

Ethics and staging in the cinema of Dardenne brothers:

From *The Promise* to *Young Ahmed*

Ética e encenação no cinema dos irmãos

Dardenne:

De *A Promessa* a *O Jovem Ahmed*

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Introduction

The Dardenne brothers' cinema puts in evidence two fundamental concepts such as ethics and staging for thinking cinema nowadays. The approximation between the materiality of the films and the reflections and world vision of these filmmakers helps us to reflect on this cinema in the sense of unraveling how, through the Dardennean staging, we can foresee the ethical stance of the Dardenne brothers in the face of daily issues. It is from that possibility that we approach the Dardenne work in order to observe more closely the ways in which these filmmakers distill their world vision in their films.

Based not only on the films of the Dardenne brothers, but also on the books *Au dos de nos images* 1 and 2, a kind of diary in which Luc Dardenne records his and Jean-Pierre's creative process, we can predict the relationship they establish with the current world. Through numerous interviews, we also noticed how their ethical positioning is placed in a radical way. This positioning invites us to view this work, considering both the staging strategies and the world vision that marks the cinema of the Dardenne brothers. The concept of ethics, here, follows the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas (2000; 2012) and is translated as responsibility towards the Other. It is Luc

Dardenne himself who points out, in his diaries, the centrality of Lévinas and his conception of ethics in the preparation of scripts and in the making of their films (DARDENNE, 2005, p.56).

Considering the filmography of these Belgian filmmakers, who began their career in the field of documentary and who, just over 20 years ago, dedicate themselves exclusively to fiction films, we turn to their most recent works, notably the films made from 1996, pointed out by Dardenne themselves as a turning point in their career¹. The feature films made from this turn are *The Promise* (1996), *Rosetta* (1999), *The Son* (2002), *The Child* (2005), *Lorna's Silence* (2008), *The Kid with a Bike* (2011), *Two days, one night* (2014), *The Unknown Girl* (2016) and *Young Ahmed* (2019). In all these films, we find the same narrative structure, the same movement that puts the characters in check when facing a moral dilemma, and a series of aesthetic and language choices that converge on ethical issues.

The frequent option for not using non-diegetic sounds, the absolute respect for the chronological structure of the narrative events, the constant use of actors unrelated to the star system, the handheld shots following the characters, simplicity in the sound and image of the films, these and other elements can be pointed out as characteristic of the Dardennean staging, which we will try to systematize here to think about how ethically and aesthetically cross the Dardenne brothers' cinema and in what terms we can consider this relation as a key to apprehend their films.

This article aims to reflect on staging and ethics in the cinema of the Dardenne brothers. We will begin with an analysis of several excerpts, evoking the above-mentioned films to build an overview of the Dardennean staging, and choosing to consider only the work of these filmmakers in order to more accurately design the panel formed by the films in question. Then, we will approach more directly some ethical issues that allow us to think of their films as direct results of their relations with the world, including how this vision affects the choice of actors and the journeys of the characters. Finally, we will conclude with an approximation between staging and ethics as central to understanding the relations between the films and the theoretical reflections of the Dardenne

¹ From 1978 to 1983, the Dardenne brothers made only documentaries, such as *Le Chant du Rossignol* (1978) and *R... Ne Repond Plus* (1981), starting to fiction production from 1987 onwards. It was with the experience of *Je Pense à Vous* (1992), considered by the pair as a failure, that they established the bases (unknown actors, simplicity and low budget) that would mark the ethical dimension of their cinema after *The Promise*. About the necessity of a turning point carrier, Luc Dardenne records in his diary: "Long talk with Jean-Pierre about the way we are going to continue making our films after the bad experience of *Je Pense à vous* ...". (DARDENNE, 2005, p.13-14, own translation). This conversation resulted in the bases that remain remarkable in Dardennean cinema until today.

brothers. Thus, we believe to contribute with new elements for a vision of Dardennean cinema that considers the ethical and aesthetic dimension of their films.

Panoramic of the Dardennean staging

What draws the most attention in the Dardenne brothers' films when viewed together is the moral dilemma that marks the characters, dilemma translated by the choices that these characters make at decisive moments and, in addition, a certain narrative and aesthetic repetition. In the meantime, there are many elements that need to be considered, and we think it's important to list some strategies of the Dardennean staging to understand how we arrive at the ethical dimension of their films.

Janice Morgan (2004) uses the expression *unadorned cinéma vérité style*² to refer to Dardennean cinema, which makes us reflect on the ordinary way in which the impression of reality in these films is confused with the absence of staging, and which goes against the grain of Luc Dardenne's diaries attest and what his and Jean-Pierre's testimonies indicate in numerous interviews. For Morgan, it is the sum of the urban industrial ambience and the characters facing moral dilemmas that causes this effect:

In the kind of gritty, unadorned *cinéma vérité* style they practice, the specificity of this setting is highly important to their social vision. Here, the urban landscape of northern Europe, gray in cloud and stone, matches the mood of these somber tales about young people facing important turning points in their lives. (MORGAN, 2004, p.1187-8, emphasis added).

Morgan discusses, based on the enunciation of an unadorned cinema, the strength of body language in *Rosetta*, the costume economy itself, which reinforces the absence of adornment and invites us to look at the character in a different way, "but the way she is caught and tracked by the camera will ask much more of us" (MORGAN, 2004, P.1188). Therefore, the term unadorned *cinéma vérité* style mixes truth and style in an expression put in check by the author herself when indicating the staging strategies present in *Rosetta*. In effect, what exists in Dardennean cinema is an intense control of the whole process, from the conception of the script, through the structure of the story and the construction of the characters, to the production and direction, from the set to the finalization.

² We chose to keep the term *unadorned cinéma vérité style*, as it appears in the original, here and in the direct quote, in order to preserve the mixture of languages proposed by the author.

It is still naive to assume that the absence of an incidental soundtrack or a camera virtuosity denotes the lack of adornment, understood here as a staging strategy. We know that the camera's instability is programmed to achieve a certain objective, as well as the absence of non-diegetic sounds. What matters at this moment, however, is to affirm an evidence: the treatment that the Dardenne brothers give to each work contradicts the idea of the lack of adornment attributed to their films by critics and analysts, as we will see below.

A blunt example of this is *Rosetta*'s opening scene. The protagonist hurries through the corridors of her work and, behind the planned instability of the camera, there is a movement between actors and crew that indicates the main feature of the Dardennean staging. Essentially, staging is putting on the scene, and it is worth thinking about how the method created by the Dardenne brothers on the set contributes to the Dardennean staging; nothing happens by chance, and confusing certain flexibility that the brothers allow themselves with something close to the chronicle or the documentary is at the origin of a questionable approach of their work.

Phillipa Hawker (2009) discusses the method created by the Dardenne. According to the author: "The brothers' methods are a combination of painstaking preparation and deliberate flexibility" (HAWKER, 2009, p.113). The initial scene of *Rosetta* reaffirms the Dardenne as directors aware of the effects of a particular use of photography, which assumes the instability of the image in a radical way, in contrast to the effect intended in the only scene in Riquet's house, in the same film, in which the image remains stable. This gives us clues about the camera instability as an option in some moments, and a certain stability of the image in others. Bert Cardullo (2009) talks about some films of the Dardenne brothers and highlights the contrast of photography in this particular scene of *Rosetta* in relation to the rest of the film.

... the Dardennes film most of this scene at Riquet's apartment in a static, becalming long take, with the camera in medium shot. Much of the rest of *Rosetta*, by contrast, is photographed with a handheld camera that remains disorientingly close to the heroine as she dashes about, with a twofold effect. On the one hand, the restless, uneven camerawork of Alain Marcoen (...) creates the visual equivalent of the instability and uncertainty in Rosetta's life; on the other hand, the handheld camera seems to dog Rosetta with an angry intensity that matches her own ... (CARDULLO, 2009, p.41).

As in the beginning of *Rosetta*, the other films considered here begin in the middle of an action. The camera, always in hand, does not claim any stability. In *The Son*, we see Olivier, in the first scene, reading something, which we will know later is an apprentice's registration form, while the camera goes up, from the character's back, to framing him from behind, the back of his head

revealing his head low, like someone reading something. The camera pulls back to reveal a woman beside and watching him. When stepping back, the camera frames the doorframe, the image is divided in half, to the left of the image the woman who observes Olivier, the right part of the image is filled by the door that hides Olivier. Returning to Olivier, the camera initiates a downward movement until it finds what Olivier has in hand, but he is called to help an apprentice in carpentry and the camera interrupts the movement and gives up its supposed intention, to frame what he is reading, quickly returning to a close-up, when we see Olivier's face for the first time. The handheld shot follows him from behind, as it happens various times in *Rosetta's* opening scene; a planned spontaneity, disguised as movement at random.

Indeed, in *The Son* we find a recurring feature in the Dardennean staging: the interruption of the camera movement when it meets what Olivier has in hand suggests an unpredictability that does not actually exist, but the sensation is built by the staging of the Dardenne brothers. As Luc points out in his diary, the rehearsal is fundamental to their method. They rehearse for weeks before the shooting period and, again, every shooting day. In addition, the method also consists of rehearsing the actors' movement before defining the positioning and the movements of the camera.

Therefore, it remains clear that the interruption of the camera advancing in order to frame the folder in Olivier's hands but not reaching this objective because Olivier is requested in the carpentry and the camera starts to accompany him in rapid movement, consolidates itself as a strategy, a trademark of the Dardenne brothers in their films, and undoubtedly one of those responsible for claims that the camera in these films only records or moves at random. Behind a supposed spontaneity of the photograph is a strict control of the frame and of the camera movements. The Dardenne brothers leave little to chance.

Elio Girlanda (2006) wonders if what the Dardenne brothers created would be a formula or a system. Luc Dardenne (2005; 2015), in turn, puts throughout his books the concern if he and his brother are repeating themselves in each new film. The common traits that we can find in the films here considered make us think that only one system, understood as something more comprehensive, a properly Dardennean universe, justifies the proximity between the films, but not their congruence. The script's objectivity makes similar the beginning of all films. The characters are always in the middle of an action and the main question is already clearly made. For example, in *The Promise*, the moral universe in which Igor lives, by stealing the money from the lady he

supposedly tries to help, reveals that this will be the main struggle of the character. In *The Kid with a Bike*, the initial scene of Cyril's attempt to speak to his father on the phone and his revolt for failing mark the protagonist's goal and state of mind throughout his journey. In *The Child*, Sonia goes up the stairs to discover that her apartment was rented by her boyfriend to other people while she was in the hospital, indicating Bruno's character weakness. The same Dardennean staging strategy can be found in all films.

Luc Dardenne himself announces the bases of this system when the brothers were about to start writing the script for *The Promise*, which marks the beginning of the new phase of Dardennean filmography.

One thing is certain: small budget and simplicity in everything (script, sets, costumes, lighting, crew, cast). Having our team, finding actors who really want to work with us, who do not block us with their professionalism, strangers who do not lead us through what is already known and recognized. Against affectation, the mannerism that prevails: thinking poor, simple, naked. (DARDENNE, 2005, p.14, own translation).

Low budgets and simplicity in all sectors of film making. This simplicity, we can say, is relative, because there is nothing simple in the writing of a script or in the direction and production of an audiovisual work that results in films such as *Rosetta* or *The Child*, both winners of the Palme d'Or in Cannes, in the 1999 and 2005, respectively. The simplicity lies in the fact that no large crew, expensive equipment, or production industrial model are required, and their films generally do not have big stars (with rare exceptions), cranes or expensive locations. The study of the Dardennean staging reveals the complexity behind an alleged simplicity.

Within this study of Dardennean staging, the features of editing and photography deserve to be highlighted. There is, at first, an appearance of repetition in this staging, but when we look more closely, we find that the issue is not so simple. The truth is that the choices made by the Dardenne brothers are not implied by any radicalism. The option of not working with famous actors is contradicted by themselves when casting Marion Cotillard or Cécile de France, as we will see later, and the conviction of not using non-diegetic music is relativized in the final shot of *Lorna's Silence* and in some moments of *The Kid with a Bike*, when the musical score is used. We can say that inflexibility is not part of the Dardennean universe, and this also applies to editing and photography, even if, at first, it is possible to intuit the opposite.

The photography of all films is characterized by handheld shots, and this occurs even in moments when filmmakers could use a static camera, given the absence of movement of the actors within the scene. The camera remains radically close to the actors in the scenes in which they move, notably when they walk down the street, but the same option for handheld shot remains in moments when there is no movement of actors in the shot. This resource is frequent, as we can see in the analysis of some fragments made here, and it constitutes a base of the Dardennean staging.

The way in which the editing is used is another base. The Dardenne brothers opt for editing with most parsimony, always resisting to divide the scene in several shots, except when there is some impediment in the continuity of the shot that justifies the cut. There is no insert, no mannerism in the narrative, as the Dardenne would say. There is, quite clearly, the intention of not manipulating the narrative through excessive editing. But it is evident that editing plays an important role within this staging.

Complementing the option for long takes that is given by photography, the editing takes place within a scene respecting a certain economy. The most characteristic of the Dardennean staging is to solve the scene in few shots. However, the editing will be used inside a scene whenever there is a need to change the position of the camera, even if in a handheld work. One of the limitations of continuity of the shot that we can perceive is when a character moves from one floor to another in a location. As accompanying the character in this type of displacement and with an handheld shot would imply the execution of a shot with less stability than usually found in their films, the Dardenne choose to cut. This is what happens when Lorna visits the store she has just rented in the film *Lorna's Silence*. Going up three floors of the store, whenever the character moves from one floor to another, there is a cut in the image and the beginning of a new shot, which will remain until the character changes the floor again. In *Two Days, One Night*, when Sandra goes upstairs of her house, the camera does not follow her. The use of editing here is functional, and does not go beyond what the spatial limitation imposes.

This type of use of editing is quite common in their films. In *The Child*, in the foreground, Sonia goes up the stairs with her newborn son in her arms. There is a cut and the next shot shows Sonia already at the apartment door. The film uses this same treatment in the rest of the narrative, the cut being used only when it is inevitable due to some spatial limitations. Even when changing rooms, inside locations, the cut usually occurs only when the character leaves one room for another.

When it comes to spatial limitation, the scenes that take place inside cars call attention for a particular use of the editing. This extreme situation of spatial limitation unites the bases of photography and editing in the Dardennean staging. In *The Kid with a Bike*, Samantha takes Cyril to talk with his father. After realizing that the father no longer wants to see him, Cyril and Samantha return to the car. The scene lasts 82 seconds and begins with the use of shot reverse shot. Three shots make up the scene, one of Cyril, followed by one of Samantha, and finally one of Cyril and the final frame is the boy lying on Samantha's lap. Upon seeing him strike blows against his face, Samantha stops the car and hugs him, comforting him. The abandonment of editing takes place in the most dramatic moment of the scene. Then, when Samantha and Gilles find Cyril in the company of the young drug dealer, the scene in the car takes 103 seconds and begins with close-up shots of the three characters until Cyril fights with Gilles, and when he asks if Samantha chooses to stay with him or the kid, the cut is abandoned in the most dramatic moment of the scene. Samantha says it is Cyril she will stay with, the camera leaves Samantha's close-up shot for Gilles and back to Samantha, uncut.

In *Two days, one night*, we found a similar situation. When Manu accompanies Sandra on her journey, the use of shot reverse shot is reduced to a minimum, that is, even if they use this resource, it is used with a minimum number of shots. For example, in the scene where Sandra answers the phone in the car and then Manu tries to interrupt a song on the radio, the scene is resolved in five shots, with two very short by Manu, and the option for the camera movement is given, again, in the most intense moment of the scene, when the music unites the couple; at that moment, the camera goes from Sandra to Manu, and back to Sandra. Later, when Sandra, Manu and Anne sing a rock song in the car, the scene lasts 87 seconds and is filmed in just one shot. Anne is seated behind the driver, her body projected forward, justified by the dialogue between her and Sandra. The shot starts with the camera framing Sandra; the camera takes the place of a fourth passenger, behind the passenger seat. From there, the camera moves horizontally to frame Anne, and returns to Sandra, always passing by Manu. When the sound increases, the three characters sing, the camera returns to framing Anne and returns to Sandra, in a single shot.

We believe that the option to avoid cutting in the most dramatic moments is constant, which leads us to the Bazinian statement of the prohibited editing: "When the essential of an event depends on the simultaneous presence of two or more factors of the action, the editing is prohibited." (BAZIN,

1991, p.62, own translation). However, what is pointed out as aesthetic law by Bazin appears in the Dardenne brothers' cinema as a staging resource. This meets the use of the long take in the Dardennean staging, which contributes to the reading of the Dardenne brothers' cinema through realism. Such reading dialogues with a tradition that attributes to the long take and the parsimonious use of editing the basis of realism and Bazin's own concept of prohibited editing refers to this. Indeed, the option for the long take and the parsimonious use of the editing complement and feed several readings of the Dardennean work. On the contrary, our analysis of the fragments of the Dardenne brothers' films indicates the use of editing as a choice due to a certain effect, in different situations, and in others, due to the imposition of spatial limitations.

When mentioning the critical school of Bazin, and also of Michel Mourlet, Jacques Aumont states that: "The long take (...) was tended to (...) more adjusted to the ideal of expressive realism, of staging as a transparent appearance evidence, than any editing." (AUMONT, 2008, p.104, own translation). It is important to consider this tradition of film theory about the dramatic continuity given by the absence of cut, as if it were more real than the one to which the cut contributes, as if there was no choice behind the use of cut at a time, and its absence in another, as the interiors of the cars scenes in the Dardennean staging show so well. The characters remain in their seats, the staging chooses sometimes for the use of the cut, sometimes for the continuity of the shot, not randomly, but to accentuate a certain moment of tension and, it seems, it is only in these moments that editing becomes prohibited in these films.

A more radical option is found in *The Son*, when Olivier offers a ride to Francis, the young apprentice. Upon seeing that Magali, his ex-wife, runs into Francis, Olivier runs to avoid the confrontation. The handheld shot follows Olivier as he runs from car to car. The scene is composed by three shots, but there is no cut when it reaches its dramatic peak, although this brings an intense instability to the image while Olivier runs to prevent Magali from approaching.

In addition, it is worth noting that the effects obtained when using an uncut shot after a series of cuts within the same scene, as in the case of *Two Days, One Night* and *The Kid with a Bike*, are different from the effect we would have if the scenes were totally resolved in a single shot, something widely found in the cinema of the Dardenne brothers, or if, on the contrary, the option was to amplify the *decoupage*, keeping the cuts to always show close-up shots of the characters. This idea of thinking at what moments editing is necessary is a mark of the Dardennean staging, echoing, at

times, the concept of prohibited editing. However, something that is not so explored when talking about the cinema of the Dardenne brothers and that deserves to be highlighted is the constant use of the long take.

In *Rosetta*, the final scene is an example of a sequence shot within the Dardennean staging. There are 12 minutes and 52 seconds without any cut, although it is rare to mention this scene as a long take. The interesting thing to note is that uncut scenes are a constant in the Dardenne brothers' cinema, a fact that often goes unnoticed. We also found the use of the long take in the final scene of *Young Ahmed*, during the protagonist's attempts to enter the school and find his teacher. In *Lorna's Silence*, the protagonist goes to the pharmacy to buy medicine for Claudy and, in another moment, Lorna takes Claudy to the emergency room; the same happens in *The Promise*, when Igor takes Assita and his baby to the hospital: in all these cases, the scenes are resolved in a single shot, but, it is worth mentioning, in the fragments pointed out in *Lorna's Silence* and *The Promise*, the scenes are very brief, contrary to what happens in the examples of *Rosetta* and *Young Ahmed*. In other words, there are distinct uses of the long take, but they all result from a restrained use of editing and the absence of any virtuosity in photography. This staging does not correspond to what was established by common sense as being a long take, always marked by some camera virtuosity so that the shot is considered as such. In the cinema of the Dardenne brothers, mannerism has no place, as neither does the virtuosity of photography. The Dardennean staging in the films of our study echoes, albeit without radicalism, what Luc Dardenne established in his diary: low budget, unknown actors, and there is no doubt that the absence of mannerism evoked by Luc Dardenne ends up constituting a certain way of staging.

Ethics and aesthetics in Dardenne brothers cinema

One of the pillars of the Dardennean staging lies in the choice of actors and the way they act, which brings us to the ethical dimension of that choice. Here, it is worth considering the way in which the actors are placed on the screen in a broad way, which presupposes, even, which premises are considered in the choice of the actors that compose the cast of a film as an inherent part of the staging. When deciding how they would conduct *The Promise*, it was clearly that the Dardenne brothers saw the need to seek actors without the mannerisms of professionalism. In this anti-star

system, the Dardenne seek out unknown actors, avoiding working with renowned actors, which will be slowly relativized throughout their films.

As we know, their films are always based on individual journeys, with Igor, Rosetta, Olivier, Lorna, Bruno, Cyril, Sandra, Jenny and Ahmed as protagonists. In general, the Dardenne brothers do not repeat the actresses who starred in their films, but the same does not happen with the actors. And it is paradoxical that some unknown actors who have passed through the scenes of the Dardenne brothers have become stars and returned to their films as famous actors.

In *The Promise*, two actors deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, Olivier Gourmet, who became a frequent figure in the Dardenne brothers' films. He plays the father, Roger, who employs illegal immigrants and leads his son Igor into a deep moral struggle. When Olivier was cast in *The Promise*, he was already a theater actor in Belgium and, even in cinema, he had already worked on *The Eighth Day* (*Le Huitième jour*, by Jaco van Dormael, 1996), albeit in an expressionless role. It was with the success of *The Promise* that Gourmet became known and started to be constantly cast to work with the Dardenne brothers. He returns as the owner of the waffle factory in *Rosetta*, and takes the lead as the cabinetmaker who employs, as an apprentice, the murderer of his own son, in the film that won the award for best actor at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. *The Son* is the only film by the Dardenne brothers in which Gourmet takes on the main role, but he has acted in all the films realized by them since *The Promise* (the exception is only *Young Ahmed*) even in minor roles, and accumulates more than 30 films in his filmography, with many directors.

What happened to Jérémie Renier was no different. When the Dardenne brothers cast him for *The Promise*, Renier already had experience, including in cinema, having acted at the age of ten in *Les Sept péchés capitaux* (by Beatriz Flores and others, 1992) and in the telefilm *La Mélodie des héros* (by Tiziana Caminada, 1993). Therefore, the idea that the Dardenne brothers work with non-actors is misplaced. What works as a premise for them is to find actors who are not known to the general public and who do not have what the Dardenne brothers call professional addiction. But above all, it is against the star system³ that they take a stand. Renier also became a frequent figure

³ It is worth noting that, when we refer to the star system, we think of the way in which famous actors add market value to films, which happens in several cinematographies and is not restricted to the star system period marked by the system of the great American studios, which signed long-term contracts with actors during the 1930s and 1940s.

in the Dardenne brothers' films, although he does not appear in all of the films, having been cast in central roles in *The Child*, *Lorna's Silence* and *The Kid with a Bike*.

Another actor who is a constant presence in the Dardenne brothers' films is Fabrizio Rongione. He plays Riquet in *Rosetta*, and returns as a criminal in *The Child*, having more prominence as the contravening taxi driver in *Lorna's Silence* and Sandra's husband in *Two days, one night*. When he was cast in *Rosetta*, Fabrizio had already acted in the short film *Foudres* (by Véronique van Meerbeeck, 1998). Along with Gourmet and Renier, Rongione forms the trio of frequent actors of the Dardenne brothers, unlike what happens with actresses, with whom the Dardenne brothers work only once.

That's what happens with the casting of Assita Quedragogo, who plays Assita in *The Promise*, and with all the other actresses who played a prominent role. When Emillie Déquenne was chosen to debut in the cinema in *Rosetta*, she already acted in an amateur theater group, having joined a theater company at the age of 12. Upon receiving the Best Actress award at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival, she began a career as a cinema actress, without ever returning to work with the Dardenne brothers.

The same happened with Déborah François, from *The Child*, and with the Albanian actress Arta Dobroshi, from *Lorna's Silence*. In neither case, the Dardenne opted for non-actors, but for actors who were not, at least not yet, included in the star system. In any case, *The Kid with a Bike* marks a turning point in this method of choosing actors, since, at that time, Cécile de France was already a renowned actress, having even worked on a Clint Eastwood film two years earlier, namely *Hereafter* (2010). Her first feature film is from 2000 and she had already received the César for Best Actress for the film *L'Auberge espagnole*, directed by Cédric Klapisch (2003).

Therefore, while the Dardenne brothers maintained the same criteria in choosing Thomas Doret to live Cyril, they opted, for the first time, for a well-known actress, which will also mark *Two days, one night*, with the award-winning actress Marion Cotillard, who had already received an Academy Awards for *La Vie en Rose* (*La Môme*, by Olivier Dahan, 2007), seven years before the meeting with the Dardenne brothers. However, all actors, famous or not, receive the same treatment when they are inserted in the Dardennean universe. Therefore, it is not a question of scaling non-actors, but of questioning, through its own relationship with the actors and with the world around, an

industrial model of cinema, in which a certain reproduction of the way how actors occupy the position of stars is placed in check, as when working with renowned actors the Dardenne insist on maintaining the premise of simplicity announced by Luc in his diary.

In addition to this Dardennean cast, it is important to note that a faithful team accompanies the Dardenne brothers, asserting Luc's wish in *Au dos de nos images*, which has repercussions on the aesthetics of the films. Alan Marcoen remained a photographer from *The Promise* until *The Unknown Girl*, always accompanied, in his team, by the cameraman Benoit Dervaux, whose contribution is notable, and who takes the direction of photography in *Young Ahmed*. The same is true for Marie-Hélène Dozo, who has edited all the Dardenne films since *The Promise*. This continuity undoubtedly contributes to the films maintaining the same standard, beyond what we could find if there was a turnover of professionals in areas as strategic as photography and editing, for example. Thus, the choices that culminate in the Dardennean staging start in the definition of crew and cast, and always follow guided by the premises pointed out by the Dardenne brothers and supported by their world vision.

Concerning the Dardennean characters journeys, we sustained that they have something in common, a lowest common denominator: it is the moral issue that imposes difficult choices on the characters, but that result in their humanization. The way heroes face these dilemmas clearly demonstrates this congruence in the outcome of the narratives. Both in *The Promise* and in *Rosetta*, this is clear. Igor and his father Roger work with illegal immigrants and the title makes reference to Igor's promise to one of those immigrants who is injured and dies. Thus, the promise to look after the son and wife of the deceased immigrant worker will make Igor face Roger as a consequence of his moral dilemma. Already in *Rosetta*, the title character betrays Riquet, the only one who extended his hand to her, so that he is fired and she can keep her job. It is this moral dilemma that leads her to the scene of frustrated suicide in the end, for failing to move forward after the betrayal. The journeys of the Dardennean characters are journeys that humanize the protagonists and that are translated by the belief in the human being and responsibility towards the Other.

For Lévinas, Ethics is based on responsibility for the Other: "From sensitivity, the subject is for the other: substitution, responsibility, expiation." (LÉVINAS, 2012, p.101, own translation). The centrality of the Other unites the philosophy of Lévinas and the cinema of the Dardenne brothers. It

is from this axis that the Dardennean work gains more defined contours. The appeal to the Other is an ethical call.

It is worth noting that in all the films of our investigation, the moral struggle that crosses the lives of Dardennean heroes and that leads them to a humanizing experience is always present. In *The Son*, discovering that his young apprentice was responsible for the death of his own son, Oliver faces the dilemma of forgiving or punishing, and both he and the young man come out more human from this confrontation. In *The Child*, Bruno sells his son, and Sonia's reaction puts him in check. It is from this clash that he begins his journey of humanization. In *The Unknown Girl*, Jenny decides not to open the door to a young woman who was being chased and who, the next day, is found dead, which takes the protagonist on a journey that makes her rethink its ethical stance towards the world. In their humanizing trajectories, the outcome invariably means a choice based on ethics and responsibility for the Other.

In *Lorna's Silence*, the protagonist's moral struggle is one of the most evident. Lorna agrees to participate in a fake wedding with Claudy and succumbs to Fábio's plans, among them, the murder of her false husband; this is her silence, and it becomes unfeasible for Lorna to move on without becoming someone more human. In *The Kid with a Bike*, after being abandoned by his father, Cyril spends the weekends with Samantha, whom he accidentally met, against whom he channels the revolt of rejection, and his attitudes will lead him on a path in which it will become impossible to go without regret. In *Young Ahmed*, after an accident, the protagonist who flirts with religious fundamentalism apologizes to the teacher who planned to murder. And in the particular case of *Two Days, One Night*, Sandra discovers that her co-workers have opted for a salary bonus instead of her return to the job, which makes her go on a journey to convince them otherwise. She will be put in check when she knows that, in order to keep her job, one of her temporarily hired colleagues, and who voted for her return, will have to be fired. The particularity is in the fact that it imposes also on each secondary character a moral dilemma, which is one of the main bases of the Dardenne brothers' cinema.

At the same time, the style of photography by Alain Marcoen meets the low-budget Dardennean premise, while establishing a close relation with the actors. The method created by the Dardenne brothers, who first define the movement of the actors, making intense use of the rehearsals, to then fit the camera, allows the staging to evoke a feeling of naturalness, since the

camera is inserted organically in the set and establishing a symbiotic relation with the characters. In this sense, photography reproduces the ethical premises of Dardennean cinema.

The sound treatment of the films is another point to be considered and proves, as we have seen in relation to the casting, that the Dardenne brothers allow themselves to break with what they establish as a certain tradition of their films. That's because in the first four films of our investigation, *The Promise*, *Rosetta*, *The Child* and *The Son*, there was a radical option for the absence of non-diegetic sounds. Even in the initial and final credits, there is no music, and in some films they use ambient sound on the black screen, and in other films, there is no sound accompanying the credits. It was only in the fifth film of our study, *Lorna's Silence*, that the Dardenne brothers used, in the last shot, a non-diegetic sound. The music that marks the final credits, namely Beethoven 2. Arietta - Piano Sonata n. 32 in C minor, Op.111, starts still in the last shot of the film, while Lorna lies down in the lost cottage in the middle of the forest. Then, only *The Kid with a Bike* presents non-diegetic music, also a composition by Beethoven, Piano Concerto n.5, in E Maior, Op.73.

As we know, both to establish the ordinary use of the handheld shot, considering the displacement of the actors, often walking or even running through the streets, and for the construction of the sound ambience without non-diegetic sounds, nothing happens in a way simple and testing and planning are constant. Once again, simplicity is built by staging, crossed by the premises that the Dardenne established for their films.

In a way, the desire placed by Luc Dardenne on what, at the turn of the making of *The Promise*, the brothers wanted it to be their cinema, as opposed to what they had previously done, was solidly realized through these three pillars that directly influence the Dardennean staging: low budget, unknown actors and absence of mannerisms. These pillars feed back; the requirement to work with small budgets, in general, excludes the possibility of adding actors that become expensive for the film; the simplicity in choosing the scenarios and the use of the handheld shot speak directly with the proposal to keep the budget low; a simple filming model becomes compatible only with available actors and crew that fit the system of filmmaking created by the Dardenne brothers.

In evoking simplicity and a lack of mannerism, Luc Dardenne places the premises on which he and Jean-Pierre founded their filming assumptions. Giving up on a larger filming structure, large budgets and more complex production puts the professionalism of the film industry in check, which

is not only present in the search for unknown actors. It is even against the industrial logic of making cinema that the Dardenne put themselves with their choices, with their aesthetics, with their staging.

We should film with small budgets and people close to us, with friends. As Jean-Pierre said: "This is, without a doubt, our truth". This economic restriction is for us, perhaps, an opportunity to rediscover our strength, our relationship with the real, which cannot live with the growing and overwhelming professionalism of film production." (DARDENNE, 2005, p.38, own translation).

The choices that mark the staging of the Dardenne brothers are, above all, in their world vision. The simplicity that they claim goes to the encounter with a lost humanity, in the team of friends, in the refusal of hierarchy and the star system, and even in the abolition of any mannerism that calls attention to itself, to its functions. Filming life necessarily requires a deglamourization that is strange to the industrial cinema model. However, Brooks points out a paradox, letting escape the Dardennean essence.

They have established a lofty international reputation by keeping their nose to the ground. Avoiding the lure of established stars and hefty budgets, the brothers ferret out human stories from their local terrain and turn them over to the world at large. But there is a paradox here, and it shows up every time they slip into their festival tuxedos. Do they fear that they might be drifting too far from the margins? Do they worry about becoming victims of their own success? ... / The brothers laugh at the notion. "We are not Spielberg," chortles Jean-Pierre. "Spielberg is successful, not us." (BROOKS, 2009, p.97).

Thus, the Dardenne brothers managed to carry out a work of great repercussion, following the premises announced by Luc Dardenne, going through the cinematographic staging with his world vision, uniting ethics and aesthetics to each film made. The Dardennean universe is permeable to everyday issues that place the need for humanization of people and the desire of world transformation.

Final considerations

The Dardennean staging follows the premises announced by Luc Dardenne, and a study of these pillars, as we have done throughout this paper, helps us to propose a new key for viewing the Dardenne brothers' films, through the approximation between the staging and the ethical posture of these filmmakers and their work.

Behind these pillars, in Luc Dardenne writings, in the films he has made with Jean-Pierre since they decided to write the screenplay of *The Promise*, what we find is more than just the staging

of two renowned filmmakers. It is a world vision that directly interferes with their staging, based on the relationship they establish on the set, the way they treat actors and crew, the denial of industrial logic in the production of their films, the refusal of large budgets, or a greater production structure, which takes us beyond what only the analysis of the Dardennean staging provides.

The undeniable humanitarian vision of their films is an unfolding of the way they perceive reality. It is the reading of a world that manifests itself, a critical reading of the excesses of capital, the marginalization of the underprivileged, the dehumanization of people. The central question that echoes in the Dardenne brothers' films, namely, "what does it mean to be human today?" (DARDENNE, 2005, p.110, own translation), in a markedly inhuman world, it is the question that crosses their work, and with an ethical stance towards the world, they themselves answer this question with each new film.

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YOUNG Ahmed. Directing, Screenplay and Production: Jean-Pierre e Luc Dardenne. Bélgica, Les Films du Fleuve, 2019. DVD (84min), sound, color. Original title: **Le Jeune Ahmed.** Subtitles.

Abstract

The Dardennean universe is made up of characters facing moral dilemmas, in a scenario marked by the dehumanization of people in the world today. This paper aims to reflect on the ethics and staging in the cinema of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, investigating how the films reverberate the ethical posture of the filmmakers in question. Through an analysis of film fragments made by the duo from *The Promise* (1996) to *Young Ahmed* (2019), we seek to examine the films from their aesthetic dimension and then to address the ethical premises posed by the filmmakers. The aim is to demonstrate how the staging is guided by the Dardenne brothers' world vision.

Keywords: Ethic. Staging. Aesthetics. Cinema. Dardenne.

Resumo

O universo dardenneano é constituído por personagens que enfrentam dilemas morais, num cenário marcado pela desumanização das pessoas no mundo atual. Este artigo propõe uma reflexão sobre ética e encenação no cinema de Jean-Pierre e Luc Dardenne, investigando como os filmes reverberam a postura ética dos cineastas em questão. Através de uma análise de fragmentos dos filmes realizados pela dupla desde *A Promessa* (1996) até *O Jovem Ahmed* (2019), buscamos examinar as obras a partir de sua dimensão estética para, em seguida, abordarmos as premissas éticas colocadas pelos cineastas. O objetivo é demonstrar de que forma a encenação é pautada pela visão de mundo dos irmãos Dardenne.

Palavras-chave: Ética. Encenação. Estética. Cinema. Dardenne.

Resumen

El universo dardenneano está formado por personajes que enfrentan dilemas morales, en un escenario marcado por la deshumanización de las personas en el mundo actual. Este artículo propone una reflexión sobre la ética y la puesta en escena en el cine de Jean-Pierre y Luc Dardenne, y investiga cómo las películas reverberan la postura ética de los cineastas en cuestión. Mediante un análisis de fragmentos de las películas realizadas por el dúo desde *La Promesse* (1996) hasta *Le Jeune Ahmed* (2019), buscamos examinar las obras desde su dimensión estética y luego abordar las premisas éticas planteadas por los cineastas. El objetivo es demostrar cómo la puesta en escena está guiada por la cosmovisión de los hermanos Dardenne.

Palabras clave: Ética. Puesta en escena. Estética. Cine. Dardenne.