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Left-over spaces: The cinema of the Dardenne brothers

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Resisting until the last energy for the destiny of the work of art, against the deaf power that tightens, blocks, walls in, stifles, embalms. This struggle with this destiny endorses the genuine work of art. (Dardenne 2008, 9)³

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne have already been the focus of a few studies, and have given numerous interviews where they speak of the process of film-making, their choice of actors, the attention they pay to location, and the thought that goes into every detail of their films (see Cardullo 2009a). The diary of Luc Dardenne, *On the Back of our Images, 1991 - 2005* (*Au dos de nos images, 1991 - 2005*), written over 15 years and documenting their working method, was published in 2005. They are now in their sixties and have collaborated on all their films, moving from documentaries centred around steel workers in their home city of Seraing earlier in their career, to the fiction films that they see as their true métier. Releasing a film every three years, they are well known for *The Promise* (*La Promesse*, 1996), *Rosetta* (1999), *The Son* (*Le Fils*, 2002), *The Child* (*L'Enfant*, 2005), *The Silence of Lorna* (*Le Silence de Lorna*, 2008) and *The Kid with a Bike* (*Le Gamin au Vélo*, 2011). As expected, their next project *Two Days, One Night* (*Deux Jours, Une Nuit*), which is currently being filmed, will be released in 2014. Part of the reason that we were drawn to their cinema is because of the coherence that is evident through all five films; they frequently assert that they collaborate on every aspect of the film, the script-writing, the directing, the producing, the casting, the choice of costumes and locations, micromanaging the smallest detail. There is then a certain logic that runs through the films, manifesting itself even as each film shows a cinematic evolution and maturation. It is precisely this implicit rationale that has led to the criticism that they have made the same film five times. But we see this criticism more as an appraisal of their work; the fact that each film resonates so deeply with the others – that all of them address a similar cluster of themes – is what allows the possibility of something larger than each of the films taken separately. This repetition is actually an expanding resonance, a practised style that creates the oeuvre of the Dardennes.

The object of our study is the presence and the operation of space in the films of the Dardenne brothers. In this paper, we will examine three films – *Rosetta*, *The Child* and *The Silence of Lorna* – and present the

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³ All quotations from French sources are our translation.

argument that they depict an original account of the contemporary European city as a totality (in this case an eastern Belgian steel town). The construction of the characters, their relationships, and the moral implications of their actions are usually the most discussed aspects of the Dardennes' cinema. Instead, we want to shift focus to the city, because without the city – the urban landscape, the buildings, and the concrete, visceral materiality that the viewer can almost touch (Crano 2009, 11-12), taste and smell – the protagonists would not possess the same depth and magnetism. The bleakness of these grey, concrete, post-industrial spaces is further emphasised by the minimal, mild, winter light in which the directors like to film.⁴

Thus, the question at the centre of this paper is the function of spaces in the cinema of the Dardenne brothers: the setting is not a mere detail, a backdrop for the action; rather, there is a real sense of the place. Four of the six films that we have mentioned, take place in the same post-industrial town, Seraing, situated five kilometres away from the Walloon city, Liège. As Sarah Cooper observes:

Set principally in or around Seraing, an industrial region in decline just outside of Liège, their gritty fictions probe the harsh realities of immigration, unemployment, and existence on the margins of Belgian society. The setting of the films is important, since the river Meuse, the woods, the roadways, and no-man's land of the surrounding area lend a brute materiality to the socio-historical positioning of the characters. This serves the filmmakers' stated aim, which is to look at what it means to be human today, not in general or abstract terms, but in the concrete and extreme situations constructed by a particular society [...] The Dardenne brothers speak repeatedly of using films as a way of gaining access to humanity [...] to capture the human gaze. (2007, 68)

It is evident that the directors do not treat the city as a fixed, historically accurate *mise en scène* but as a living, almost viscous medium as they attempt 'to interpret their subjects' lives in this desolate environment' (Mai 2010, xi). The space is not just there, it is not a given; it is created, invented, reworked, altered, and repeatedly thought through so as to determine in what sense the characters express a being-in-the-world. The only access the audience has to history and time is through the optics of the place (Mosley 2002, 164-166). Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the Dardennes' cinema is how they manage to capture a precise sense of place and time without a direct reference. The buildings, the landscape or the city are never directly the object of conversation, but they function as a milieu, as a platform onto which the characters emerge. Yet the Dardenne universe,

⁴ As Luc Dardenne puts it in one of their interviews: 'You know how winter is in northern Europe. Winter light makes the colors come out: the red, the black, the gray, the flowers, in all their intensity. Winter sunlight is not a sunlight that crushes' (Badt 2009, 144).

and the unfolding of its story, could not take place without the uncompromisingly gritty details that they depict, as if they were post-industrial impressionists, replacing the lotuses with the rusty factories.

We aim to chart the leaden landscape of these films, by tracing the movements of the protagonists in two particular kinds of spaces: the woods that lie next to motorways in *Rosetta* and *The Silence of Lorna*, and the motorways that feature prominently in *The Child*. Even though these spaces are the left-over spaces of the city, cut out and discarded from the inner spaces of the city, they are still heavily inscribed and symbolic sites. Not only do they move the plot forward and are expressive of the characters that inhabit them, they also engage in a sustained, though understated, political critique. In his essay on Habermas and *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998), Robert Porter asks why it is important to argue for a notion of cinema as political critique. He answers this by firmly stating:

[I]t is important that 'we' political theorists be constantly reminded of the often particularistic and, at times, rather rarified, abstract, even myopic, discourses that we engage in, and that political concepts can find a more expansive, visually stimulating or arresting form through their expression in a popular-cultural form like film. At the same time, of course, recognition of the capacity and autonomy of cinema to engage in political thought and critique immediately demands of the political theorist a specific kind of cultural-media literacy, where 'cultural-media literacy' signifies a developing awareness of the concrete operations of political concepts as they are mapped out at the level of the cinematic text. (2007, 406)

In this analysis of the spaces of the woods and the motorways is present a recognisable engagement with a very particular kind of cityscape that is riddled by interstices, left-over after the rest has been used up and consumed. The characters of these films live their lives in these scrapped spaces, and this is where the unforgiving edge of the political critique of these films becomes evident. The entire cinematic oeuvre of the Dardenne brothers reveals a coherent critique of contemporary society, of the hard and shiny surface formed by its consumerist practices and its middle-class mores which will always remain inaccessible to their protagonists, who live, work, cheat, and survive in the subterranean world below that surface.⁵ The

⁵ The impact of film's searing social and political critique is evident in the Belgian government's decision to pass the 'Rosetta Plan'. This was a law proposed in 1999, shortly after the film's release, that would try to generate and develop employment for young, low-skilled workers that make up a large part of the chronically unemployed. Under this law, businesses with over fifty employees are obliged to hire 3% of their work force from this floating population of young people. Lauren Berlant, in her detailed essay looking at *Rosetta*, notes that reviews of the film suggested that it was 'barely fictive in its dramatization of generally contingent economic conditions as well as those among youth, but *Rosetta* was read as strongly exemplary of a generation of the willing, able, and

marginal spaces that the protagonists inhabit (the work camp in *The Promise*, the trailer in *Rosetta*, the motorway shack in *The Child*) are on the outside territorially and economically, yet it is the Dardennes' cinematic project to bring them to the fore of the spectatorial space.

Although their stories are poignant and gripping, and the story-telling technique ingenious, Luc Dardenne repeatedly writes in his diary that they do not want to tell stories, but to explore ideas, behaviours, or instincts that are more primal and complex. For instance, in the case of *Rosetta*, their aim was 'to describe the behaviour of someone whose entire being is occupied by the obsession to exist normally, to belong to society, not to be pushed outside, not disappear [...] a vagabond who would kill to leave her condition. No humour. Only angst' (2008, 72). Not just *Rosetta*, but all their films avoid a psychological development of the story; they portray from the inside, the gestures, the things, the environment embodying and inhabiting the characters. It is a materialist cinema that refuses to fictionalise and dramatise the plot but, at the same time, creates an ensemble with the protagonist and an object locked together: the boots in *Rosetta*, the belt and the measuring tape in *The Son*, the pram in *The Child*. Luc Dardenne writes, 'since cinema is really to film utterly concrete stuff. [...] cinema is interested in the accessory. The essential aspect of cinema is the accessory' (2008, 158). Anyone who has seen their films will attest that their stories are powerful, intense and extraordinary, but it is as if the story mediates what really counts for these filmmakers: the accessories, the crumpled corners of the city, the river bank or the left-over strips of forest neighbouring the motorway. The accessories pierce the screen to lodge themselves in reality; the left-over spaces recall the 'extraordinary' (the invisible, yet ordinary) life of the Dardennian characters: Roger, Igor, Riquet, Rosetta, Olivier, Francis, Steve, Bruno, Sonia, Claudy, Lorna.

If their films have been interpreted from a moral or ethical standpoint (Cooper 2007; Zarader 2008; Mélon 2010), it is precisely because of the vacuity and emptiness of the post-industrial city. If the viewer constantly asks, 'What is going to happen next?', 'How is s/he going to escape, survive, succeed, or fail?', it is precisely because of the effects of the ruins of the post-industrial landscape: the ruin of a stable morality that has been supplanted by the cynicism that represents a world without meaning. However, these films are far from cynical and each of the characters fights with the place to which he or she has been marginalised, striving against this pessimism to find meaning in their actions. Following a reading of Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Luc Dardenne writes in 1993 how he envisioned the role of the cinematographer in Europe as attempting 'to help the human being to find a way in the labyrinth of her/his

economically unacknowledged' (2007, 274). For more on the social realism of *Rosetta* see Morgan (2004).

destructive drives of life' (2008, 28). The filmmakers set themselves the very difficult task of diagnosing the symptoms of the post-industrial city without desolation: that is, by bringing a sense of care and positivity to it. To be more precise, these protagonists – illegal immigrants, small-time criminals, teenage parents, junkies, trailer-park inhabitants – are depicted through a lens that makes them subjects in their own right, not objects of our pity. There is a compassion in the portrayal of these characters, and an absence of any attempt at sentimentality.

Part of the way in which the filmmakers avoid this sentimentality is through the movement of the camera, and the positioning of the gaze of the viewer. The protagonists are often filmed from the back, and from odd angles that cut a part of their face or their actions out of the frame. In *Rosetta*, for instance, the hand-held camera doggedly moves along with the heroine, following her closely, mimicking the anger and aggression of her movement. It is through these intense close-ups of the nape of her neck, her eyes, her clenched fists, her gestures, that we empathise with her overwhelming frustration and rage. It is indeed part of the Dardennes' cinematography to focus on the gesture rather than facial expression, on silence and observation rather than sound and dialogue. Luc Dardenne speaks of how it is more interesting to focus on the characters' bodies and gestures because, 'filming gestures and very specific, material things is what allows the viewer to sense everything that is spiritual, unseen, and not a part of materiality' (Luc Dardenne in West and West 2009, 132). They explain that they film from the back because 'then when you see the face, you really look at it' (Jean-Pierre Dardenne in West and West 2009, 131). It is this too that gives a humanity to these marginalised characters, without providing elaborate psychological explanations.

Central to the way these characters are fleshed out is the manner in which they inhabit the city. The spaces that they occupy reflect their marginalised position in society but they also have an expressivity and autonomy that goes beyond this. All of these films are in some ways about the difficulty of speaking. The spaces that the protagonists occupy and the gestures that they enact then articulate this problem, while also articulating a deeper psychological and emotional state. There is a clear continuum between the character, the gesture and the space. The socially marginalised protagonist occupies spaces that lie on the margins of the city, on the borders of what are seen as productive and legitimate urban spaces. Existing in the realm of the unseen and the unheard, it is only the gesture that can reveal deeper truths.⁶ The gesture comes into focus through the extended

⁶ The recent work of Guillaume Le Blanc is particularly useful in understanding the role of visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion in the public space. He argues that these social existences – marginalised, declassified, unemployed, voiceless lives – are not caused solely by individual behaviour but also governed and regulated by norms. See by

silence of the films, emphasised by the minimal, pared down dialogue, as well as the complete absence of any background music; there is no background score in the films, and the sounds of the city and its traffic are predominant.

Woods

The eponymous heroine of *Rosetta* lives in a trailer park whose address is provided by the roundabout next to it, ironically called ‘Grand Canyon’. On the way back from the city, Rosetta makes her way to the trailer park by crossing a busy motorway, walking through a patch of woodland and then entering the property through an opening in the wire-fencing that surrounds it. Her walk home is marked by rituals that are repeated several times in the film. She gets off the bus, hides behind a gate till the bus pulls away, then dodges through the fast-moving cars to enter the safety and solitude of the woods. Here she finds the boots that she has hidden in a drain, exchanging them for her city shoes. She then cautiously enters through a break in the fence and goes to the muddy pond where she has hidden the line and hook with which she tries to catch trout, keeping watch for the janitor, before she heads for the trailer that she shares with her alcoholic mother.

The woods function as an odd space in the film. They are a space of transition between the city and the trailer-home. Though they lie outside the city, they are not really pastoral or natural, bordered as they are by the busy road. They are also where two crucial moments of conflict take place: one where Rosetta fights with her mother, and is thrown into the water as she physically tries to restrain her; the other where Riquet, her only friend, accidentally falls into the water and Rosetta almost lets him drown, as he is sucked in by the mud. The first scene sees Rosetta, the strong, stubborn woman, turned into a vulnerable young girl as she cries for her mother to help her out of the mud that is pulling her down. In the other scene, Rosetta is the one who is called to for help. These scenes of being trapped in quicksand, pulled into its depths, are highly symbolic moments. They are a physical echo of Rosetta’s fear of being ‘stuck in a rut’ as she calls it, of being unable to reach the safety and normalcy that work and middle-class status offer. ‘Rosetta is in a state of war [...] A climate of war between the side of Rosetta and the side of society. So appears society to the one thrown outside of it: as a fortress which one cannot enter’ (Dardenne 2008, 66). Extending this idea, in an interview about the film, Jean-Pierre Dardenne says, ‘[t]o us, *Rosetta* was a war film, and she was a soldier going off to war’ (Andrews 2009, 157); in a later interview, Luc Dardenne continues, ‘Rosetta is a warrior who never gives up. She is a survivor who lives in a primary state: water, shelter, food. She has found her own weapons, a

Guillaume Le Blanc (2009) and (2007). This is also why Le Blanc can refer directly to *Rosetta* in *L’invisibilité sociale* (2009, 25).

survival system: boots for the campsite, shoes for work, a box for bait, bottles for fishing' (Cardullo 2009b, 193).

The woods, then, work at several levels of meaning: they occupy a liminal position between the city and the home, a threshold Rosetta has to cross over every day as she goes to work and then makes a return. But given that this is a 'war film', the woods are also the site where this war is enacted, where she has to fight for her survival, fight against the janitor, her mother, and with herself as she decides whether to save Riquet. But, simultaneously, the woods are a space of escape: a space where Rosetta has learned to survive, where she has worked out a survival system that in some ways allows her to rely on her own ingenuity, but one that is always under threat. It is not accidental then that it is a space of conflictual passions as well as of emotional intensity that give insights into Rosetta, both the character and the film. Her struggle in the quicksand – as she tries to free her limbs and keep her head above the surface – is a tangible realisation of the 'social euthanasia' that pursues her and makes her suffocate (Dardenne 2008, 107): the turbid pool is an actualisation of the social relations that make sure she is never able to lift herself out of that life whose every moment is an existential struggle.

In *The Silence of Lorna*, the woods feature prominently at the end of the film. Again, located on the outskirts of the city, lying alongside the motorways that lead out of it, the woods become, for Lorna, a space of refuge and of amelioration in what is otherwise a moral wasteland. An Albanian girl who marries a Belgian drug addict in order to acquire his nationality, she ends up feeling a tenderness for him that she had initially tried hard to avoid. Unable to save Claudy from the heroin overdose that the mafia who control her have planned for him, Lorna begins to believe that she is pregnant with his child. At the end of the film, seen as unstable and therefore unable to participate in another sham marriage, she is being sent back home. However, the suggestion is that this will be the last journey she will ever make. Sensing the danger she is in, Lorna manages to get away from the man to whom she has been entrusted, escaping into the woods. The absence of Claudy, the junkie, is filled by this baby for Lorna, but the baby too is an absence. In a stunningly crafted inversion, Lorna's increasing insanity, her psychosis, becomes her increasing humanity. She wants to protect this illusory baby in the way she was unable to protect Claudy. The forest in this scene is captured beautifully. The gentle light filtering through the trees gives the moment a romantic, lyrical quality. Lorna finds an empty cottage where she makes herself at home, speaking to the unreal baby about an imagined tomorrow. As the scene fades into darkness, the credits roll. For the first time, here, the Dardennes have added music to their credits. In an interview Luc Dardenne explained that they felt that they could not leave the spectators alone, and they could not leave Lorna alone (Concannon 2009,

185).⁷ The music and the woods come together in this final moment, giving it a heartbreaking beauty and tenderness that stays with the audience even though we are aware that this is just an illusion, that there is no real future for Lorna outside of this moment.

These wooded areas are furtive, fragile spaces that act almost as cinematic interludes of selfhood in both these films. Woodlands on the edges of a city, these are undesired, unclaimed spaces but, at the same time, these unnatural spaces are lived in as natural places, as part of a saturated romantic narrative. Even though the female leads in these films (Rosetta and Lorna) are pushed into these left-over spaces of the city, on its physical margins, it is as if they are able to create new relations with nature and new narratives. It is these other relations and narratives that we see as spaces of alterity, of mutation and maturation. Such a re-appropriation also takes place with motorways.

Motorways

Control is not discipline. You do not confine people with a highway. But by making highways, you multiply the means of control. I am not saying this is the only aim of highways, but people can travel infinitely and ‘freely’ without being confined while being perfectly controlled. That is our future. (Deleuze 2007, 322)

In all Dardenne films, the motorway is a key element in making sense of place (Crano 2009, 7), and in depicting the post-industrial atmosphere that determines the intensities of the characters. We know, after Augé, that motorways are non-anthropological places – what he calls non-places – precisely because they are opposed to anthropological places (1995, 51-53), where traditions, rituals and language are rooted. What Augé terms ‘supermodernity’ is defined by the proliferation of non-places at the detriment of anthropological places (1995). In other words, villages, churches, even factories, disappear from both the landscape and from everyday life, being replaced by hotels, motorways, metros, and shopping centres, which then impose a certain kind of anonymity and homogeneity.

A motorway that is shown on screen repeatedly is the one that Rosetta has to cross in order to reach the ‘Grand Canyon’ campsite; she hides before crossing the road as if she were ashamed of living on the other side, or rather ashamed of being seen crossing the left-over spaces which are the motorway and the small forest next to the road. But this particular kind of left-over space is even more prominently featured in *The Child*. The motorways, roads and bridges play a significant role in mapping Bruno’s life of petty crime and obsessive trading. At the beginning of the film, we

⁷ Luc Dardenne wrote in his diary in 1998: ‘Q. Why don’t you have music in your film? A. For not blocking your eyes’ (2008, 85).

discover that Bruno has sublet the flat he was sharing with his girlfriend while she was in hospital, giving birth to their son. Bruno lives lightly, freely, with a strange mixture of guile and naivety, and for some instant money is willing to sell his child. With absolute ease, he can spend his nights at a night shelter, or make himself at home in a cardboard box in an abandoned cabin under a bridge on the banks of the river Meuse. It is on this patch of green between a motorway and the river full of industrial waste, crossed by a bridge and used as a junk yard, that Bruno spends most of his time when he is not cheating, stealing or scamming. He keeps his stolen goods and all the other traces of his thefts here, turning this dilapidated shack into a dysmorphic home that holds his meagre store of ragged, scavenged, and filched possessions. The dull grey of the river forms the backdrop of most of the scenes that are shot in this location. The Meuse is in fact one of the key elements, along with the pram, which led Luc and Jean Dardenne to write the script of *The Child*, as Luc Dardenne reports in his diary. The river gave a new spatiality to their film: a desire to enlarge the plan of their film and not to simply produce a closed cinematic experience, not to remain with the hand-held camera close to the bodies (2008, 169).

Throughout the film, we see Bruno walking alone by the motorways, as the cars whiz past, but with the arrival of baby Jimmy, Bruno has to try harder to retain the lightness with which he moves through life. This is part of the reason why he finds it so easy to sell Jimmy for adoption; he sees the baby as another package that can be exchanged for ready cash. The situation becomes more complicated and sinister as he tries to get the baby back, unwittingly entangling himself with a powerful criminal organisation. But this emotional journey where Bruno learns to take responsibility is visually realised through his walking of the motorways. While at the beginning of the film, Bruno moves quickly, zigzagging between the speeding traffic, he is hampered by Jimmy's pram after Sonia's return from the hospital. The camera moves with him as he pushes the pram through the bleakly rendered city, waiting for the traffic light to change before he crosses the road, his restlessness palpable. It is precisely when he is left alone with Jimmy and his awkward pram that he decides to sell him, but this transaction does not bring back the former lightness. Not only does Sonia leave him – refusing to forgive him even when he brings Jimmy back – he is still left walking around with an empty pram. Mimicking the previous scenes, we see Bruno traversing the same streets, crossing the same roads, with the now useless pram. Later still, the pram is exchanged for a broken scooter after a failed theft, and the camera follows Bruno as he pushes the scooter through the city.

The motorway by the riverbank intensifies the left-over aspect of the Meuse in *The Child*, and the river is neither romanticised, nor superficially embellished. The Meuse is then the ideal place to seek refuge when the attempt to snatch a handbag goes horribly wrong. Bruno's precarious

lifestyle of petty crime suddenly and violently takes a more serious turn as he attempts to elude the two men who have also called the police. Trying desperately to find a place to hide, Bruno and his young accomplice, Steve, attempt to conceal themselves in the freezing water: a moment of equal danger and shame. Echoing the scene from *Rosetta*, where Rosetta fights the mud to make her way to the safety of the shore, Bruno comes out of the highly polluted water soaked to the bone while Steve almost drowns.⁸ Bruno feels the limits of the city; even in this left-over space which had been his habitual haunt, he cannot really find any safety. This immersion in the Meuse is not a ceremonial cleansing of his sins, or a purification of the soul; it is a moment of awakening consciousness. His quick smiles and small dreams are gone, and his entry into the prison is also his entry into the awareness that he is outside the fortress that cannot be breached.

What is a Left-Over Space? The Relation Between Voice, Gestures and Space

These left-over spaces function in relation to the characters portrayed in the films, the Dardennian cartography coming into existence once these protagonists are anchored, or embedded in a specific environment. This is an environment which they define and which in turn defines them. The left-over spaces in Dardenne films can only be understood in this dual productive relationship. This confirms what we know from Lefebvre: that space is not a neutral element, but the result of a social fabric (1974, 35).⁹ The space of the city and the space of the cinematic image come together in their films according to what we could call their ‘principle of hiding’: ‘Where to place the camera? In other words: what do I show? In other words: what do I hide? Hiding is without any doubt essential’ (Dardenne 2008, 55). Luc Dardenne learns this principle, that then develops into an aesthetics of omission, through his reading of Bazin’s book on Jean Renoir, explaining that what counts more is not the framing of the image but the hiding of the surroundings (2008, 22).

The sense of the environment and the place – the run-down houses, the rusty steel industries and the vacant and sacrificed spaces¹⁰ –

⁸ In fact, we learn from the diary that Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne had read in the local news section of the newspaper in September 2003 that in Seraing, a young petty criminal drowned in the Meuse after stealing the hand bag of a lady and trying to hide in the river by gripping the grass and the weeds of the river bank. As he did not know how to swim and the grass was not robust enough to hold him, he died in the river (2008, 155).

⁹ Doreen Massey, building on Lefebvre’s work, also conceptualises space in terms of social relations. This formulation is based on three propositions that Massey makes explicit: first, that this space is a product of interrelations and constituted through interactions, through certain embedded practices; second, this space contains the possibility of multiplicity, of coexisting heterogeneity; third, this is a space that is always under construction, never quite finished, imaginable as ‘a simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey 2005, 9).

¹⁰ In his critique of *The Child*, *Le Monde* journalist Jean-Pierre Stroobants gives a description of Seraing: ‘This city is lined by overground gas and water pipes, it is sullied by

where the quasi-heroic figures will start their mission or their war is always present in the texture of each film even though it is never talked about, or at least not directly. The place is rarely the primary focus of the shot. On the contrary, the characters are present in all the shots: they populate them, so that the screen and the camera become an extension of their body, ‘a body-camera’ (*corps-caméra*). (Cooper 2007, 76)¹¹

If, for Deleuze, the creative moment lies in the disjunction between the visual and the aural (1989, 278-9), between the gaze and the voice, then, for the Dardenne brothers, the creative arises from the interaction between gesture and silence, where it is the bodies that speak. The silence of the intense shots, simultaneously simple and complex, reveals a secret speech coming from both the gestures and the spaces. This muted expression is both invisible and infinite, and yet so banal, so ordinary:

We are more interested in trying to give meaning to a scene by the way we film the relations between the characters’ bodies and what gestures a character makes – how he passes a cup to someone else, how he pours coffee into his cup. This is more interesting than presenting actions as pretexts for talking. Words come afterwards, when you cannot do anything else. In general I think there is too much talking in movies; it is an easy thing to do. But why clutter up a film with chattering? (Jean-Pierre Dardenne in West and West 2009, 129-30)

It is in this banality that the intensity of the Dardennes’ cinema stretches in all its dimensions and gains its thickness. The spectators learn to glance out of windows, think about what lies behind walls, look over shoulders and imagine the outside of the frame that can perhaps explain the complex facial features of all the characters (Crano 2009, 11).¹² The spatial depth present in the Dardennes’ films is a continuation of the body: ‘For us who shoot, the image is neither the incarnation of an invisible nor the disembodiment [*désincarnation*] of a visible, but it is visible, and by remaining visible it speaks the invisible’ (Dardenne 2008, 122). And this declaration shares much with Deleuze’s claim that cinema does not produce images that are

industrial waste, literally sacrificed to metallurgy, hell and pride for those who approached it, facing unemployment, misery and the destruction of social links. “We were married to the Cockerill factories, but our grandchildren are orphans of everything” explains Louis, a retired unionist’ (Stroobants 2005).

¹¹ On the fully developed concept of the body-camera in Dardenne films, see Mai (2007).

¹² Also, Jean-Pierre Dardenne explains: ‘[W]e try [...] 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’ (Cardullo 2009b, 190). Sarah Cooper argues that, in *The Son*, bodies overflow the frame to create new sensations (Cooper 2007, 72, 75); we can extend this point to the post-industrial city depicted in their films.

reducible to subjective perceptions (see 1989, 47),¹³ or as Luc Dardenne writes again, the objective is ‘not to bureaucratised the imaginations’ (2008, 17). The ontological status given to the gestures of the Dardennian characters is there precisely because of the spatial anchor. If the bodies and their gestures organise and order the words of speech, the fragments of dialogues are only there to settle on the bodies, sometimes wrapping themselves around the bodies.

Both the woods and the motorways are part of the vocabulary that the Dardenne brothers use to express the subjectivity of their characters. In their films, they manage to make use of these left-over spaces, the dregs of industrialisation, and turn them into spaces that allow for the unfolding of new relations, new narratives and new selfhoods. These are places that are invisible to the measured rhythm of everyday life, to the capitalist enterprise, to the ‘normal’ functioning of the city. The Dardenne brothers attempt to reveal the invisible part of gestures that are usually forgotten in cinema. But these gestures do not happen nowhere; they happen in the invisible place of the city, in the scattered, marginal, dirty, yet truly resisting and existential sites that still exist within it. Challenging Augé’s definition of non-place as a non-anthropological locus, they have succeeded in turning it into a humanising space, a space of potential, where there is a hope for this world.

Not only do these films open up spaces of resistance within what are otherwise the discarded remnants of modern cities, the cinematic space of the films itself becomes a space of alterity and resistance. Speaking of their documentary film-making in workers’ areas earlier in their career, Luc Dardenne explains the rationale of their choice of subject:

A lot of these workers’ estates have no communal space, and so there’s no place for people to talk to each other, so we decided we would go and film these people and tell their stories, perhaps of moments in their lives where they come up against some injustice. So we would film them during the week and then on the weekend show the films in a cafe or a local church. And that was a way for people to see and listen to other people in the same estate. We did that for a few years, and then we started to build on that experience and to write our own stories. That’s how it developed. (Andrews 2009, 147)

These films, then, arise from a desire to tell stories that have no other place to be told in, and to bring into the centre the marginalised people who populate our cities. The characters that they depict in these three films are not even the working classes, but the *déclassé*, those who are absolutely outside the economy defined by ‘productive’ work. Claudy, for instance, in

¹³ ‘Subjectivity, then takes on a new sense, which is no longer motor or material, but temporal and spiritual: that which “is added” to matter, not what distends it; recollection-image, not movement-image’ (Deleuze 1989, 47).

The Silence of Lorna is recurrently called ‘the junkie’, and it is legitimate to kill him: because he is a junkie, because junkies are useless, because no one will miss a junkie, because he would have died of an overdose at some point anyway. The humanisation of Claudy, which starts by naming him, is also the first step in the humanisation of Lorna. It is this process of humanisation of those who remain unnamed and unseen that these films attempt. Becoming human, regaining dignity, and an individuated selfhood is the journey taken by Rosetta, Lorna, and Bruno. It is a journey that comes at a price – Rosetta’s attempted suicide, Lorna’s psychosis, and Bruno’s jail sentence – but never are these characters subjected to our pity.

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