in or inseparable from such a physical dimension—or at least that the putative *isolation* of the psychological as an ex ante determinate inner world (which can be expressed or not, which we see into by looking at a face) is being challenged by an attempt to locate such a putative interiority instead in the world. We see any such inner world taking shape and changing *in* the activities and expressions of the characters, and, in some cases, we see that there is very little determinate or fixed or resolved or even linear going on in such a putative world beforehand. As we shall discuss soon, it can seem that any such putative inner psychology is at almost (but not, I want to say, completely) degree zero.

This is all challenging and difficult enough, but there is another huge difference in their use of close-ups compared to the conventions of realist movies. In the cinematic world of the Dardenne brothers, when we get something more of the character than the full back and the back of the head, we rarely get more than half or at best three-quarters of the face. And they are very fond of shooting such unusual close-ups from the rear of an automobile, accentuating again the theme of speed, forward motion always under way (not to mention being driven, carried forward—such as Igor and Francis and Lorna—rather than driving themselves), without much in the way of punctuated moments of reflection or decision, as well as a way of again putting us, almost claustrophobically, in the scene (figs. 3–4).

Throughout all the films, however, what we expect from the close-up is frustrated. We expect some revelation, a mark of some passion or intensity or guilt, but in their films we can't get the best picture of the soul, the front of the face, in view. It is as if, even taking account of how little pure interiority is sometimes suggested in their close-ups, what partial insight we might gain about the character's mindedness is deliberately denied us, as if we are being told that we will have to make do, that one always has to make do, with some incomplete picture of the soul.³¹ Their dominant close-up is the profile. A standard view of the meaning of this technique, proposed by Paul Coates and echoed by Richard Rushton, is that such a profile view

31. I should stress that I mean how little of *pure* interiority there is. This is not a claim that there is no inner life to these characters. Olivier is clearly boiling inside. It is just to challenge the simple location of such mindedness in a pure, private, inner realm, uniquely and only knowable by the subject. It is also to suggest that such turmoil and stress may not yet have an object.

suggests that something in the characters is hidden or blocked.³² And there are many other possibilities. Sometimes a profile, looking away from a conversation or an action, can suggest absent-mindedness or distraction or daydreaming. But, rather than indicating that anything is hidden, it may also mean that our expectation of some punctuated moment of insight is being deliberately frustrated because such an assumption is misleading, looking for the wrong thing, for some hidden content, rather than attentive to a still indeterminate and more temporally extended and socially embedded formation process. The profile can suggest that something is ongoing, not completed, being resolved rather than already resolved, so that our normally assumed time frame for coming to understand another is arbitrarily compressed.

This is remarkable given what the close-up is famously able to do.³³ Consider for the sake of contrast Carl Dreyer's paradigmatic use of Maria Falconetti in his *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) with the more passive and confused face of Lorna. (I am also convinced, but cannot prove, that the Dardennes are thinking of Falconetti in the way they cut the hair and photograph and to some extent heroize the Albanian actress Arta Dobroschi in *The Silence of Lorna* [figs. 5–6].)³⁴

And for the fourth technique there is something we have already noted in passing: the related general issue of the representation of psychological states in all the films, and *The Son* in particular. Not only do we not very often simply see much of the face; when we do, what we see is sometimes unreadable, nearly blank.³⁵ There is a flicker of remorse and concern from Lorna in the scene from which the last image was taken, but there is also a long scene in a single take where Lorna is trying to decide whether to defy her gang and divorce Claudy rather than kill him. She knows that she must

32. See Paul Coates, *Screening the Face* (New York, 2012), pp. 29–35, and Rushton, "Empathic Projection in the Films of the Dardenne Brothers," p. 310.

33. For a rousing panegyric, see Jean Epstein, "Magnification," trans. Stuart Liebman, in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, trans. Richard Abel et al., ed. Abel (Princeton, N. J., 1988), pp. 235–41. "The close-up, the keystone of the cinema, is the maximum expression of this *photogénie* of movement" (p. 236). "The close-up is drama in high gear. . . . Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. Ever closer it presses against me, and I follow it face to face. It's not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. It is in me like a sacrament. Maximum visual acuity" (pp. 238–39). All of this the brothers invite and then refuse.

34. The picture of arrogant men in Dreyer's film deciding the fate of Joan is repeated in the gang's discussions of Lorna. The intensity of Lorna's final (and crazy) belief that she is pregnant is also an echo of Joan's intense commitment (to the point of insanity).

35. This is something that has been noted by several critics. See Jacques Rancière, "Le Bruit du peuple, l'image de l'art: a propos de *Rosetta* et *L'Humanité*," *Cahiers du Cinema*, no. 540 (1999): 110–12. I disagree with Rancière that the effect here is Brechtian and am arguing for an alternative, but his point about the confluence of both realist and modernist elements in their films is an important one.

show evidence of physical abuse to get the quick divorce that she needs (this will save Claudy's life and, she hopes, still satisfy her bosses), but there is a remarkable *stillness* in this scene of deliberation. We detect very little mental movement, we might say, at least nothing visible in her face. At its conclusion she seems to have decided nothing, then very suddenly, she acts, and we jump in our seats. She calmly sets a cup down and then violently slams her upper arm against the doorframe. We see, at least, no moment of deliberation or even preparation to act. There is almost a pure picture here of, and a deliberately isolated focus on, the *seamless* relation between inner deliberation and bodily movement, almost as if this bodily movement, itself rich in meaning, freighted with both self-punishment, self-sacrifice, and a strategic deed for the sake of a quick divorce, was going to happen all along, as if the pacing and deliberating did not bear directly on the action. She simply sets her cup down, and then, suddenly, this is what we see (fig. 7).

Of course, suspicions about human psychology as a kind of inner citadel of occurrent states and dispositions, uniquely accessible to a subject's mind, have long been a feature of post-Hegelian European philosophy, prominent in very different ways, with different implications, in Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and the French structuralist and poststructuralist moment, as well as in the modernist novel. But arguably, to summarize with wild abandon, we still do not have a very good sense of *what it would be to be free* of the grip of such illusory Cartesian or Christian or subjectivist pictures, what it would be to live out a whole form of life, day to day, in complex interactions with others, *not* informed (and self-deceived) about itself in such ways, and credibly set in a world that determines what forms such interactions shall take (and may not take). As we have seen in the critical reaction we have been tracking in the notes, the idea that the Dardennes' unusual technique shows us that the characters are mysteriously other—that we are blocked from their inside, that much in them is hidden, and so forth—remains prominent in that literature (as would be attempts to apply the notions of the unconscious or self-deceit). If we give up this sort of mystification, we can see that there are glimmers of such a positive possibility, such a different idea of mindedness itself and therewith possible mutual comprehension, in these films, even in a social world with little room, if any, for such a possibility of such objective subjectivity. When Wittgenstein spoke of being in “the grip of a picture,” and when we ask here what it would be to be free from such a grip, we usually do not mean anything as literal as a picture.³⁶ But this is exactly what I am

36. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S.

suggesting. What we need is such new, densely textured pictures, something available uniquely in fine art and film. Since our evaluative judgments are tied to what we have come to understand about a person's deeds, and since such an assessment brings with it different possible assumptions about *what* we need to understand and evaluate, all of these issues are in play as we try to understand what happens between Olivier and Francis (*The Son*), Igor and Assita (*The Promise*), Bruno and Sonia (*The Child*), and Lorna and Claudy (*The Silence of Lorna*).

Moreover, the Dardenne picture is not that of the neutral or affectless subjects of some modernist novels. The chief characters in some Heinrich von Kleist and Franz Kafka and Maurice Blanchot novels are not governed by the conventions of psychological realism. Those conventions have been suspended, and the result is more like fable or parable; whereas characters like Meursault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger* are frightening because something is clearly lacking or missing, something that makes them stand out, like a sociopath but clearly not like the insane.³⁷ We do not have here, in other words, either a traditional psychological realism or the mere *absence* of such realistic interiority. The films show us that any possible self-relation in view in the films is never divorced from whatever outer relations are possible. They show what possible courses of action are closed or open, and so an intimation of genuine, but not individualist, subjectivity is visibly emergent in (and only in) these personal interchanges and in what they try to do—manifestations of such subjectivity that must therefore be understood in a way not captured by conventional assumptions. An intimation, because characters often can only sense something essential to such expression as missing, not allowed, blocked, and so they struggle against it; in effect, they form themselves in the struggle. This is paradigmatically true not only of Rosetta but also in Igor's promise (something only he knows about), in Bruno's hurried reversal about selling his child, in Lorna's resistance to the terrible pressure applied by the gang.³⁸

Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, ed. Hacker and Schulte (Malden, Mass., 2009), § 115, p. 53; my trans. And see § 422–6.

37. See Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York, 1989).

38. Likewise, just as it would be wrong to infer that these frequent blank or unrevealing faces suggest an absence of any interiority, so it would not be right to say that these characters are unreflective because they are not discursively or linguistically reflective. The form of reflection is a kind of agitated, inchoate, but not chaotic self-sentiment; a much larger topic. The same could be said about any supposed affective blankness. It would be a mistake to think this suggests a lack of emotional depth or affectlessness. See Rushton again on "empathic projection" and his references to Michael Fried's account, "Emphatic Projection in the Films of the Dardenne Brothers," p. 313.

And only an intimation, because it is only with repeated viewings of the films that such a picture begins to come into cinematic focus.

4

There is one interchange in which this all comes to a very fine point. Whatever else Olivier may want in *The Son*—revenge, closure, perhaps even another son—he also wants what we want: understanding, the capacity to render something more intelligible.³⁹ In this case, he clearly wants to understand how it is possible for an eleven-year-old boy to commit murder.⁴⁰ He seems to realize in some abstract way that he should be having the same violent, passionate, desperate reaction of his ex-wife simply on hearing the news that Francis had been released. He doesn't, and Olivier cannot tell the truth to his ex, so he pretends that he has not taken him on as an apprentice. But after his initial moment of panic, it is clear that he cannot bring himself to give up the chance to observe such a boy close-up, however painful it might be to constantly confront again and again what happened to his son. He follows Francis furtively through town, goes through his things, steals his keys and slips into Francis's apartment, and in a moving scene even lies down on his bed, as if trying to inhabit his space, as if trying for a form of mimetic understanding of the young boy. (We are thereby shown the striking similarity of Francis's and Olivier's apartment: cold, spare, empty of any signs [any external signs] of personality or comfort. They both seem to have a kind of stalled life.)

It is not the case though that even this much is clear to Olivier or, at least, that there is much more to what he is doing than he can formulate. He gives his basic answer to this "why" question in a tense scene with his ex-wife, who has followed Olivier because she suspects he was lying and that he did in fact take on their son's murderer as an apprentice. Yet again the cut ends before the scene does; there is a radical jump cut before anything in the parking lot has ended. The genuineness of Olivier's answer in the scene is at the

39. Olivier has a remarkable ability to estimate distances intuitively. He has a passion for such precision in his work, and we sense that he brings that passion to this question, that he is after something far more determinate and specific than will be possible. He will have to learn somehow to accept this, and it appears that he does. This theme is also a reference to a kind of intuitive, non-discursive knowledge. Olivier says he knows how to do this "d'habitude," from practice or out of habit.

40. One of the reasons I am somewhat hesitant about Levinasian categories in understanding the film is that Olivier's attempt is not something like an attempt to subsume Francis under Olivier's regime of meaningfulness, let us say, by contrast with a supposedly purer encounter with Francis's wholly other status, a status that breaks through rather than is incorporated in such a regime. That would just mystify what Olivier quite understandably wants to understand, not encounter. This still leaves open the question of what, if anything, he does ultimately understand.

heart of what the film is attempting to work out. She asks, “Who do you think you are? Nobody would do this. So why you?” There is a long pause and he says simply, “I don’t know.” (As in the closing scenes, Olivier’s heavy breathing is unusually prominent on the sound track. This both reminds us of what was extinguished in the strangulation murder of his son, the burden of memory he must carry, and provides us with another powerful image of the inner-outer relation criterial for action.) We want immediately to say to ourselves, he means “I don’t know *yet*,” that he has a reason, an end, that he just cannot now formulate. Or we want to say that he means his action is multiply motivated, and he can’t isolate his chief motive, what would still move him to act, even if he had none of the others. There is no sense that this “I don’t know” is simply the best Olivier can do, as if someone more articulate or reflective could do better. So while it is true that Olivier might retrospectively be able to make some sort of sense of what happened between him and Francis, it is not by way of discovery. To insist on forcing the narrative into such a standard form is again to miss both the power and the point of the film.

Further, in another convention, we would normally say that Olivier is trying to understand what is and was inside Francis; especially what he was thinking and feeling when he killed Olivier’s son during a robbery gone bad.⁴¹ That, we think, is how we explain what people do, by reference to their purpose in doing it, to what they had in mind, as if, again, we could isolate such content. Once we know that, we think, we might go on to ask, whatever that internal makeup was, how it got to be that way, what brought it about. Perhaps that would excuse or mitigate blame. But given that answer to his wife, Olivier could just as well be said to be trying to find out why *he* is doing what he is doing, and to do so simply by doing it. More generally, however conventional and familiar, such a way of understanding—access to the hidden inner of another—is denied us by the film, and the suggestion is that the problem is not uniquely true of Francis (that his psychological interior is rather minimal or medicated away), but that the assumption of determinate interiority is bound to lead us astray in all cases.⁴²

At any rate, Olivier never finds out anything determinate as to why Francis did what he did. He gets a chance to ask Francis point blank, but

41. For more discussion of this persistent but false picture of mutuality, see Pippin, “Passive and Active Skepticism in Nicholas Ray’s *In a Lonely Place*,” *Nonsite* 55, nonsite.org/issue-5-agency-and-experience

42. Again it is the repetition of this theme—the unavailability of any pure interiority for characters in *The Promise*, *Rosetta*, and *The Child* especially—that establishes that something of larger significance is at issue than the personal history of the individuals involved. Readers of Stanley Cavell will recognize that this illusion, and the implications of avoiding it, are central issues in his work; see the discussion of Cavell in *ibid.*

the response is like most of the other psychological indicators in the film: flat, minimal. They are on a trip to Olivier's family's lumberyard so that Francis can learn about different kinds of wood. The preparation for the trip has been quite ominous, and there is a moment when Olivier stops the car suddenly, throwing the sleeping Francis forward violently. Olivier at one point refuses to shake Francis's hand. There is a definite sense of possible violence in the air. So Olivier finally asks the decisive question. "Why did you kill?" He clearly means, "What made you think it was alright to kill someone for a car radio?" But Francis assumes he is just asking for details and explains that he was surprised that there was someone in the car, that the son grabbed him and wouldn't let go, so he tried to break free by grabbing him by the throat and ended up strangling him. (Francis in effect gives the same kind of non-answer answer ["He wouldn't let go, that's why I strangled him"] that Olivier gave to his wife, when she first asked Olivier why he was even considering taking Francis on, "To teach him carpentry." And, in effect, both of them also give a version of the "I don't know" answer when they are being straightforward. The phrase *deux fois* resonates again.)

We see no remorse from Francis; on the contrary, he exhibits a dogged, adolescent self-justification (the son was killed simply because "he wouldn't let go"). Remorse, we can postulate, would require considerably more understanding of what he did and its consequences than Francis can muster up. Of course, he doesn't know who is interrogating him and why, but we don't get the sense that he understands much more of what happened to him and because of him than this. He barely remembers how old he was when he went to prison. He has never heard the word *initials*. And there is no real forgiveness from Olivier either (now or ever) and no real way to understand what happened from Francis's point of view. There is *barely* a detectable point of view there, at least as it would be traditionally understood. The same camera technique (what we might call the refusal of the revelatory close-up) and the same signs of minimalist, not yet fully determinate, psychological interiority are characteristic of the treatment of Rosetta in *Rosetta*, Igor in *The Promise*, Bruno in *The Child*, and Lorna in *The Silence of Lorna*. It is here in the question of why this is so that the similarities among these characters arise, as does the question of their sociohistorical, distinctive world.⁴³

43. It would take a separate and lengthy study to establish with any credibility that there is at work here an attempt to understand the link between an ever more radical absence of *any* standing or status, *any* recognitive respect, and the altered, reduced psychological determinacy in the portrayal of these characters (as opposed to working, recognized characters like Olivier and Samantha). Moving away from a conventional view about inner-outer relations is certainly

In *The Son*—in many ways a much more intimate, narrowly focused film than most of the others—we get a glimpse of such missing possibilities for social connectedness and the difference such connectedness might make in mutual comprehensibility. (Francis seems to have no family that cares for him. His mother’s boyfriend doesn’t want him around. He has no contact with his father. And he is a product of the juvenile prison system, one result of which is that he has clearly been over-medicated.) But especially in *The Son*, we see that there is the hint of a mode of mutual understanding that has nothing to do with punctuated moments of insight into the other but is the result of a variety of longer term, complex diachronic development and interactions, much of which are public, action-based, worked out in a variety of different contexts that seem to have nothing to do, initially, with the issue. (Eating together, playing a Foosball table game together, working together on Francis’s carpenter’s box, helping the boy carry his load [his “burden”] and much else.) Even the moments when Francis reacts with abject fear when he learns who Olivier is and Olivier chases Francis down and begins to throttle him are made to seem relevant to a form of mutual understanding or acknowledgement that cannot be summarized discursively or driven forward by dialogue or reflection. (This is the last instance of a form of mimetic understanding in which Olivier finds himself to have assumed the position of Francis with respect to his son.)

5

I note in conclusion that we have produced sufficient reason to believe that the Dardennes are in their own way quite sensitive to the implications of this way, a socially mediated way, of thinking about what is involved in trying to understand what people do. The conditions in which such agency exists—or let us say, in general, the possibility of leading a life in a way that can be understood by themselves and others—are, for some, profoundly threatened. In the films where the social conditions under which the characters live are quite prominent and clearly assumed to be relevant to understanding what happens—*The Promise*, *Rosetta*, *The Child*, *The Silence of Lorna*—persons are not externally constrained. But the limited sphere of social possibilities and social mobility, and the pathological nature of the socially formative influences on Igor, or Rosetta, or Bruno, and the inhumanity and falseness of the world Lorna is locked into, do not just mean

important for such an issue and that is all that can be suggested here. A future study of the issue in *Rosetta* is planned.

that the situation of these characters is unjust and that we should perhaps take that into account in assessing whatever wrongs they may have committed. Something fundamental in even their relation to themselves—their ability to understand and evaluate themselves as conventional candidates for standard intentional explanation—is put in question. The possibility of self- and other-understanding is shown to be, in such a world, a kind of luxury, one made possible by the leisure and security these characters do not have, cannot ever expect to have. The consequences of not having it are on view in those films. (We cannot easily, or even with difficulty, imagine what happens after the ending of a Dardenne film, because *the characters* can't. 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.)

The most telling case is that of Rosetta, who—unrecognized, ignored, and in an economy with no place for her—is reduced by her marginalized status to a hunter-gatherer or almost animal level of existence. People so reduced, so far outside the world of production and consumption that confers whatever status is available in a modern world, or who are “illegal” and have no standing to call on authority to address wrongs committed, do not just passively suffer and remain as they were.⁴⁴ The strange neutrality and near-blankness of expression that we see in Igor, Rosetta, Bruno, Lorna, and Francis reflects then another implication of taking seriously the notion that the relation between inner and outer in our understanding of others and of what they do is dialectical, not cleanly separable. In more fully recognized and socially integrated characters like Olivier and Samantha, the non-isolability of the agent as possessor of an inner world means a kind of provisionality and instability in their initial self-understanding and thereby in our possible understanding. Conventionally, we see what they do as *the exteriorization of something interior*, and that is not wrong, but such states are not something fully determinate and identifiable except as exteriorized and thereby in a domain where *what* has been exteriorized is contestable as well as recognizable. So whatever stops Olivier from harming Francis when he has his hands around his neck is not something we are invited to tie to some conclusion he has reached or decision he has made about Francis, even though it is obviously not unrelated to how he feels, to what is going on in his mental life, to some mode of comprehension in which his view of Francis changes. The change is marked by the first ex-

44. In the case of Rosetta and Bruno, their relation to the natural world seems like evolution in reverse, so reduced are their circumstances.

pression of intense emotion in Francis's face and in Olivier's torment as he releases the boy, after which they both revert to their neutral, stern demeanor. (As noted, perhaps finding himself doing to Francis what Francis did to his son gives Olivier some form of mimetic understanding. See the striking look of amazement on Francis's face; his wonder that he is not being killed [fig. 8].) This indeterminacy is due to the fact that what he is doing, "teaching Francis," is not complete, the event in the world that he is bringing about cannot yet be determinately specified. (This is indicated again by the typical way the film ends so abruptly, without any "natural" fulfillment of their joint deed.) Their final scene of reconciliation, when Francis walks slowly back to where Olivier is loading planks, begins to help, and, with Olivier's quiet acquiescence, joins him in tying down and wrapping up the load, is silent, played out *in what they do*; and in that action, what Olivier is doing is not driven by any thought about what he ought to do, yet nor is it mindless or unintentional. Their joint action seems to suggest that they have *silently* found some way to wrap up or tie together—tentatively—what they have jointly achieved with respect to the past.⁴⁵ It is also obviously of major importance to the filmmakers (and the mark of another huge difference between *The Son* and most of their other films) that that way involves meaningful work (and non-alienated craftsman labor at that), the possibility of which is wholly absent in *The Promise*, *Rosetta*, *The Child*, and *The Silence of Lorna* (figs. 9–10).

By contrast, in the unrecognized and marginal characters, we see evidence of a kind of deep interiorization of the minimal exterior possibilities and the limitations of their social world, but not in a way that simply reduces them to victims of such objective conditions and certainly not to objects. We return again to the moments of resistance mentioned earlier but in the limited, restricted ways objectively possible in the world they inhabit. I mean such moments as when Rosetta, while going to sleep at her

45. Everything is different between them, a mode of understanding has been reached, with nothing articulated, no words of regret or forgiveness; no words at all. Luc Dardenne has said that Olivier has become Francis's father, fulfills the role of father, by *teaching* him, but what he has taught him is extremely simple: "I didn't kill you." That is all they have at this point and it seems decisive in a way that is hard to state. See Joan and Dennis West, "Taking the Measure of Human Relationships: An Interview with the Dardenne Brothers," in *Committed Cinema*, p. 126. As Françoise Collin points out, the transition from a kind of state of nature, out in the forest, with living trees, where Olivier's passion for revenge seemed close to getting out of control, to the scene with manufactured planks of wood, and so an "established" paternity or at least legal patronage, is significant. They leave "l'ombre des arbres vivants pour attacher à la voiture ces arbres morts et débité en planches qu'ils doivent ramener à l'atelier. La loi du travail donne une limite à l'illimité de la passion. . . . La lutte a mort a été jouée jusqu'à sa limite" (Collin, "Le Fils," p. 213). Collins is aware of the resonances with Hegel in the relationship between this struggle and a self-liberation from the natural.

friend's place, reflectively determines in a bravely hopeful way who she is and what she will do. As one of the most pathos-filled moments in any of the Dardennes' films, the scene's minimality and simplicity is painful to watch. As Rosetta falls asleep, she manifests in what she says a form of dissociation that, we have been shown, is clearly no individual pathology. She is preparing to tell herself good night, assuming the role of the only recognizing other she can imagine in her world: herself. (She becomes her own "outside" for the realization of her "inside" [fig. 11].)

"Your name is Rosetta."

"My name is Rosetta."

"You found a job."

"I found a job."

"You've got a friend."

"I've got a friend."

"You have a normal life."

"I have a normal life."

"You won't fall in the hole."

"I won't fall in the hole."

"Good night."

"Good night."⁴⁶

46. *Rosetta*, dir. Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne (1999; New York, 2012), DVD. This is not the closing scene of that movie. And she says she will not fall into a "trou" (a hole). (I have altered the subtitle translation.) In English, to "fall into a rut" is to be numbed by routine and repetition. Rosetta would welcome that; she is afraid of *disappearing*.