

The cinematic representation of reality and an aesthetic of resistance in the Dardenne Brothers' cinema

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The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Realism

As Dudley Andrew shows in his book *What Cinema Is!: Bazin's Quest and Its Charges*, Bazin's aesthetic heritage is “first the pursuit of ‘the real’ beyond representation and mere images; second, a taste for the interaction of reality and imagination in all sorts of genres; and third, a concern for the social consequences of ‘projection,’ both in the circumstances of exhibition and in the discourse provoked by films” (Andrew, 2011, x). In this regard, I try to study the Dardenne brothers' select films in terms of Bazin's thoughts on cinematic realism. In doing so, my main question shall be: what does it mean for a film to be realist? How do stylistic choices and thematic concerns work together to create a cinematic reality?

For the Dardenne brothers, cinematic realism is the way in which the human subject challenges the outside world's pre-existing reality, and the way the camera challenges the depiction of this reality. It could be argued that, in terms of the narrative and thematic concerns, the Dardenne brothers tell stories of their marginalized characters' resistance, struggle and self-actualization in the face of the opposed, dominant reality; in terms of form and stylistic choice, they explore the possible ways through which the camera “film[s] a reality that exists outside of you and you don't have control over it.”

For the Dardennes, the great challenge is to capture the reality that “resists the camera”. (J.P Dardenne, 2010,8) This challenge, as depicted in the Dardenne brothers' films and discussed in interviews, is inevitably associated with a cinematic discourse of resistance, which could be examined in different dialectical relationships weaved around one's encounter with reality, as well as her/his commitment to changing it, or making a flight beyond its limitations and pre-determined structures. Two discourses of resistance can be found in their realist filmmaking style, which is dialectic between the documentary and fiction. The first is when reality resists fiction for depicting the truth as it is, and the second is fiction's resistance to reality in order to create a cinematic version of reality. In terms of narrative and thematic concerns, one could see the resistance of the Dardennes' marginalized bodies against the dominant brutal reality. The latter explores the way in which the socially ostracized and politically ignored try to create their own space of hope within the order and structure of the opposing reality, determined by the force of the global neoliberal economy and its new post-colonial forms of inequality and exploitation.

Thus, this paper will begin by examining the Dardennes' realist filmmaking style, and then the humanist discourse provoked by their films' subject matter. Indeed, I intend to show how their realist filmmaking falls within the context of European neorealist cinema, and in the light of André Bazin's thoughts on cinematic realism. In particular, I will argue that the Dardenne brothers, while deeply influenced by European neorealist as well as European leftist film traditions, practice a manner of corporeal and spatial cinematic realism created by the interactions of actor, space, and camera. I will argue that, like neorealist filmmakers, they use a realistic *découpage* composed of deep-focus *mise-en-scène*, long takes, and moving cameras to tell their stories. In brief, I will study

the dialectic relationships between the ethical, the spiritual and the political with the stylistic and narrative strategies of the Dardennes' films.

Luc and Pierre Dardenne are filmmakers from the French-speaking part of Belgium. *The Promise*, their first feature film, was released in 1996. Their reputation grew with *Rosetta* (1999) and *The Child* (2004), as well as *The Son* (2002) and *The Silence of Lorna* (2008). In their films, the Dardenne brothers offer their account of social realism with a particular focus on marginalized or working-class youth characters. These characters inhabit the post-industrial urban landscape of eastern Belgium – Seraing, a working-class city on the Meuse River.

This study will focus on the Dardenne brothers' feature films *The Silence of Lorna* (2008) and *The Promise* (1996). I have chosen these films for their common subject matter, as well as their humanist, ethical and socio-historical concerns, namely the notion of paternity in the context of post-industrial, neoliberal Europe. In these films, paternity could be considered the most primary and everlasting of human relationships, which is reproduced, expanded through, and influenced by one's other relationships and encounters with "the other". In particular, I intend to study the cinematic representation of these films' vulnerable characters – namely children and teenagers, as well as females – and their struggles, resistance to the patriarchal based on power relationships, and the brutal reality of a material dog-eat-dog order of a neoliberal society, and strive to stand up for themselves in the face of the other as well as the physical world's reality.

In this paper, I shall argue that the Dardenne brothers' realistic cinema exemplifies a contemporary example of Bazin's thoughts on cinematic realism, visualized through spatial and corporeal *mise-en-scène* and camerawork in realistic cinematic time. It could

be argued that the Dardenne brothers propose one possible reading of Bazin's stylistic concerns, which are highly influenced by the documentary filmmaking approach to reality, as well as the interactions of bodies, objects and space in creating cinematic realism. In terms of Bazin's humanist concerns, the Dardennes resurrect the Italian neorealists' humanist commitments to the human condition in post-war Europe through the stories of the ethical and social challenges of the marginalized characters within the normalized social order of the so-called modern, post industrial and neoliberal Europe.

I. The Dardennes' Realism and the Question of Style

1. *Découpage*

Timothy Barnard, in his notes on the article, "William Wyler, the Jansenism of *Mise-en-scène*," published in his 2009 translation of *What is Cinema?*, tries to review the translations of this Bazinian expression in works of different translators and film scholars; he argues that the decision to not translate the term *découpage* in English "has been taken not because of a lack of possible translations, but rather to draw attention to this historical term and its importance in Bazin's critical and theoretical system and not camouflage it through translation" (Barnard, 2009, 262).

Barnard argues that for Bazin, *découpage* refers to the process through which the film narrative and *mise-en-scène* are visualized before or during the shoot and thus, quite apart from editing. (264) He refers to Bazin's explanation of the term in "William Wyler" as "the aesthetic of the relationships between shots – as they are conceived not as they are edited" (Bazin, qtd. in Barnard 2009). Accordingly, it might be argued that Bazin's notion of *découpage* refers to both *mise-en-scène* and camera work, or cinematography,

as two decisive elements of creating cinematic realism. In this respect, one could argue that Bazin's "spatial unity" and "spatial continuity" is created through a filmmaker's method of *découpage*. Similarly, and in terms of narrative and thematic concerns, the filmmakers' stylistic choices in film *découpage* could create that "ambiguity of reality" which, according to Bazin, lays the ground for different readings and perceptions of projected cinematic reality (Bazin, 2009, 100-101).

For Bazin, this cinematic spatial and temporal unity, continuity, and also ambiguity of the represented reality and the different possible narratives it could create, provides the filmmakers, as well as the spectator, a cinematic experience of reality, which becomes a substitute for reality. This new cinematic style, according to Bazin, was crystallized in the films of Italian neorealist film authors; in particular, Roberto Rossellini. (*Cinematic Realism*, 243).

Based on these elements, I shall argue in this paper that the Dardenne brothers' cinema is profoundly influenced by the Italian neorealist filmmaking and a tradition of its Francophone reception. Indeed, one could study their corpus of works as the inheritors of Bazin's theoretical heritage, as well as Rossellini-the-author's socio-historically conscious, humanist-realist filmmaking style. In this sense, one can trace the continuity and transformation of Italian neorealism's subject matter, as well as stylistic strategies, over the course of several decades: from postwar Europe to contemporary neoliberal Europe in the films of the Dardenne brothers.

In this regard, I try to examine the Dardennes' approach to film *découpage* through their *mise-en-scène* and camera works in the films *The Promise* and *The Silence of Lorna*.

1-1. *Mise-en-scène* and Spatial Continuity

Bazin argues that filmmakers' stylistic choices about *mise-en-scène* are the most genuine method of creating cinematic realism through maintaining the spatial unity and continuity. As Thomas Elssasser notes in “A Bazanian Half-Century,” Bazin’s term ‘spatial density’ describes his idea of cinema’s unique form of realism: “Shuttling between ‘documentary’ and ‘fiction,’ but nonetheless making both a condition of their ‘truth’” (Elssasser, 2010, 7). Similarly, one could argue that the Dardennes' realist filmmaking style, in a sense, could be studied as a form of realism that is “shuttling between ‘documentary’ and ‘fiction.’” This is what the Dardenne brothers explore in their realist and highly humanist filmmaking style; this also resonates in Jean Pierre Dardenne's response to a question about whether one could see their films in terms of a social activism influenced by their documentaries; as he says:

...to draw a further connection between the documentaries and our fictional work, that is the documentaries that we used to make, you go to film a reality that exists outside of you and you don't have control over it – it resists your camera. You have to take it as it is. So we try to keep that aspect of documentary in our fiction, to film something that resists us. And we try not to show everything or see everything. The character and the situation remain in the shadows and this opacity, this resistance, gives the truth and the life to what we're filming. (J.P Dardennes, 2010, 8)

Thus, the Dardennes' films offer a manner of cinematic realism created from their approach to the notion of resistance. There is a reality that flows in a parallel with the dominant reality, challenging it. This reality, in the Dardennes' films, is the way the

cast out, marginalized characters resist against the brutal, dominant social reality formed and controlled by the neoliberal economy and its power-based relationships. They resist this reality, for they believe in something beyond the current, possible reality. This space of hope in the Dardennes' aforementioned films crystallized around the promise of a future in which they could be seen, counted, and enjoyed a normal life. However, as their desired reality conflicts with the dominant reality, the dominant social order insists on ignoring them. As Luc Dardenne, referring to Hannah Arendt' description of the pariah, says: "but he who, like the pariah, is sent away [congédié] by society cannot think himself as relieved of the situation [tirer d'affaire](despite the judgment) since society continues to assert that it is real and tends to make him believe that he is unreal, that he is nobody."(L.Dardenne 2008, 71 quoted in Mai 76)

In this way, the Dardenne brothers create a semi-fictional, semi-real world through a cinematic form which is neither a purely documented version of reality, nor a purely fictional one, but rather a fictitious/virtual account of the ongoing reality which could create spaces of hope and a line of flight beyond the current, inhuman situation, or even simply what the physical and objective world oppose as the only possible reality.

From the following passages, I shall examine the way in which the Dardennes' camera creates their spatial as well as corporeal realist filmic continuity through the human body in relation to the urban and domestic spaces, everyday objects, and other humans. In doing so, one possible question centers on how they create their fictional narrative through spatial as well as corporeal realist filmmaking. As well, how does their realism challenge viewers with ethical and humanitarian questions? Indeed, I will

examine the way the Dardennes' *mise-en-scène* and camera in the films *The Promise* and *The Silence of Lorna* visualizes the notion of paternity as the most immediate, and at the same time, the most life-long and influential form of human/children encounters with the other, through a corporeal as well as spatial realism.

The story of *The Promise* is about Igor, a working-class teenager who works for his father, Roger, in a construction business outside Antwerp, in Belgium, in which Roger employs and exploits illegal immigrants. One day, when government inspectors come to visit the site, Igor runs to tell Amidou – an immigrant from Burkina Faso who has recently arrived with his wife Assita and their newborn child Tiga – to hide from the labour inspectors. Amidou loses his balance, falls from a scaffold, and is severely injured. Igor hears his fall and runs back to dying Amidou and tries to stop him bleeding. Amidou, with his final words, asks Igor to look after his wife and baby. Igor promises Amidou to take the responsibility of Amidou's family, and over the course of the film, we see Igor challenging both his loyalty to his father and his decision to carry out his promise to Amidou.

The Silence of Lorna is the story of a young Albanian immigrant, Lorna, who is determined to open a snack bar in Belgium with her boyfriend, Sokol. In order to realize her plan, Lorna gets involved in a white wedding (or marriage of convenience) with a Belgian drug addict, Claudy. This marriage, planned and managed by Fabio, an Italian taxi driver and human trafficker, will give Lorna Belgian citizenship. It is implied that Fabio has been offered a great amount of money by a Russian immigrant who intends to marry Lorna to acquire citizenship as well. Thus, he has decided to devise a plot for killing Claudy smoothly, so that the authorities will not be suspicious of his intentions.

However, Lorna suggests the solution of divorce instead of having Claudy killed. Indeed, as it shown, throughout her short period of marriage and cohabiting with him, she avoids any emotional involvement, but she does not want Claudy dead and as the film progresses she realizes that she becomes more intimate and emotionally concerned with him. Claudy wants to overcome his addiction and tries to win Lorna's affections. However, Fabio, in order to prevent his plan being spoiled, makes certain that Claudy is given a heroin overdose. Claudy's death profoundly influences Lorna both mentally and physically, and it is implied, after hearing of Claudy's death, Lorna intuits that she is pregnant. Fabio tries to force Lorna to get an abortion but she refuses and resists against Fabio's will. Eventually, Fabio's plan fails and he decides to get one of his men to drive Lorna out of the country. Lorna, as it seems, notices that they will probably attempt to kill her, and manages to escape from the driver. She runs through the woods. We see her, desperate yet resilient, trying to find a shelter in an unoccupied house. Lorna talks with her unborn child and promises her child that she is ready to take any necessary risks to protect it. The film does not show whether Lorna is pregnant, or if this is just a fantasy that stems from feelings of guilt for Claudy's death (Koutsourakis, 2010).

In the very beginning of *The Promise*, we see Igor pumping gasoline at the garage where he works, just as an old woman drives up with a problem with her car's fan belt. Igor fixes it and then gets into her car to start the engine. He sees the woman's wallet on the seat next to him and steals it. When the old lady wants to offer Igor a tip for helping her, she notices that her wallet is missing. Igor suggests that the old lady should go back at once to the parking lot where her car had been sitting and to look around, for she may have dropped her wallet. Then he goes through the garage to a backyard where he

removes the wad of bills and buries the wallet. Here, the Dardennes introduce two essential thematic concerns, visualized in the relationships between their characters and two spatial and material elements of their *mise-en-scène*: land and money. As the film progresses, we see how these three elements – the film space or *mise-en-scène*, humans, and the economic concerns of land and money – become interconnected in the Dardennes’ narratives of human subjectivity and ethical challenges in relation to others and outside reality. As Luc Dardenne explains about “the omnipresence of money” in their films in an interview with Bert Cardullo:

Money governs our relations with others to a certain extent, which is not necessarily negative. Money gives you the means to change your life, and in this film, all the characters want to change their lives – and the only way of achieving this in our day and age is with money. Unlike many films, ours don’t treat money as if it were something shameful: we show it for what it is. It’s just there. And we want to depict human characters whom viewers won’t judge as they do in real life. Money, after all, can permit moral as well as immoral behaviour. When Lorna opens a bank account to deposit money for Claudy’s child – her unborn child – it’s beautiful money. (L. Dardenne 2010, 13)

Similarly, in *The Silence of Lorna*, in the very first scene, Lorna is introduced counting her money and depositing it into the account which she and Sokol will use to buy their dreamed snack bar. Later in this scene, Lorna reminds the bank teller that she has made an appointment with the bank manager; as she says this, one might interpret a sudden, warm glimpse of hope in her face. It seems that this appointment is about a loan for which she has become eligible as a Belgian citizen: an apparently legal status she

obtained through a convenient marriage with an addicted Belgian. This is how *The Silence of Lorna*, like *The Promise*, in the very beginning composes a prelude to a film structured around the closed cycle of transition, transformation, and transference of money, land, and human beings.

Thus, in both films, the Dardennes try to visualize their narratives of struggle, despair, hope, and resistance in relation to the notions of money, land, and the way these transactional commodities connect people who share a historical period: post-industrial Europe in the face of expanding global neoliberalism. It could be argued that they are stories of people who are moving, transiting, and inhabiting the in-between spaces, in the borders of things; either the real ones, like those between countries, or the more abstract ones: between morality and immorality, objective and subjective, individual and collective, and most of all, reality, the human perception of reality, and the imagination. In this section, I shall examine *The Promise* in terms of *mise-en-scène* and spatial continuity.

I would argue that in *The Promise* the white house that Roger plans to build represents the whole body of the film's cinematic space. It acts as the reference *mise-en-scène* and provides the film with the spatial continuity through which all the film's events and characters are connected and signified. The Dardennes' *mise-en-scène* in *The Silence of Lorna*, like *The Promise*, is composed through the interplay of characters' bodies and their related objects in space. However, while in *The Promise*, the white house and its inhabitants provide the films' main *mise-en-scène* and spatial continuity, the *mise-en-scène* in *Lorna* has a fluid nature composed of characters' movements, gestures, and various other physical actions and reactions in different urban

settings of Liege. Indeed, it seems that the transitional state of this cosmopolitan European city – to which desperate immigrants are trafficked in pursuit of a secure future, as well as the uncertain, vulnerable, and always-to-be-questioned identities of its immigrants and outcast natives like Claudy – influenced the fluid, unstable, distant, and observatory qualities of the Dardennes' style of *mise-en-scène* in *The Silence of Lorna*.

In *The Promise*, the character of Roger, with his various authoritative roles in relation to his subordinates, can be understood as an embodiment of a father figure, both in its literal sense within the family as well as its possible metaphoric senses within society (Razavi 2012, 4-5). In this sense, as Joseph Mai argues, we may examine the characters of fathers in the Dardennes' films within the broader context of their material, humanist cinema, in which characters struggle to survive in a godless world (Mai, 2008, 46). In this way, the authoritative status of “God the father” could be reproduced through different socio-economic and political manifestations of paternal, power-based relationships.

Thus *The Promise*, like *The Son* and *The Child*, as Mai also notes, challenges the relationships between fathers and sons. Luc Dardenne, in an interview with the journal *Multitudes* and quoted in Joseph Mai's “Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne,” describes paternity through the myth of Cronos: “the Titan who killed his father Uranus and, fearful of an oracle that declared he would be overthrown by his progeny, devoured each of his children at birth. The myth implies so strong an attachment to power that Cronos wants to control time and prevent the present from evolving into a future without his mastery.” Luc Dardenne explains: “The idea when we made *La Promesse* was that today we lived in the time of Cronos who eats his children, who fears dying, who fears losing his life in

leaving life to others, and who therefore hasten to kill to conserve his life. We thought that Roger had something of this character that killed his son. Igor is killed by his father” (L. Dardenne 2003, qtd. in Joseph Mai, 45-46). In this way, we may examine the way that the Dardennes depict the themes of paternity and its associated material issues, as well as ethical choices in the age of global neo-liberalism and their effects on the people who must live and walk within this landscape.

In *The Promise*, Roger, with his huge, nervous body and his movements within his territory – the white house construction site – embodies a patriarch, a landlord; in this sense, he becomes the visual manifestation of Cronos devouring his son, preventing him from attaining a genuine human living (Razavi, 2012, 5-6). Roger is involved in a black-market business of importing illegal immigrants. Indeed, he exploits undocumented working class immigrant to work on his construction site; he helps them to immigrate and in return, make money out of them and forced them to work on his dreamed white house that he is going to build. As we see throughout the film, he refers to this as what he wants for his family, in particular for his son Igor, as a promise of a secure future. In this way, he tries to make Igor obey him and, in a way, guarantees his cooperation in his illegal business through a number of ties that are based on a material nature. He makes Igor participate in the family business, draws their promise of friendship on his skin with a tattoo, and buys him a ring similar to his own (Mai, 2010, 46). However, as the film progresses, we see how Igor – through a kind of self-realization (that he shares with other teenaged and young characters in the Dardennes’ cinema) – gradually becomes distanced from his father and instead gets closer to Amidou’s widow and son, who like Igor become victims of the material-based human relationships and dog-eat-dog cycle of

exploitation caused by neoliberal global economy.

In one of the first scenes of the film, Amidou, working as an illegal worker on Roger's construction site, is seen tumbling from the scaffold and becoming deadly injured. We see Igor asking and Amidou resisting. Then, the Dardennes' camera moves backward, and we see them, Igor's frightened body and Amidou's bleeding body at the very foot of the white house from a distance. This shot depicts how their bodies – death, fear, and anxiety – are intertwined with the land and the building within which their lives are limited, depriving them of a genuine human life. Indeed, Amidou's death becomes the story's turning point. In this sense, the white house is not that space of hope or secure future that Roger planned for his family, in particular Igor; but rather it becomes a tomb for Amidou, an exploited black worker, as well as an affront to Igor's very humanity. When Roger discovers Igor with the wounded body, he removes the belt by which Igor was trying to stop the bleeding and causes Amidou to bleed to death. Then he asks Igor to help him bury Amidou's body deep in cement in the courtyard. Roger and Igor bury the black Amidou in the foundation of the white house upon which he died labouring. When Assita, Amidou's wife, comes back from the market, Roger tells her that her husband has fled town to avoid paying his gambling debts. This is how the white house courtyard, as the main site of construction where Amidou's body falls and is buried, becomes the cinematic space which creates this sequence's spatial continuity and, more importantly, is expanded to the film's whole spatiotemporal continuity. As it is shown, when Assita returns home and meets Roger and Igor in the courtyard, she speaks in the foreground with Roger; in the background, we can see Amidou's hidden grave in the courtyard. This notion of space and objects, or more precisely, material entities, and the way they can be

related to or even reveal human reality, can also be found in the scene in which Assita and Igor meet the African spiritualist. After the spiritualist says that Amidou is buried nearby, Assita looks for signs and cues throughout the space. Once again, we are referred to the courtyard, where Assita tries to catch the chicken around the courtyard. We see her searching through the chicken's torn-up body, and after a while, turning back to Igor and saying that the chicken guts show her husband is nearby.

In this scene, in this very personal space of Assita, all objects – Amidou's radio, her religious statue, her shopping bag, the baby's carrier, the chicken – relate Assita, her little son, Igor, and Amidou's buried corpse to each other in a circular continuity (Mai 60). Their reality is interconnected with the reality of the incomplete white house, Roger, and the socio-historical processes that have gathered these people and connected them to each other. The chicken feather is an object that connects Assita's intuitive spirituality to the very materiality that surrounds her. Thus, it might be argued that there is no metaphorically or symbolically semantic connection. In the Dardennes' cinema, and in *The Promise* in particular, objects are embedded in the very reality and materiality of the film world, and are perceived through their characters' subjective, individualistic worldviews. Indeed, they are represented and framed through their relations with the characters and are seen as a part of the whole film's reality.

In another scene, we see Igor at Assita's door. Apparently, he intends to return Amidou's radio, which he finds stolen by one of the neighbourhood's junkies. However, he also wants to tell her that Roger has faked a telegram to the African woman from Amidou, asking her to join him in Cologne; but instead, he intends to sell her into prostitution. In this carefully composed frame, Igor is standing at Assita's door curiously

and yet reserved; between Igor and Assita, in deep space, we see Assita's religious statuette, which is like many other objects in *The Promise* (as well as other films of the Dardennes) as it has its own history, story, and signification; it signifies through its very reality and material presence.

Similarly, in *The Silence of Lorna*, the Dardennes' camera seeks and captures the objects and the narratives they weave around the very reality of their characters. Characters are identified with their objects; and indeed, their objects, personal accessories, things they use every day, items of clothing, etc. all connect them to the outside, urban reality of everyday life. It seems that the Dardennes' realism is based on carefully considered relations between objects, bodies, spaces and the possible narratives they create regarding the reality of living in the contemporary profit-driven society, and the way one challenges that reality, so as to make his/her own personal space within it and draw her/his plans upon it. For instance, Claudy's envelope, containing all his material property, is not simply and merely an envelope of money, but rather, in its very materiality, a means of relating him to Lorna and their possible future child. He asks Lorna to keep it for him so that he cannot use it for buying drugs. He asks Lorna to manage his money for him, as if this envelope and its money could represent a promise of his desired care, support, and love from Lorna. As Luc Dardenne says about their carefully thought-out decisions about characters' objects and material entities and properties: "Claudy's envelope is the prop that symbolizes his relationship with Lorna. As for the costumes, after a month's work, we decided that Lorna would have a skirt and two pairs of trousers, including the red one, which makes her instantly recognizable when she walks around the city!" (L. Dardenne, 2010, 9).

The reality of Claudy's apparently small envelope, like many of the Dardennes' other objects, continues throughout the film. After his death, it becomes the embodiment of Lorna's sense of guilt and ethical responsibility toward him. We can see how she obsessively tries to keep it and save it. Finally, after she discovers (or guesses) that she has become pregnant from Claudy, she collects the envelope that she had buried and hidden under the leaves of the backyard. Then, one of the most emblematic scenes of the whole film takes place in the same bank that appeared in the first sequence of the film. However, this time we see Lorna insistently trying to convince the bank teller to open an account for her and Claudy's unborn child: the one that it seems no one expected, perhaps not even Lorna, nor is anyone really certain about its existence. In this sense, one could trace the reality lived by that self-assured, determined Lorna we see in the bank at the very beginning of the film, who wanted to save money to buy a snack bar with her boyfriend at any cost and through any possible means; and this determined but frustrated mother-lover seeking a true human reality somewhere in between her own perception of reality and the outside world, the society's and its inhabitants' reality.

On the other hand, Lorna's clothing – every piece of her material belongings and accessories – are distinguishing parts of her human reality, or more precisely feminine individuality. For example, as Luc Dardenne notes in the aforementioned interview (L. Dardenne 2008, 9), her short brown jacket and red pants make her distinguishable and recognizable when she walks around the city in pursuit of money, people, and places. She is a working-class restless body; a body of struggle, hope, and resistance who is determined to find a way out of her currently imposed reality. Like the Dardennes' Rosetta, she does not want to “fall in a rut.” We see Lorna persistently and consciously

wear her earrings, as small yet difficult-to-be-ignored signs of her very personal, distinguished human reality – or more precisely, feminine individuality – which is being threatened by Fabio’s dark business of human trafficking and marriages of convenience.

Accordingly, one could argue that in the Dardennes’ setting, all of the objects find their places within carefully designed spaces: upon and within walls, floors, doors, and corridors that in themselves and at the same time exist in relation to other elements of *mise-en-scène*, the composed film reality, and every detail of its narrative. As Daniel Morgan notes in the article “Rethinking Bazin,” it might be argued that, to Bazin, the connection of objects and bodies in cinematic space to a world outside the frame is “if not exactly severed, at least loosened” (Morgan, 2006, 456). In this respect, I would argue that the Dardennes’ framing is influenced by this Bazinian discussion of framing, which he most remarkably finds in Renoir’s films. Luc Dardenne refers to Bazin’s elaboration on Renoir’s style of framing, which does not enclose an object as does the frame of a painting – but which excludes other parts of space, suggesting continuity beyond what it encloses. Similarly, as Luc Dardenne says, the brothers intend to frame the space, objects, and characters in a way that the frames of their films are “lost in matter” (2008, 22, qtd. in Mai 62). As Mai notes, for the Dardennes, the frames engulf a spatial continuity, which is visible but is always continuous and developed beyond the frame, in and into our own experiences (Mai 2010, 62).

1.2. The Dardennes’ Corps-Camera

In the article “Theater and Film (1),” Bazin argues that the “real unity of time and space is introduced by the camera’s mobility” (TC, 176). He explains that one could find

a “hundred examples” of “the way the camera respects the set design and decor and attempts to heighten its effect, always refraining from modifying its relationships with the characters” (176). Indeed, as it seems, Bazin implies that the filmmaker's approach to *découpage*, in particular camera work and *mise-en-scène*, could create a manner of spatial integrity and continuity that provides the spectator with a projected experience of reality on the screen. In this sense, one could argue that the Dardennes use their camera to reconstruct a manner of human reality that could be described as a profoundly bodily (as well as spatially) conscious transference of human experience into the language of film. Indeed, the Dardennes treat their camera as a body in process. Perhaps it might be said that this notion also explains how in the Dardennes’ cinema, in particular films like *The Promise* (1996) and *The Silence of Lorna’s* (2008), one feels like can touch the actors’ bodies as well as the textures of their objects and clothes.

In *The Promise*, the Dardennes’ body-camera (or corps-camera) creates a manner of corporeal experience of image, a kind of unmediated experience of encountering with bodies, objects, and the space surrounding them. As Luc Dardenne says: “The movements of Benoit Dervaux carrying the camera are more subtle, alive, more felt and complex than any movement created with the help of machinery. His bust, frame, legs and feet are those of a dancer. With Amaury Duquenne (his assistant) who accompanies him and supports his movements, the two form a single body-camera” (L. Dardenne 2008, 175, qtd. in Cummings 2009, 61). He adds that the body camera “seeks to follow, it doesn’t wait, it doesn’t know” (L. Dardenne 2008, 18 qtd. in Mai). As Mai also notes, one possible effect of the Dardennes’ body camera is that the camera limits spectators’ mastery over space. And, in a sense, it creates the ambiguity and uncertainty indicated in

the very form and meaning of the Dardennes' realism (Mai 56, 2010). In this way, Alain Marcoen and Benoit Dervaux's mostly close and handheld camera is always in pursuit of the young, restless Igor or the anxious Roger. This body-camera visualizes the physicality of the film as a whole; it creates an intimate corporeal experience of the film space and its inhabitants, the Dardennes' moving bodies. In this respect, it could be argued that, to some extent, the Dardennes' approach to corps-camera and their corporeal cinema is influenced by Rossellini's filmmaking style. Indeed, once again we can trace the Bazin heritage and the Italian neorealist filmmaking tradition in the Dardennes' approach to the interrelations between camera, bodies, and space. Consider what Bazin profoundly appreciates in Rossellini's cinema:

Rossellini directs facts; it is as if his characters were haunted by some demon of movement.... Gesture, change, physical movement constitutes for Rossellini the essence of human reality... The world of Rossellini is a world of pure acts, unimportant in themselves but preparing the way (as if unbeknownst to God himself) for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning. (Bazin, GYZ, 100 qtd. in Cummings 61, 2009)

As the Dardennes explain in an interview, their camera movements are determined by the movements of their actors, and not vice versa: "Every morning that we shoot, we rehearse on location with the actors. We don't rehearse the dialogue, only the movements and rhythm. And we decide where we're going to place the camera; often it's dependent on how the actors have moved and where they've stopped. We need to see this happening in front of us in order to plan it" (J. P. Dardenne 2005, qtd. in Cumming 66). Indeed, one

might argue that the Dardennes' corps-camera invites their audience to closely observe, and mentally piece together, the partial images that the body-camera depicts. As Jean-Pierre Dardenne explains in an interview:

We have tried to film a human being, a person who speaks directly to the viewers. There's no intermediary between the eye of the spectator facing the screen and the person on the screen, her face, body, shoulders, arms and legs. We wanted to have as little intervention as possible. It had to be an almost physical relationship. (J. P. & L. Dardenne 2001)

However, in *The Silence of Lorna*, the Dardennes' corps-camera is mainly replaced with the eye-camera, or camera-as-observer. In contrast to *The Promise*, as well as the Dardennes' previous feature films – mostly shot with handheld super 16mm cameras – *The Silence of Lorna* is shot in 35mm, which creates its wider frames and more static shots (Cardullo 2010, 12). In this way, in *Lorna* the brothers employ a distant, rather than indirectly or corporeally involved, camera. In doing so, they keep their camera farther away from their characters so that they can depict them within the environment and its related objects, which define their very reality. As Jean Pierre Dardenne explains in an interview about their choices of camera work in *Lorna*: “We tested five digital cameras, a 35mm, and a super 16mm. The images shot at night with the 35mm were closest to what we wanted for this project. Plus, we had decided that this time around, the camera would not be constantly moving, would be less descriptive and limited to recording images. Because of its weight the 35mm was best suited for us” (J. P. Dardenne 2010, 12-13).

The Dardennes' approach to camera movements and position in *Lorna* in a sense recalls Bazin's argument about Jean Cocteau's *découpage* in *Les Parents terribles*. Bazin appreciates Cocteau's use of shots "from the point of view of the audience alone – of an exceptionally perspicacious viewer placed in all-seeing position" (TC 1, 178). He argues, in Cocteau's *découpage* "the subjective camera has finally been achieved" where the only possible point of view is "that of the witness to events" (TC 1, 178).

One remarkable point in Bazin's arguments about Cocteau's subjective camera, which could be found in *Lorna* as well, is that this manner of camera movement and positioning is never confused with the character's subjective view, "despite the great temptation to have it do so" (179). In *The Silence of Lorna*, the camera seems to consciously keep its distance from the characters. Indeed, in *The Silence of Lorna*, the Dardennes, instead of focusing on characters and following them closely in a way that one can see in *The Promise* or *Rosetta*, observe their characters, in particular Lorna's mostly ambiguous and unexplainable actions and decisions, from a certain distance (L. Dradenne, 2010, 13). A case in point would be the scene in which Lorna meets Russian immigrant Fabio and his translator at a disco bar. In this sequence shot, the camera participates as one of the people sitting in the bar, behind one of the tables near these strangers, curiously observing their every detail movements and gesture. Here, the Dardennes' camera-observer finds Lorna surrounded by four men, with each of whom she shares part of the reality of her yesterday, today, and future life (L. Dardenne, 2010, 13). This distant, objective, and observational camera makes it difficult to judge any of these people's intentions, choices, and ethical or material concerns. In this manner of capturing reality, where the camera prefers to observe from a safe distance, all of the

characters' body gestures and every detailed expressive emotion create the Dardennes' humanistic and corporeal realism. In this *mise-en-scène*, Dardennes composition is created around the physical relationships between the characters. This once again reminds us of Bazin's admiration of Rossellini's cinema, in which: "characters were haunted by some demon of movement" (Bazin, GYZ, 100, qtd. in Cumming 60) in such a way that their gestures, changes, and physical movements constitute the essence of human reality. The pure acts are unimportant in themselves, but prepare the way for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning (100).

V. The Dardennes' Realism and the Question of Ethics

In *The Silence of Lorna*, the main question is the issue of ethics in the very material world surrounding the characters. Lorna, like Rosetta, Assita, and other Dardennian working-class female characters, while she determinately invests all her life on her personal goal, has no way out from answering the common Dardennian concerns: Do I kill you to advance my own interests or not? Do I let you have your life or not? (L. Dardenne 2010, 8). In *Lorna*, as well as *The Promise*, this ethical question becomes associated with a deep sense of guilt, disturbs characters like Lorna and Igor, makes them always strive to move, and forces them to take responsibility for their nonconformist decisions and actions.

It could be argued that in *The Silence of Lorna's* narrative and formal system, the character of Lorna, is shown as a body in process, which with her every detailed movement, gesture, voice, speech, and walk, with all the men surrounding her, constructs and deconstructs the Dardennes' intended cinematic realism. In this respect, Lorna's

performance is vital to the film's form, its visual style as well as thematic concerns, similarly to how the white house is the most important element of the Dardennes' *mise-en-scène* in *The Promise*. This body-conscious, body-constructed, or body-driven *mise-en-scène* and its associated narrative and ethical concerns can be seen in the love scene between Lorna and Claudy, which is structured upon apparently spontaneous bodily movements and gestures. It's not clear whether it is just an act of pity, desire, or both. It could be said that her gesture towards Claudy cannot be explained or interpreted – perhaps it is simply ambiguous and unknown to Lorna herself. In the book *Jean Pierre and Luc Dardenne*, Joseph Mai examines this scene's possible meanings:

The scene is beautifully choreographed, with Claudy chasing Lorna through the apartment to get his money to buy drugs from a dealer waiting down stairs. Lorna is able to break free, lock the door from outside and throw the key out the window. But Claudy is physically driven and suffering. In what seems like an act of pity, Lorna stripped naked and walked to the entryway, where she has left Claudy and the two embrace. Their bust fills the screen, behind them only the dim white surface of a wall. On one hand they seem like Adam and Eve, separated from the outside world, starting humanity anew. On the other hand they are not in a typical Eden. Their embrace is animal-like: Renier's skeletal thinness emphasizes his vulnerability. Dobroski also seems vulnerable, though she is a bit stronger and larger-looking than Renier. Their bodies resemble the gaunt bodies of Jan Van Eyck's altarpiece at Ghent. Lorna/Eve steps out of her Paradise, the smooth running world in which she and Sokol would buy their snack bar with Garden seating, into an encounter with a dying body in need of help. (Mai,

2010,121)

After this, which could be described as the most authentic human encounter of the whole film, Claudy tells Lorna that he is trying to stop using drugs. Lorna encourages him and admires his decision. However, the Dardennian thematic concern of the sense of guilt once again disturbs Lorna and forces her to find a way out of her passivity toward the truth and the other's human reality, similar to the way it disturbs young Igor in *The Promise*. This is the point where ethical human concerns make the Dardennes' characters change. One could trace this sense of guilt to the religious, or more precisely, the catholic upbringing the Dardennes experienced (Mai 2010, 4-5). As they move from the religious and the spiritual to a secular humanist approach regarding the question of ethics, this everlasting and perhaps unconscious sense of guilt is recalled and revived in the form of a secular sense of guilt, which is associated with an existential sense of responsibility, necessitating action.

In *The Silence of Lorna*, it is Lorna's movements and body gestures towards others that forward the film's narrative and its turning points. In the scene when she helps Claudy get up from the floor, she starts to reflect on the ethical dilemma of her decision; this is the point she begins to change as a human being. This sense of guilt could be described as the Dardennes' most important ethical concerns, as they use it as a turning point in most of their realistic, minimal narratives. As Jean Pierre, in an interview, explains about this sense of guilt: "this subject interests us because it's when we feel guilty that we become more human. In all our films, it's thanks to feelings of guilt that the character breaks his or her routine, and changes (J. P. Dardenne 2010, 14). However,

Luc places more emphasis on the anti-narcissist and human conscience involved in one's sense of guilt: "but I'd say the idea of guilt, of what we're prepared to do in order to guarantee our place in the sun, has become simply a human question in our society. Take note that, for us, there is nothing morbid in this; guilt is not narcissistic because it enables us to work towards something better" (L. Dardenne 2010, 15).

The Dardennes' ethical concerns also recall Sara Cooper's argument that the Dardennes go beyond Bazin's question of the relationships between image and mortality to its relation with ethics and morality (Cooper, 2007, 66-87). In this regard, the Dardennes' command of *mise-en-scène* has become intertwined with ethical questions and choices challenging their characters as well as spectators. However, these questions and situations always become associated with varying degrees of ambiguity for characters as well as the spectators.

VI. The Dardennes' Realism and Questions of Faith, Spirituality, and Imagination

In his article "The Evolution of Film Language," Bazin – discussing cinematic realism in the works of Rossellini and De Sica – argues that neorealist filmmakers, despite their stylistic differences, endow their films with a sense of the ambiguity of reality (Bazin, 103). He explains that neorealist filmmakers like Rossellini and De Sica, through various methods and stylistic choices in their *découpage*, annihilate montage to show the true continuity of reality on the screen (103). According to Bazin, this realist cinematic experience "reproduces the ebbs and flows of our imagination," which "draws on reality," and in its final analysis, "seeks to substitute for it" (*What Is Cinema?*, 80). In this way, Bazin appreciates the images that reflect the ambiguities and complexities of

the 'real world' through the cinematic composition which is a "momentary crystallization of a reality whose presence we constantly feel" (*Theater and Cinema* 1:177).

Bazin's notion of "the ambiguity of reality," the different narratives it could create in the human mind and the way filmmakers could transfer it to a cinematic reality, may be examined in his thoughts on the confluence of the real and imaginary in projection, as well as the reception of cinematic reality. As Robert Kolker in *The Altering Eye* notes, it could be said that Bazin hopes that the filmmaker, "by aligning the image with the phenomenon of unmediated perception, will capture all the richness and 'ambiguity' of reality." Kolker argues, "by 'ambiguity,' Bazin implies a multivalence, a range of possibilities in what is seen and interpreted in a film: a freedom for the filmmaker, and especially for the spectator, to elicit meaning" (Kolker, 2007). Bazin, in particular, emphasizes that these possibilities of different perceptions of projected reality affect the viewer's intellectual relationship with the image (*Evolution* 100). Indeed, as Bazin says, it "creates a relationship between the viewer and the image which is closer to the viewer's relationship to reality." In this way, "the viewer has a more active intellectual approach, and even makes a real contribution, to the *mise-en-scène*" (*Evolution* 101). One possible sense of this Bazinian notion of ambiguity could be found in his discussion on the confluence of the real and imaginary in some select films of neorealism. Indeed, I would argue that this cinematic experience could happen for the film characters as well as the viewers or spectators. The Dardennes' characters Assita and Lorna have experiences of reality that exemplify this confluence, and they invite their viewers to share their experiences. In *The Promise* and *The Silence of Lorna*, this can be seen in the characters' personal faith and perhaps spirituality, or belief in something beyond or within the very

materiality of the objective, inhuman reality surrounding them. In the essay “An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation,” Bazin discusses the technique of Rossellini in presenting a succession of events, and emphasizes the role of the human mind and subjectivity in the perception of reality. He explains that:

Rossellini’s technique certainly preserves a degree of intelligibility in the sequence of events, but these events do not mesh like the links of a chain on a flywheel. Our minds must bestride events the way one hops from stone to stone when crossing a river. Sometimes, our feet hesitate when choosing between two stones, or they miss a stone or slip on one. This is what our mind does. It is in the nature of stones not to let travellers cross rivers without getting their feet wet, just as the ribs of a melon are not there just so the *pater familias* can divide it equally. Facts and events are just that, and our imagination makes use of them, but they are not there to serve this purpose. (*Cinematic Realism*, 239)

This imply that, for Bazin, true realism in the cinema is not merely a reproduction or representation of a pre-existing world, but rather the way the human mind might perceive it. In another debate, in the “Ontology of The Photographic Image,” in which he favors surrealist photography over painting, Bazin notes the possibly hallucinatory borders that might be created between the real and imaginary in the perception of outer reality, as well as its representation in the photographic image. As he puts it:

This is something that Surrealism foresaw when it turned to the gelatin of the photographic plate to create its visual teratology. The Surrealist’s aesthetic goal was inseparable from the machine-like impact of the image on our minds. The logical distinction between the imaginary and the real was eliminated. Every

image should be experienced as an object and every object as an image. Photography was thus a privileged technology for surrealist practice because it produces an image that shares in the existence of nature: a photograph is true hallucination. (Ontology, 2009, 9-10 qtd. in Chevrier 2011)

I would argue that, in the Dardennes' account of realism, and in particular in the films *The Promise* and *The Silence of Lorna*, the frustrated yet self-assured and resilient characters of Lorna and Assita attempt to impose and assert their own way of inhabiting reality, which exists somewhere between the real and the imaginary, the objective and the subjective, and the material and the spiritual. They are living in a virtual reality the Dardenne brothers created in the space between reality and the fictitious. They are the Dardennes' marginalized yet highly admired heroes, for in the world where people lose their dreams and faith, they persistently seek another kind of freedom, faith and redemption. As the Dardennes show, Lorna seeks in the woods far from the city, when she is wandering, talking with her unborn baby, and gathering wood to light a fire. And Assita, as it seems, finds comfort in the spiritual rites and rituals connecting her to the world through her profound personal faith and intuition. Indeed, these characters impose their narratives of hope, struggle, and resistance on and against the pre-existing reality that has been imposed upon them by the very inhuman order and relation of the world and people surrounding them. This is what distinguishes them from most of the postwar neorealist characters (Anderson, 2012).

Here, the point where the real and imaginary confluence crystallizes in the characters' perceptions, even if it seems hallucinatory and imaginary, leads immediately

to actions and decisions. One could argue that Assita's belief in magic, spirituality, and ritual does not seem barbaric, insane, or retrogressive in the context of the Dardennes' realism. Similarly, Lorna's conversation with her unborn and perhaps unreal baby in the film's final scene, while she is wandering helplessly in the woods, does not seem to be an act of insanity but rather faith and belief in something beyond the current objective reality.

In *The Promise*, Assita is an infinite source of a desirable ambiguity for Igor, a maternal embodiment of a human reality beyond the everyday, inhuman reality of Igor and his father's life. Assita offers Igor a kind of spirituality that can connect one's self to another as well as one's own true self. In this sense, one might argue that what differentiates Assita and Lorna's fates from their counterparts in the neorealist film tradition is that they act based on their own perceptions of reality, a virtual reality which cannot find its place within the dominant social order, or conform to it, and could disturb its order and integrity. Thus, it must be eliminated or ignored. This perception of reality may sound unrealistic in its everyday logical sense; however, Lorna and Assita, though from different backgrounds and with different goals, represent the Dardennes' belief in the possibility of human agency, freedom, and redemption in a time when we have lost faith in that possibility. This resonates best in Luc Dardenne's notes on the idea of making *The Silence of Lorna* in their autobiographical book, *Au dos de nos images*: "perhaps our next film will be about a young woman who has every reason to be desperate and who continues to believe that everything is possible. A religious believer of sorts, even if God is dead... how can a woman who doesn't believe in God believe everything is possible? Where does this crazy hope come from? She is strange, out-of

-the-ordinary. Fictional characters always swim against the tide” (L. Ardennes, 2008 [qtd.in Mai 2008]).

The Dardennes’ characters show their hope and belief in simple acts of faith, care, and resistance: either as Assita trying to create her own space of peace and hope through simple acts and objects, or Lorna gathering wood and lighting a fire in a stove. This is how the Dardennes’ marginalized, outcast, and yet self-assured and resistant characters stand up for their hopes and dreams: looking beyond the current possible reality and struggling to create a space of their own, to be seen, respected, have a normal life, and be treated as human beings.

Epilogue

In this paper, I have endeavoured to examine the Dardennes’ formal strategies as well as thematic concerns. Indeed, this paper’s point of departure was the question: what does it mean for a film to be realist? In this respect, I have tried to study the Dardennes’ style in their films’ *découpage*, in particular in terms of the way they maintain spatial unity and continuity through their realist *mise-en-scène*, camera movements and positions. In parts 2 and 3 of this paper, I have tried to examine some of the Dardennes’ ethical, spiritual and humanist thematic concerns in the aforementioned films. Now, one possible question could be whether the Dardennes’ socio-political concerns and ethical commitments challenge their approach to filmmaking. That is, could it be said that it could be reduced or reproduced in a cycle of repetitive formal strategies and similar stories about the social problems of the people of their hometown of Seraing? Which, as

some of their critics and film scholars argue, might tend to be a kind of “social activism” (Cardullo, 2010, 8) or political agenda?

In this sense, what is problematic is the interrelation between a film’s form and subject matter; the possible promises and challenges of the dialectic of film as an art form for cinematic expression of reality on the one hand, and film as a social medium for making change or encouraging reform – enlightening or educating – on the other hand. Here, one possible question engendered by this paper might be how one could study this challenge in relation to its perspective in the Dardennes’ future films.

Indeed, one could also trace these concerns in Bazin’s argument about the originality of Italian postwar neorealist cinema. In “The Evolution of Film Language,” he writes: “In short, that the real revolution took place more on the level of subject matter than style: what cinema had to say to the world, rather than its way of saying it. Isn’t neorealism a form of humanism before it is a style and a kind of *mise-en-scène*? And isn’t this style essentially defined by its unobtrusiveness towards reality?” (94) Then, right after this statement, he emphasizes that he does not intend to “advance some mysterious pre-eminence of form over substance” or “heretical” arguments about “art for art’s sake,” but rather, all he wants to put forth is: “for each new topic, a new form” (94). One could examine the Dardennes’ film form and thematic concerns in terms of Bazin’s aforementioned argument about the intertwined relationship between neorealist cinema’s subject matter and its cinematic expression. However, it could be also noted that, considering their status as highly appreciated realist film authors, and also this paper’s argument about their status as followers of Bazin and the Italian neo realists – in particular Rossellini – could it be said that what is at stake is the perspective of the

European realist film tradition in terms of the challenge of transferring reality through a complicated cinematic language and aesthetics?

Bazin shows that Italian neorealism surpasses spatial and temporal boundaries, and in its final analysis reaches to the essence of cinematic reality. One possible proof of Bazin's claim could be that, in reading any realist film, one inevitably returns to Italian neorealist film tradition, mostly aiming to study the way the film is influenced or contributes to it. It could be said that what Bazin most appreciates about Italian neorealism is its perfection of the dialectics of form and subject matter; this flourished as a new form of profoundly humanist cinematic realism. Based on this, one possible challenge is whether we may hope that the Dardennes continue their contribution to European realist filmmaking tradition through seeking new ways of encountering reality and its cinematic expression without repeating themselves.

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