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Stefanie Knauss (ed.)

In Search of the Human

The Work of the Dardenne Brothers

SCHÜREN

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JRFM is a peer-reviewed, open-access, online publication. It offers a platform for scholarly research in the broad field of religion and media, with a particular interest in audiovisual and interactive forms of communication. It engages with the challenges arising from the dynamic development of media technologies and their interaction with religion.

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In Search of the Human

The Work of the Dardenne Brothers Editorial

Close-ups of human faces and hands, shots that are anchored around human individuals, with landscapes or cityscapes only present in so far as they represent the environment in which these individuals live and act, a camera that moves and breathes with human bodies, scenes defined by the actions and interactions of the characters, narratives of human despair and resilience, broken relationships and offers of trust – without wanting to delimit the multifaceted œuvre of Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, these prominent aesthetic and narrative elements of their films underline one central theme across their work, the search for the human. What is the human being? What are the conditions that hinder or promote human flourishing? How can human beings exist in an industrialized, technicized society? How can they maintain their humanity under dehumanizing conditions? These questions are not explicitly religious, let alone specific to Christianity, and they are treated in the films of the Dardennes without direct reference to religious traditions and their bids to make sense of human existence. And yet, with their exploration of what it means to be human and to interact with other human beings in a context that often inhibits good relationships and the good life, their films provide much food for thought for theology, the study of religions, and philosophy as they reflect on central anthropological, existential, and ethical questions.

The three articles in the theme section of this issue offer different perspectives on the Dardennes' search for the human, spanning their work from *LA PROMESSE* (*THE PROMISE*, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, BE/FR/LU/TN 1996) to *DEUX JOURS, UNE NUIT* (*TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT*, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, BE/FR/IT 2014).¹ From a philosophical-theological perspective, Isabella Guanzini draws on Giles Deleuze's notion of "belief in the world" to discuss how the Dardennes contribute to its (re-)creation in a secular world, focusing in par-

¹ The most recent film by the Dardennes, *LA FILLE INCONNUE* (*THE UNKNOWN GIRL*, BE/FR 2016) had not yet been released at the time of preparation of this issue and unfortunately could not be included in the discussion in a more substantial way.

ticular on the theme of paternity as one moment when belief in the world has been disrupted and might be recreated. Walter Lesch's philosophical-ethical contribution explores the subtle, yet decisive influence of Emmanuel Levinas and his philosophy of the ethical claim of the other on Luc Dardenne, and Luc Dardenne's own philosophical contributions in his writings and cinema. In my contribution I introduce the perspectives of gender studies, feminist ethics, and Christian ethics to ask how the interaction of individual freedom and social structures shapes the lives of men and women in the worlds of family and work.

With their varied approaches, the three articles explore specific aspects of the vast question of the search for the human in the cinema of the Dardennes. In this editorial, I will focus on two more general issues, namely the two main strategies that I think characterize on a fundamental level their filmic search for the human, with their particular interest for theology and religious studies. One strategy is to focus closely on the material world as it is, as the condition for the existence of human beings, in a realist (but not naturalist, as Philip Mosley points out²) mode of filmmaking. More than simply empirical facts, the material world and in particular the materiality of human bodies are revealing of a particular situation and of human existence within it, with its tensions, disruptions, anxieties, and hopes. Thus, the directors' visual focus on the surface of the world and human bodies is not superficial but rather allows the materiality of the world to assume its full importance as the condition of human existence: these are the objects, the textures, the material encounters, the skin, hair, and clothes, and the gestures and actions in and through which human beings exist and express themselves. The materiality of the world and of human beings is shown to be the place of human existence, rather than instruments or hardware to be used, and thus is attributed a particular and quiet dignity of its own.

From a theological perspective, it is interesting to note that the Dardennes' attention to the materiality of the world and the concreteness of human being and acting is deeply situated in the empirical, yet at the same time transcends it in the "integration of the empirical and the transcendental, of the visible and the unseen."³ The capacity for transcendence of the material is realized in two ways in the films of the Dardennes: through close-ups and steady, long shots of what is in front of the camera, attending to the material world in its mysterious presence, and through an elliptical style with cuts that often leave large gaps in the narrative and underline the impossibility of visually capturing reality and human existing and acting within it. Focusing on the visible and allowing the invisible to claim its space, the filmmakers delineate the different ways in which the material integrates the transcendent: first, in the ability of what is to

2 Cf. Mosley 2013, 9.

3 Mosley 2013, 17.

transform and become something new; second, when simple, concrete physical actions express a complex human reality that goes far beyond a simple act;⁴ and third, in the possibility for viewers to experience an intersubjective relationship between the materiality of the film and its images and their own embodied existence,⁵ as they are invited to “enter into a physically and morally charged space”.⁶

Offering images of pure materiality and physicality with their capacity for transcendence, as Isabella Guanzini shows in her contribution, the films of the Dardennes contribute to restoring belief in the world, a belief that, according to Giles Deleuze, was disrupted in modernity and to whose re-establishment cinema can make a major contribution today. In a way, belief in the world might be seen as a secular form of faith – within an immanent horizon – in the reliability of reality, the events we experience and the relationships with other human beings for which there is no evidence but which is a matter of trust. From the perspective of the study of religions, this provides interesting material for a reflection on the nature of faith and belief in what is often called a post-secular society, in which the material world becomes the primary point of reference. From a Christian theological perspective, the transcendent quality of the material that the realist filmmaking of the Dardennes suggests is an additional interesting contribution to the ever-new task of thinking about the material world as the space of encounter with the divine.

In addition to their focus on material and existential aspects, the Dardennes pursue a second strategy in the search for the human by employing an ethical mode that asks about how to relate to the material situation in which human beings find themselves. How do dehumanizing conditions distort the human being and its relationships, and how is it possible to discover glimmers of hope in despair? How is it possible to disrupt the cycle of violence and hatred in simple, small gestures of solidarity and care? Here, too, attention to the concrete is favored over against generalizing statements: the Dardennes offer “dramas of interpersonal relationships that are microcosmic versions of the agonies at large in the lower social strata.”⁷ In my own contribution, a gender-sensitive reading of the social-justice issues related to the world of work and family that are raised in the films, I note how close attention to the concrete individual case allows the directors to investigate a situation in all its complexity and tensions, rather than offer easy solutions, without denying the effects on the individual of the larger structures of injustice in late capitalist societies. In their films, the Dardennes critically describe broken relationships, ruthless competition, and

4 Cf. Mosley 2013, 7.

5 Cf. Mosley 2013, 15, with reference to Vivian Sobchack.

6 Mosley 2013, 14.

7 Mosley 2013, 12.

the exploitation of others for one's own gains, and yet they are not satisfied with the criticism of what is, but also show imaginatively what might be when hope emerges from the possibility of human beings to resist dehumanizing dynamics, to relate to their situation freely, and to find means to transform it in smaller or larger ways.

The ethical dimension of the Dardennes' cinema is not limited to the narrative representation of issues of ethics and social justice. Joseph Mai underlines the use of a specific style of filmmaking that serves to create "an ethical space" in cinema⁸ in which viewers become involved in a relationship of solidarity with the characters, a style that creates empathy without being overwhelming, that encourages reflection without providing the answers. In this issue, Guanzini describes this style as a combination of proximity and opacity, created for example through the typical over-the-shoulder shots (often in close-ups) in which the camera follows a character from behind and slightly to the side, showing the back of their head or a half profile. This shot design results in a feeling of closeness with the character, yet does not provide a complete point-of-view shot, and thus furthers identification with a character at the same time as it inhibits such identification: as viewers, we can only guess the feelings and motivations of the person we are (nearly) aligned with and whom we observe closely, but who ultimately remains a stranger to us. As Walter Lesch's discussion of the influence of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas on the work of the Dardennes, and in particular Luc Dardenne's own philosophical contributions, shows, it is precisely the stranger as the other who poses an ethical challenge to us – that we respect them in their otherness and take responsibility for them in their shared destiny of mortality.

This ethical commitment evident in the work of the Dardennes, described as "responsible realism" by Philip Mosley in his monograph on the Dardennes or as "the artistic gift of humanism without illusions and of realism without cynicism" by Lesch in this issue, is given substance by their attention to the capacity of the material for transcendence that I have discussed above. These modes of searching for the human interconnect and enrich each other, enabling the directors to combine their critical realism with a vision of how to be human within the material conditions of existence and the dynamics of interaction that have both the potential to inhibit human flourishing and the capacity for transformation.

The three articles in the open section pursue different themes. Alyda Faber offers a reading of Frederick Wiseman's documentaries through the lens of the concept of parable as "unstory" and as a moment of disrupting logical, linear explanations of reality. As she argues, parables create visceral reactions in

8 Mai 2010, 62.

viewers, sensations of pain, bewilderment, or joy, instead of motivating specific actions. Similar to the work of the Dardennes, this mode of realist filmmaking does not necessarily allow to know the world, other human beings, animals, or objects, but rather it challenges viewers to acknowledge the other (animal, human, natural) in its otherness.

The following two articles, by Alexander D. Ornella and Sofia Sjö, discuss different filmic visions of “doing gender”. Ornella’s analysis of the BBC sitcom *REV.* (BBC2, UK 2010–2014) shows how masculinity is always a matter of negotiating between external expectations and self-image as well as between different forms of masculinity. Rather than the natural way of being a man, masculinity is an unstable construct that permanently shifts under various pressures, in particular the ones exerted by the ideal of a clerical masculinity envisioned by the Church of England, which provides the institutional context of the series. While *REV.* (2010–2014) does not represent an unproblematic image of masculine roles, it does underline that they are just that – roles that change and shift under the influence of social institutions as well as individual visions of life.

Sjö’s analysis of the ways in which gender and religion interact in two Scandinavian films continues these reflections on how films are involved in constructions of gender and religion, and on how cinema imagines the influence of religious traditions on gender roles. Sjö shows that different forms of religion are gendered quite differently, and explores how religious themes can open up alternative visions of masculinity and femininity. In addition, Sjö calls attention to the fact that today films often provide the main source of information about religion and religious ideals of masculinity and femininity, especially in a context such as that of the Nordic countries, which are relatively secularized.

Each in its own way, the articles in this issue share a common interest in the search for the human as they explore various filmic visions of the conditions of human existence in material reality and in relationship with the world, the interactions between delimiting social structures and individual freedom, the capacity of humans to transcend their situation, and the negotiation of external expectations with individuals’ ideas about their own futures as men and women.

In its early stages, I planned this issue with my friend and colleague Dr. Davide Zordan of the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Italy, co-editor of this journal. Like me, he was fascinated by the theological potential of the cinema of the Dardennes, and we spent many a coffee break talking about their ability to trace the effects of social structures in the lives of individuals in a both critical and hopeful mode, the ways in which they draw their viewers into these ethical explorations, and their attention to the beauty and depth of everyday material reality. We were both looking forward to the opportunity to broaden our conversations and en-

gage with the thoughts of other authors on these questions in the preparation of this issue. A year ago, in October 2015, Davide Zordan passed away, much too early. I dedicate this issue to his memory.

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Reality and Paternity in the Cinema of the Dardennes

I increasingly meet people who don't exist. I don't know where they are (perhaps in their image?), but they are not there. This is a strange society that produces individuals who are not there, who do not exist for others, who do not exist for themselves, for whom nobody exists. At the end of the film, Bruno will exist.

Luc Dardenne, Au dos de nos images, 1991–2005

Something possible, otherwise I will suffocate

Ingrid Bergman, Europa 51

ABSTRACT

The Dardenne brothers' filmic production aims at restoring the missing link between human beings and the world that has been progressively undermined during the ultimate development of late-capitalist society. This contribution deals with their search for a new contact with reality and a concrete belief in the world, focusing on the theme of body and paternity, in the epoch of their evaporation. However, in order to rethink the paternal function in a post-political and post-ideological age, the Dardennes have had to radically come to terms with its ambiguity and oscillation between abandon and adoption, self-preservation and transmission, forgiveness and revenge. With regard to this ambivalence, this contribution focuses on two films by the Dardennes, *LA PROMESSE* (*THE PROMISE*, BE/FR/LU/TN 1996) and *LE FILS* (*THE SON*, BE/FR 2002), which represent significant descriptions of what (the body of) a father is capable of, suggesting, at the same time, interruption and filiation as possible experiences for a new beginning.

KEYWORDS

Dardennes, belief, immanence, paternal function, interruption

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Isabella Guanzini is Professor for Fundamental Theology at the University of Graz and member of the interdisciplinary research platform "Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society" of the University of Vienna. Her research interests focus on the philosophical reception of Christian categories, the relationship between theology and psychoanalysis, philosophy of religion and aesthetics.

ANTI-GNOSTIC BELIEF IN THE WORLD

Gilles Deleuze maintains that cinema has an essentially “Catholic quality” because of its “special relationship with belief”¹ and its mise-en-scène of the link between human beings and the world. He agrees with Rossellini’s conviction that the less human the world becomes, the more it is cinema’s duty to produce belief in a possible relation between human beings and the world, because everyone is involved in the production of the world. The act of believing unfolds new horizons in history and makes the creation and expansion of life possible, allowing singularities to come together and to build a common world. Consequently, to believe not in a different reality but in a possible relation between subjects and reality, to believe in life, in humanity and in love has to become the main issue of cinema (and of philosophy) for Deleuze.

This belief has collapsed, however, together with the revolutionary faith in a possible transformation of the world. The link between subjects and world has gradually been broken, leaving both in an undefined state of suspicion and suspension.

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. ... The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible, which can only be restored within a faith. Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world. Man is in the world as if in a pure optical and sound situation. The reaction of which man has been dispossessed can be replaced only by belief. Only belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. ... Restoring our belief in the world – this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad).²

The problem of belief has changed its sense, ceding place to a still more urgent question that has surfaced. The new problem seems, at first, not to be related to believing or not believing in God, but rather to believing in this world and in this life in all its possibilities, intensities and movements. It is the question of believing in the immanent quality of the material world, in its infinitely productive, connective and affective tension in view of a possible “production of the common”.³ The exhaustion and lassitude of this belief³ deprive subjects of their capability to encounter the world, to sustain experiences, to react to everyday violence and to respond to events in order to transform them. The modern suspicion and mistrust of the world continue to permeate the relations between experience and subject, deconstructing the physical presence and the

1 Deleuze 1997, 171.

2 Deleuze 1997, 171–172.

3 Hardt/Negri 2004, 196–202.

disruptive weight of life, love and death. In this way, believing in the world has become the most difficult task, which has to catalyse the present possibility of thought and narration, since it is for Deleuze the problem of thought and narration.

This intense search for the possibility to maintain a relation with the world and perpetuate life despite the intolerability of the world – or *because of the intolerability of the world* – seems to characterise the Dardennes' cinema as well. According to Luc Dardenne, "What is more important for a film is to reconstruct some human experience. That is a shock, due to the absence of such an experience in our present."⁴ The Dardennes resist the "destruction of experience"⁵ and memory that affect the post-political micro-society of the disaffected, suburban Belgian community, representing its acute crisis of conscience and action.⁶ They describe the expropriation and the marginalised life of discarded singularities in a world in which experience has transformed into something unbearable. Their films aim to offer the tactile and raw substance of the actual world that appears to be dominated by the reifying ultimate development of the consumer society, in which "all that is solid melts into air".⁷

By means of their disruptive and de-aestheticised realism, the Dardennes seek to reconstruct a possible consistency of experience within the brutal dispositif of post-industrial society. However, the missing link between subjects and the world cannot be replaced by knowledge, a dream state, morality or the faith in another world, but by a fundamental belief in this world and in its materiality. The films of the Dardennes represent the hopeful search for the signs of humanity within the deterritorialised scenery of Seraing and Cockerill in the Walloon region. Here they observe closed factories, depopulated districts, post-apocalyptic atmospheres, under- or unemployed people and exploited illegal migrants – the stigmata of late-capitalistic society. In *LA PROMESSE (THE PROMISE, BE/FR/LU/TN 1996)*, young Igor does not resign himself to this wasted underworld, but gradually reacts to this inhumanity, breaking its perverse circle through his hope for another future. In *ROSETTA (FR/BE 1999)* the 17-year-old resilient Rosetta continues to struggle to find a job and some glimmer of identity despite the degradation and exhaustion of her familial and social milieu.⁸

4 Dardenne 2009, 7 (my own translation throughout the article).

5 Agamben 1993, 11–16.

6 "Why does this land refuse to watch itself? What do they fear? Why do they have this contempt of social life, of history? Why do they escape toward something called 'imaginary'? It is symptomatic that nobody has made a film on the deportation in camps of twenty-five thousand Jews" (Dardenne 2009, 35).

7 Marx/Engels 1992, 6.

8 Through "her story, which Luc calls the 'portrait of an époque', the film taps into the employment malaise of 1990s Europe. ... In 1998, the year *Rosetta* was shot, more than half of Belgians under 25 years old had not found a job six months after finishing their schooling, with the worst numbers in French-speaking Wallonia" (Mai 2010, 65–66).

She continues to believe in the world, stubbornly seeking to escape the destiny of abjection and affliction that wounds her mother's experience. In a very frantic and disturbing scene, Rosetta chases her dysfunctional mother, a long-term alcoholic, through the desolate landscape of the campsite where they live in order to convince her to join a rehabilitation centre:

Mother: I don't want to go out! Leave me alone!

Rosetta: Come on. It's the only way out of it. They'll look after you.

Mother: I don't want out of it.

During the struggle with her mother, Rosetta falls into the lake near the campsite, crying desperately for help. During her distressed attempt to extricate herself from the muddy water, her mother simply goes away, abandoning her to the possibility of death. Despite the unbearable fatigue and dereliction of Rosetta's life, she resists, believing in her dignity and struggling for her future.

Their "responsible realism"⁹ is the expression of the Dardennes' obstinate adherence to reality and belief in this world, its materiality and its weight. According to Luc Dardenne, "We have lost touch with reality, we have become unable to produce, to tell, to show reality. We have never been so lonely, confused in madness as such, dismayed in a world that has the consistence of a fantasy. This situation distresses us terribly."¹⁰ With their refusal of aestheticism, the Dardennes seek to recreate a relation with raw reality in all its intensity and violence, which the camera simply tries to follow and to show, as if the camera itself does not know what exactly could happen.

Starting from this "secret agreement" ("eine geheime Verabredung"¹¹) between Deleuze and the Dardennes' filmic perspective, this contribution aims, on the one hand, to emphasise the "discourse of the body" that is the main vehicle of their realism and belief in the world. On the other hand, it seeks to explain the loss of this elementary faith in the consistency of experience by focussing on the topic of paternity and its present decline, a constant question in the Dardennes' films, especially in *THE PROMISE* and in *LE FILS* (*THE SON*, BE/FR 2002). These films – but also *L'ENFANT* (*THE CHILD*, BE 2005) and *LE GAMIN AU VÉLO* (*THE KID WITH A BIKE*, BE/FR/IT 2011) – seem to establish a particular connection between paternity – in all its dimensions – and reality: the lack of the paternal function seems to interfere with the subject's perception of the world and the elementary encounter with the other. From a Lacanian perspective, the symbolic function that the "Name-of-the-Father" supports undergoes a huge transformation process in globalised societies that are increasingly dom-

9 Cf. Mosley 2013.

10 Dardenne 2009, 36.

11 Benjamin 1991, 694.

inated by abstractions. The “discourse of the capitalist”, whose social effects are harshly portrayed in the Dardennes’ stories, weakens the perception of the limit, the power of interdiction and the regulation of desire that characterise the paternal function. Only the encounter with at least one paternal figure, in all its dimensions, ambiguities and inadequacies – Olivier, Hamidou, Bruno and Samantha – seems to make the access to reality, and the belief in it, possible again.

“THE SPIRIT IS A BONE”: THE AFFECTED BODY

Both Deleuze and the Dardennes resist the dissolution of immanence and strive to encounter “a world of captures instead of closures”,¹² which is able to emit signs, disturb automatisms and affect the indolence and drift of their subjects. Luc Dardenne writes, “To go out. To go out simply. To encounter something, someone, a matter, a surface, a foreign, unknown body, I do not know, but to go out of myself, to be reached, touched. I cannot stand to stay inside any more.”¹³

The “new realism” of the Dardennes therefore corresponds not to an aesthetic style but rather to a way of encountering the material substance of the world in the thorough search for the possibility to perpetuate life. To achieve this encounter with the materiality of the world, the cinematographer has to penetrate bodily the texture of reality, like a surgeon who has to feel and cut the skin of the world. In this sense, the perpetuation of life can only be concretely achieved by believing in the body, which is inseparable from its capacity to be affected. The brothers Dardenne are absolutely captured by the question of “what a body is capable of”,¹⁴ by the ensemble of the infinite possible interactions and connections among bodies, since the deserted suburbs of the world – mirror of the global human condition – do not even know what a body can do. Deleuze writes, commenting on Spinoza,

As long as you don’t know what power a body has to be affected, as long as you learn like that, in chance encounters, you will not have the wise life, you will not have wisdom. Knowing what you are capable of. This is not at all a moral question, but above all a physical question, as a question to the body and to the soul. A body has something fundamentally hidden: we could speak of the human species, the human genera, but this won’t tell us what is capable of affecting our body, what is capable of destroying it. The only question is the power of being affected.¹⁵

12 Deleuze 1993, 81.

13 Dardenne 2009, 9.

14 Deleuze 1990, 226.

15 Cf. Deleuze 1978.

Roger and Igor, Assita and Hamidou in *THE PROMISE* (1996), Rosetta and Riquet in *ROSETTA* (1999), Olivier and Francis in *THE SON* (2002), Bruno and Sonia in *THE CHILD* (2005), Lorna, Claudy and Sokol in *LE SILENCE DE LORNA (THE SILENCE OF LORNA, BE/FR/IT/DE 2008)*, Cyril and Samantha in *THE KID WITH A BIKE* (2011) and Sandra and Manu in *DEUX JOURS, UNE NUIT (TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT, BE/FR/IT 2014)* – are able to tell us what a body is capable of: destruction and consolation, responsibility and exploitation, legacy and abjection, murder and adoption, violence and salvation.

Each body – not only the human ones – represents not merely organic or inorganic material, but also the place of an insistence and a hope, from which the belief in life can continue and persist, achieving a possible significance:

But perhaps 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. We tend to think that the closer one gets to the cup, to the hand, to the mouth whose lips are drinking, the more one will be able to feel something invisible.¹⁶

Consequently, the Dardennes aim at filming “the letter and not the spirit”, since the spirit can only emerge through filming faces, precise gestures and small things. When in *THE SON* (2002), Olivier teaches Francis the skills of his trade, through his very concrete and even brusque carpenter’s gestures, something else seems to emerge. The closer the camera approaches the different wood grains and the more it focuses on the exact dimensions of Francis’s toolbox or on the robust Olivier’s leather belt, the more a transcendent dimension shines through. The phenomenon of (the spiritual) generation here seems to gain its consistency from the very materiality of the world: paternity and filiation occur progressively through the oiling of a measuring stick, through the recognising of different types of wood, through a final dramatic struggle between two bodies that does not end in tragedy. In their films “the spirit is a bone”:¹⁷ it is precisely by maintaining the contact with the letter, with the material, that the spirit acquires depth and consistency, preventing the body itself from becoming invisible. So long as Rosetta is keeping contact with her rudimentary world of objects – the broken bottle with which she catches fish on the marshy riverbank, or her pair of boots, which she stores in an unused drainpipe in the woods – she can resiliently but precariously continue to survive, preventing the loss of the last scraps of her humanity. In a similar way, Assita’s nylon shopping bag, which she always carries with her and which contains everything she owns, seems to be the materialisation of her whole biography and memory, her soul. In the material and texture of this cheap, striped object on which the camera fo-

16 West/West 2009, 132.

17 Hegel 1977, 336–340.

cuses, her spirit appears. At the same time, this object leaves marks and traces of its passage in the viewer's memory like notches in wood.

Faith can have no object but the world and the body in its bare and material presence: this corresponds to an ethical or religious need to believe in this world and to bear witness to life, before words, discourses and symbols. "Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world", writes Deleuze.¹⁸ The curt, hard tone of the Dardennes' cinema does not offer convenient symbolic resolutions in order to give words back to the body as the source of experience and seed of life. The discourse of knowledge, of the revolutionary and the philosopher and of the anarcho-syndicalism have been substituted by the "discourse of the body",¹⁹ as an anti-Gnostic "testimonial discourse"²⁰ that demands an "acute awareness of a need for both individual and collective responsibility in human relation".²¹ In this way the Dardennes avoid any imaginary participation, narcissistic projection and immediate compassion,²² exposing the viewer to the encounter with the Real (in the Lacanian sense) and its traumatic disturbance, which cannot be spoken but only expressed by physical bodies, faces, places and sounds.

In the proximity of things, among bodies, the Dardennes find a presence of humanity: "a fire, a heat that irradiates, that burns and isolates from the sad cold, which reigns in the void, in the exaggeratingly big void of life. It is our way not to despair, to continue to believe."²³ To forget ideas and to restore the belief in these faces, bodies, places and sounds as they are, in their cruelty and beauty, before or beyond words, is one of the main tasks of the Dardennes' cinema.

Something happened that has made this restoration necessary: something that deals with paternity and its evaporation within the Belgian social field as sign of the (post-ideological) times.

WHAT REMAINS OF THE FATHER?

The Dardennes reflect a deep concern for the marginalised and distressed characters of the broken world of Seraing, which becomes the symbol of the globalised, depleted and deserted post-industrial landscape. They describe the ultimate consequences of the "discourse of the capitalist",²⁴ which dominates the

¹⁸ Deleuze 1997, 172.

¹⁹ "Artaud said the same thing, believe in the *flesh*: 'I am a man who has lost his life and is searching by all means possible to make it regain its place'" (Deleuze 1997, 173).

²⁰ Mosley 2013, 2.

²¹ Mosley 2013, 2.

²² "Narcissus has never felt so beautiful as when he can despair of himself" (Dardenne 2009, 127).

²³ Dardenne 2009, 102.

²⁴ Lacan elaborated his four discourses after the political events in France of 1968 in the seminar

present world order and is organised around objects and no longer subjects, dissolving certainties and basic orientations and weakening the fundamental trust in the world.

They suggest a profound connection between the general disorientation of their characters – who seem to act without being able to explain why – and the neglected fabric of late-capitalist working-class life. In their films, human beings seem to emerge from symbolic, ideological, political and physical ruins and to resiliently resist their own ultimate collapse. They describe the intolerable human condition of the post-movement and post-ideological globalised post-working class, which has metabolised its defeat and abandoned any utopian revolution.²⁵

It is true that our characters belong to the working class or at least to what used to be the working class. You might say that Roger in *La Promesse* is déclassé, a man who no longer belongs to a class. He does not have a job, although we can guess that he once did have a job ... The working class is no longer the working class. It is no longer structured as it was at the beginning of the last century. We are truly at the end of an age, of industry, of what we have known for a hundred years.²⁶

The geo-aesthetic scenery informs and determines the development of the characters, who attempt to cope with this destructured social reality every day, trying to survive and to find a way out of the suffocating bubble of the global world. The Dardennes show that within capitalistic discourse, the subjects are reduced to instrumental bodies in the production circuit, which does not allow any exteriority, exception or ideals. Thus, the legitimacy and efficiency of any master figure is undermined, together with any other symbolic mandate necessary to determine the identity of the subjects. “In such times you see people who are a bit lost, who try to live by exploiting those worse off than they”.²⁷ Consequently, the Dardennes suggest that capitalist discourse systematically dissolves otherness, inter-subjectivity and sociability, producing subjects who are no longer named by anyone but only by themselves.

The Dardennes’ characters testify to the decline of the symbolic order of industrial society and its enemies, together with the evaporation of the Name-of-the-Father as a sign of symbolic investiture,²⁸ of a possible orientation, even a fragile filiation. In this way, they show the consequences of the dissolution of the paternal function, connecting it with the trick of capitalistic reason that

L’avers de la psychanalyse. In a conference in Milan in 1972, he introduced the “Discourse of the capitalist” as the “cleverest discourse that we have made”, which corresponds to the main language of post-industrial society (Lacan 1978, 11).

25 Cf. Zonta 2005, 63–64.

26 West/West 2009, 132.

27 West/West 2009, 132.

28 Cf. Santner 2001.

takes advantage of the diffused dismay of the subjects and forecloses every relation with law, limit and authority (Lacan would call it “castration”²⁹) by promising the subject the “phantom of liberty” and self-realisation.

The brothers Dardenne ask about what remains of the Father in the epoch of his evaporation³⁰ and in the time of his irrevocable decline, in order to at least leave this “territory” empty (and therefore still existing). Luc Dardenne records, “The cinema addresses something that does not exist anymore, the void, the nothing, the Other, who is never there. Without the Other, we would eat the flesh of those too similar to us, we would drink their blood. We would be sated by the heart of our reality. God is dead. The place is empty. And above all it must not be occupied.”³¹ They aim neither at re-establishing a new patriarchy, nor at proclaiming the inexorable disappearance of the father, but attempt to come to terms with his death and the possibility of inheriting at least the paternal desire, without regret or deconstructive nihilism.

Roger and Igor and Olivier and Francis (as well as Bruno with Jimmy and Samantha with Cyril) embody extreme experiences of the son-father relationship, which enlighten the traumatic deadlock in the encounter between generations, against the human background of a general difficulty with communication.

As *La Promesse* suggests, we feel that these days it is as if we adults no longer want to die to allow the generation coming after us to live. In order to educate someone, you have to know how to die so that he or she can live; so that, simply put, they can take your place. We adults want to be immortal, we want not to die. Somehow it is as if, when all is said and done, we have this desire to eat our children, like the Greek god, Chronos.³²

In this sense, they suggest that the social issue has to be linked to a major theme of their films, namely the question of relationships and the anti-pedagogical problem of paternal vocation. What does it mean to be a father in the time of the evaporation of every symbolic function? What does “to inherit” mean in the epoch of the death of the father, or in the time of Chronos, who kills his children? In economically deserted societies, where families dissolve, fathers are no longer able to transmit a legacy, but are even willing to kill or prevent their sons from living effectively.

29 The Lacanian notion of castration (or castration complex) deals fundamentally with the child’s encounter with the law and prohibition, that is its acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father and the consequent entry into the symbolic order. It involves the primordial loss of an original *jouissance* (the loss of the breast during weaning), namely the primordial interruption of the child’s symbiosis with the mother. Castration then represents a submission to the Name-of-the-Father as the founding signifier who marks the child symbolically, allowing the son to be named by the Other and consequently to accede to desire. Cf. Lacan 1938; Lacan 1999, 219.

30 Cf. Recalcati 2011.

31 Dardenne 2009, 14; cf. Recalcati 2011, 11–23.

32 West/West 2009, 126.

THE PROMISE (1996) is the mise-en-scène of this dramatic impasse to generate something that lasts, to transmit a legacy that could induce belief in the world, the other and the future. Roger seems to correspond to the “father of the primal horde” whom Freud portrayed in *Totem and Taboo*:³³ omnipotent, pitiless, incestuous, beyond every law and controlling bare bodies. The symbolic function of the father is degraded here to its imaginary semblance, which dissolves every asymmetric dialectic and pursues an ambiguous and symbiotic commitment to illegal business, surrogate sexuality and deceptive intimacy. Igor’s imaginary relationship with his father has to be interrupted; the unlimited power of the totemic figure of his father must be disturbed in order to offer the son the possibility to disentangle himself from the undifferentiated, wordless morass of the paternal *jouissance*. Igor has to experience exile in order to reach a humanised life where only the encounter with the face of the other can generate a different destiny.

CHRONOS AND KAIROS

The dying body of the Burkinabe Hamidou, who fell down from a scaffold and whom Igor tries to save by tying his belt around his injured leg, represents his *kairos*, the insurgence of an imminence, a crisis, a decisive moment that significantly occurs and informs Igor’s consciousness.³⁴ Hamidou’s last words and breaths, with which he pleads with Igor to take care of his wife, Assita, and of his little son, Tiga, after his death, demand a response that will determine the humanisation of Igor’s experience, generating in him a new awareness of his existing body in a broader human constellation. In assuming his responsibility towards Hamidou, Igor radically contrasts the decision of his father to leave Hamidou to die. With his promise, Igor keeps him alive and begins to actually live himself. The *perpetuum mobile* of Chronos, who reduces everything to a knowable and expendable sameness, not allowing any encounter with singularities and exteriorities, is interrupted by the mysterious force of an urgent *interpellation*, which calls the subject from the outside, endowing him/her with a new symbolic responsibility. This demand from the Other must be primarily interpreted not as the awakening of compassion and piety, but as a provocative and traumatic presence, which breaks Igor’s imaginary and morbid rela-

33 Cf. Freud 1990.

34 In ancient Greek rhetoric, the word *kairos* originally designated the “proper time”, or “opportunity moment” for an action or a ritual performance. The New Testament notion of *kairos* deals with the meaning of history in the moment of its qualitative fulfilment. Paul uses the term *kairos* to indicate what the Judaic tradition called “messianic time”. *Kairos* is God’s time, which contrasts with the human understanding of time as *chronos* in its progressive linearity and automatism. For Paul Tillich, time as *kairos* is the “moment at which history has matured to the point of being able to receive the breakthrough of the manifestation of God” (Tillich 1963, 369).

tionship with his father/semblance. Luc Dardenne writes in his diary, “There is something heavy, oppressing in existence. From here the irrepressible need for a break, an outside, emerges. A request for air is radiated with all our gazes, by all our words, by all our faces, by all our oppressed bodies. Extreme need for something that does not exist. Our epoch has serious breathing problems.”³⁵ The Dardennes seem to continuously struggle against the bubble that suffocates and de-humanises subjects and does not allow them to breathe, trying to tear its thickness through the hard materiality of the bodies of strangers.

In the *kairos* of Hamidou’s request, together with his gradual encounter with Assita’s mysterious face, body and gestures, Igor experiences a new beginning and a new birth that is a resurrection: “The resurrection of bodies. Why of the bodies? Because only the body can die and consequently only the body can be resurrected. And since only the body can be filmed, there is a relation between cinema and resurrection. It is an idiotic consideration, but it continues to amaze me.”³⁶ Here, resurrection represents the possibility of interruption and a new beginning and the unpredictable emergence of *kairos* as a propitious time for decision and action in contrast to the deathly repetition of the same. The father of the horde (as identified by Freud) has to be abandoned in order to open a new humanised horizon. At the end of *THE PROMISE* (1996), when Igor wants to confess the truth about Assita’s husband, Roger reacts violently and the relationship between father and son comes to an end. Igor chains his father’s foot to a block in order to prevent Roger from hitting him and to permit Assita to escape. The father assumes the figure of an enchained animal, who wriggles trying to release himself from his cage.

Roger: Igor let me loose! In God’s name, let me loose! Come here! Come here and let me loose! Tell her I’ve got the money for her return. All she wants. I’m begging you. Wait! I’ll give her this. She can go where she wants. Just let me loose. What do you want to tell her? What’ll it serve? She leaves, we never talk about it again. Give me my glasses, at least. The house. It’s for you. I did everything for you. Only you. You are my son.

Igor: Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

Roger: Give me my glasses and let me loose. I’m your father. You can’t do this. Let me go, Igor, I’m begging you.

Igor leaves his chained father alone and accompanies Assita towards her undetermined future.

In *The Human Condition*, which Luc Dardenne was reading during the shooting of *ROSETTA* (1999), Hannah Arendt very clearly affirms this necessary qual-

35 Dardenne 2009, 32.

36 Dardenne 2009, 60.

ity of action as the interruption of automatic processes: “The life span of man, running toward death, would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.”³⁷ In this sense, the demand/interpellation interferes with the inhuman cycle of corruption, exploitation and murder, so that human affairs are not entirely abandoned to despair and ruin. In the time of the crisis of symbolic investiture, the Dardennes believe in the possibility for subjects to be called and named: only through this process are they able to begin a new course of (ethical) life. The Dardennes aim to film “the appearance of the human, to grasp the passage of goodness in the simple human trade”.³⁸ They passionately wait with their body-camera for this contingent, eventual transition into human life, as if they were not perfectly conscious that it could really occur.

Furthermore, in the Dardennes’ films, the *kairos* seems to be fundamentally related to the encounter with the other, namely with a symbolic father. Within these devastated human constellations, they obsessively focus on the possibility to meet at least a father – Hamidou, Assita, Olivier, Riquet, Samantha, etc. – to encounter an exteriority, to experience a moral debt, to be interrupted by a law or by the face of the Other, who comes from the outside.

On Bruno’s way there is the law as well. Bruno does not change thanks only to Sonia’s love. He needs to experience something that allows the law to begin to exist for him, that things could gain weight, that he could finally be there, be blocked, be in debt, that he could see for the first time what he has done, finally able to say: “It’s me”.³⁹

Such a revelation seems to occur even outside the plot, beyond the narration, through the real encounter between bodies and faces. The camera follows the various forms of contact among the actors “from behind”, as if any abstract and previous frame could not determine and enclose characters, with the action being generated by their movements, encounters and sudden decisions. It is something that cannot be defined since it is something that ties two bodies together, forbidding them not only to disappear, but also to find their place, to rest; that is, they must remember to exist. Life realistically appears in continuous movement that cannot be simply fixed or represented in its occurrence. It remains open to the possibility of a new beginning. Consequently, revelation

37 Arendt 1998, 246.

38 Dardenne 2009, 45.

39 Dardenne 2009, 121. “We have to forget Dostoevskij’s Sonia. Sonia is a woman’s body, an erotic nature. But we have to remember Dostoevskij’s Sonia as well, because Sonia’s erotic nature is not enough to provoke Bruno’s conversion” (Dardenne 2009, 121).

is something in the Dardennes' films that can break the sphere, allowing the viewer to breathe as well.

In this perspective, the “anti-pedagogical” possibility of a father – or of the rest of the father – appears to be crucial, with all its ambiguities and consequences. Furthermore, Roger has to be abandoned so that Igor can have a destiny and hope; Bruno has to meet an external injunction – both of love and of law – in order to begin something new; Olivier has to come to terms with his internal dramatic struggle with Francis, who killed his young son, in order to be a father again.

PROMISING AND FORGIVING AGAIN

“What does being human mean today? To view as human beings, not in general, but in the concrete and extreme situations that the present society generates”, asks Luc Dardenne.⁴⁰ The Dardennes are deeply convinced that there is a necessary link between humanisation and filiation. If this link is weakened, the sense of the community of initiation and destiny, that is, of human life, necessarily becomes barbarised.

The Dardennes show that a father could only really be a father if he does not kill: *THE SON* (2002) represents this last possibility for a father (Olivier) to refuse to kill, even (maybe) becoming the father of his son's murderer (Francis). Olivier's work as a carpentry instructor in a rehabilitation centre for young offenders, with its world of measures, thicknesses and corners, and his involvement in teaching his students and transmitting a trade are not enough to take him outside his obsessions, to let him live again. In order to be able to be a father again, he must not kill Francis, who, at the age of eleven, killed his son. The interdiction against murder appears here as the main possibility for the transference of legacy in the filial relationship. The prohibition of murder has primordially founded human society and has to be continuously transmitted in order to preserve humanity: “It was Olivier who attracted us. We asked ourselves what a human being is and came to the definition that certainly a human being is an individual who succeeds in not killing.”⁴¹ This represents what remains of the father in the epoch of his evaporation. Olivier at least breaks the circle of violence and murder: despite his despair and anger, he chooses not to eat the child (as Chronos did) so that the future appears possible. He refuses to kill the murderer of his only son, permitting another outcome of the story. If the experience of filiation actually begins with the transmission of practices and gestures in Olivier's workshop, the very act of paternity takes place in the continuation of life

⁴⁰ Dardenne 2009, 8.

⁴¹ West/West 2009, 127.

beyond the possibility of death. Olivier's success corresponds to the interruption of a repetition, to the release from the prison of his past and to a new beginning in his and Francis' life, without forgetting.

Something happens between Olivier and Francis on a Saturday morning, when the man takes the boy along to a remote lumberyard, both to teach him the different types of wood and to come to terms with the past, the present and the future of his paternity. The drive to the lumberyard, shot from behind, showing the backs of Olivier and Francis's heads, alludes to Abraham and Isaac's dramatic walk to Mount Moriah: the Dardennes present the sorrow and temptation of a father, who has to be a father after the death not only of his son, but also of God.⁴² In the last sequence of the film, after Olivier's revelation that Francis is the murderer of his son, the boy escapes into the woods with the man chasing him. In the end, Olivier catches Francis, and struggling with him, he wraps his hand around his throat and seems to be tempted to kill him. His hesitation, which dramatically expresses his oscillation between recrimination and forgiveness, the desire for revenge and wish for adoption, ends with a long shot of Olivier weeping next to the boy until he disappears among the trees into the woods. Olivier does not have to forgive the murderer, but he must not kill again:

Forgiveness between Olivier and Francis has not to be omnipotent. This does not deal with forgiveness but with the impossibility of murder. How can one not see at the same time forgiveness here as well? We do not know how the end of the film will be, but we do not have to fall into reconciliation, where nobody remains unforgivable. Olivier cannot completely substitute his son. In the film the point is the father and not forgiveness. In not killing Francis, Olivier is the father, who will perhaps permit Francis to reconnect with life.⁴³

This reconnection with life after death – the death of a son, the Father, an illegal immigrant – represents a fundamental issue of the Dardennes' filmic production. It deals with the possibility to reconnect with reality after the end of the grand narratives, after the time of protests and the age of revolutions. They suggest that, at the time of his evaporation, the Name-of-the-Father has to be understood in its whole legacy.⁴⁴ This means that the viewer has come to terms both with the "primordial father of the horde" (Roger), who teaches his son to lie, steal and kill, and with the "father of work" (Olivier), who tries to remain a father, oscillating between revenge and forgiveness.

In both cases, it is not possible to encounter the father face-to-face but only from behind or by catching glimpses of his gaze between his glasses and his

42 "How can we inherit meaning from our childhood Bible readings when God can no longer be found?" (Dardenne 2008, 19). See Mai 2010, 94.

43 Dardenne 2009, 85.

44 Dardenne 2009, 76.

eyes. The Dardennes' body-camera shows the unbearable tension that accompanies Olivier's movements towards Francis and their common past by following him from behind, showing his back and neck in extreme close-ups. This view from behind emphasises the opacity of his experience, allowing at the same time a close proximity, as if his whole broken history was to appear like an indelible inscription on his back. Moreover, the constant motion of the camera, focussing on Olivier's back, gives the viewer the unsettling impression that anything could happen, accentuating the character's unpredictability and ambiguity. Luc Dardenne recorded, "To film the back. The human enigma, that is situated in the obscurity of the back. The great ellipse".⁴⁵

The Dardennes suggest that what remains of the father is this great ellipse of his back: what remains are the invisible signifiers that have marked his existence and are now inscribed on his back, like notches in the wood of his carpentry, which only the viewer can grasp as they see his oscillation between forgiveness and revenge, promise and removal, abandon and adoption. Only the promise or forgiveness – as the Dardennes, together with Hannah Arendt, seem to suggest – can unexpectedly decide between life and death, interrupting life's natural tendency to ruin and allowing concrete belief in the world. Promise and forgiveness destabilise the automaton and the irreversibility of destiny by releasing the subject from the unbearable consequences of morbid action and by connecting subjects in a new common destination. Promise and forgiveness both deal with temporality: the promise aims at establishing a new relation between life and future, while forgiveness seeks to look backwards into the past, interrupting the burden of guilt and generating reconciliation with the unforgivable. They both come to terms with the oppressive irreversibility of repetition, enabling subjects to tear down the walls of the sphere that encapsulates them and to go outside. As Arendt claims,

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart.⁴⁶

It is important to underline that promise and forgiveness depend on the presence of the Other – the Dardennes would say of a father – since nobody can forgive themselves and nobody can bind themselves by a promise alone. In this

45 Dardenne 2009, 95.

46 Arendt 1998, 237.

sense, both Arendt and the Dardennes suggest the necessity of plurality and proximity, not in order to reconcile the irreconcilable, but to fight against the loss of belief and trust in human beings. They both fight “against that falsely lucid thought according to which all human efforts and all human action are useless”.⁴⁷

If it is true, as Deleuze argues, that “restoring our belief in the world” should be the “power of modern cinema”,⁴⁸ the Dardennes seem to correspond with this anthropological, ontological and even religious purpose. One could refer for example to Moses, who wanted to see the glory of the Father, but could only grasp His passage: “And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen” (Exod. 33:21–23). In the cinema of the Dardennes, the fathers are often encountered from the back as well, in all their corporeality, efforts, ambiguity and exposure. The back seems to represent here what remains of the father today, before he passes away again.

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47 Dardenne 2009, 28.

48 Deleuze 1997, 172.

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Realistic Humanism

Luc Dardenne as a Philosopher and Filmmaker

ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

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

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

1 Mosley 2013. See also Mai 2010.

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

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

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

2 See Dillet/Puri 2013.

3 See Lesch 2013.

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

5 Dardenne 2012.

6 Dardenne 2005; Dardenne 2015.

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

PHILOSOPHY AND FILM: AN OBVIOUS AND COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP

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

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

7 Cf. Reneaud 2014.

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

9 See Pianezza 2012.

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

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

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

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

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

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

LUC DARDENNE, LOUVAIN AND LEVINAS

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

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

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

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

14 Dardenne 2005, 56.

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

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

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

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

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

16 Cooper 2007.

the spectator's place before the image, whose distance from the experiences viewed from camera positions of extreme proximity is precisely the creation of a space of responsibility."¹⁷ The camera's closeness to the characters does not diminish the distance between us and them; it makes the recognition of otherness possible whenever the spectator is lost in an unbearable reality and is at the same time challenged by an ethical imperative, for we can hardly remain indifferent to what we see.

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

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

EMPATHY FOR THE KID WITH A BIKE

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

17 Cooper 2007, 85.

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

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

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

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

18 Dardenne 2012, 7–9.

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

20 Dardenne 2012, 9.

21 See Aubenas 2008.

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

23 Dardenne 2012, 140.

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

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

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

25 Dardenne 2012, 189–190.

26 Luc Dardenne interviewed by De Jonghe/Soudan 2012.

27 Atterton/Calarco 2010, ix.

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Visionary Critique

Gender, Self and Relationship in ROSETTA and TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT

ABSTRACT

The films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne stand out for their complex, multi-dimensional female and male characters whose representation disrupts gender stereotypes in numerous ways, both in how the characters themselves are depicted and in how they are shown to relate to other individuals and their social context. In this contribution, I explore the themes of self, relationship, solidarity, family and work – all of them recurring issues in the films by the Dardennes – using gender as my primary category of analysis, and focusing in particular on the treatment of these themes in ROSETTA (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, FR/BE 1999) and DEUX JOURS, UNE NUIT (TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, BE/FR/IT 2014). I argue that whereas ROSETTA (1999) offers a critique of the damaging effects of the masculinized capitalist system on individuals and their relationships, TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT (2014) can be understood as a vision of alternative possibilities of solidarity and women’s empowerment and agency even within the persistent context of masculinized capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne, feminist theory, gender studies, Christian social ethics, relational autonomy

BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

The films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne stand out for their complex, multi-dimensional female and male characters whose representation disrupts gender stereotypes in numerous ways, both in how the characters themselves are depicted and how they are shown to relate to other individuals and their social context. Consequently, it is somewhat surprising that the category of gender has not been used more extensively in the analysis of their films before.¹ Therefore, in this contribution, I will explore the themes of self, relationship, solidarity, family and work – all of them recurring issues in the films by the Dardennes – using gender, understood as “a field of social power with which people establish relationships of great complexity”,² as my primary category of analysis, and focusing in particular on the treatment of these themes in *ROSETTA* (FR/BE 1999) and *DEUX JOURS, UNE NUIT* (*TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT*, BE/FR/IT 2014). As I will show, the analysis of these two films, in the context of the larger work of the Dardennes, offers a number of interesting insights. First, it is noticeable that the films do not treat gender in isolation – and this might partially explain the lack of studies focusing on this aspect so far – thus underlining the idea that identity and relationships need to be analyzed with attention to the intersection of various factors in addition to gender, such as ethnicity, nationality, and class. Second, the films remind us of the need to maintain the dialectical tension between individual self-determination and the impact of context: they show, on the one hand, that an individual, his or her thoughts, feelings, experiences, and actions, can never be fully defined through identity categories such as gender but is a surprising, singular, mysterious reality;³ on the other hand, the films also acknowledge that the larger social context, shaped as it is by the predominant gender binary, has a strong impact on the individual’s existence. Third, the films’ images and stories develop a vision of subjectivity as relational autonomy that contributes to feminist endeavors to think subjectivity and relationship in a way that enables the good life of women and men and promotes the common good.

The theoretical framework for my analysis is shaped by feminist theory and gender studies, feminist ethics and Christian social ethics. Feminist theory and gender studies have underlined the importance of acknowledging the full equality of women and men, promoting women’s agency and including women’s experiences in all reasoning.⁴ Recent developments have complicated these commitments by calling attention to the diversity of women’s experiences around

1 To my knowledge, McMahon (2012) is alone in using gender as a central category of analysis as she focuses on relationships between fathers and sons in her discussion of the deconstruction of the political in the films of the Dardennes.

2 Williams 2000, 258–259.

3 Cf. Mai 2010, xiii.

4 Cf. Cahill 2014, 28.

the globe, as well as to the different ways in which men are affected by patriarchal structures. Also, as mentioned above, it has become clear that it is not sufficient to focus on gender in isolation from other factors that shape the lives of individuals: depending on its intersection with other categories such as class, religion, ethnicity or ability, gendered identity can take many different forms.⁵ Feminist analyses of work and capitalism have also shown the systemic disadvantage of women in the labor market due to masculinized ideals of work and workers that create an “asymmetrical vulnerability of economic dependency” for women.⁶ Feminist and gender-sensitive ethics share numerous concerns with Christian social ethics, most and foremost the affirmation of the equal dignity of all human beings, the acknowledgement of being-in-relationship as a fundamentally human way of being with consequences for the understanding of subjectivity, intersubjective relationships and social relationships, the importance of family, the dignity of work as a form of self-expression as well as a means to meet the needs of oneself and one’s family, and a certain skepticism toward capitalist understandings of work and economic relationships.⁷ Besides these shared interests, however, feminist and gender studies have also critiqued in particular Catholic teaching on gender that promotes the naturalization of gender and a theory of essentialist gender complementarity with regard to gender roles, especially as far as parenthood and the division of wage work and care work are concerned.⁸

I will set the scene with some more general observations about the treatment of gender in the films by the Dardennes, and then focus on the analysis of *ROSETTA* (1999) and *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014). I will argue that whereas *ROSETTA* (1999) offers a critique of the damaging effects of the masculinized capitalist system on individuals and their relationships, *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014) can be understood as a vision of alternative possibilities of solidarity and women’s empowerment and agency even within the persistent context of masculinized capitalism.

COMPLEXITY, AGENCY, AND DIVERSITY: GENDER IN THE FILMS BY THE DARDENNES

Across their *œuvre*, the Dardennes are equally interested in male and female protagonists. Different from, for example, the camp approach to gender bending of Pedro Almodóvar, whose films disrupt conventions by exaggerating

5 Cf. Kamitsuka 2007; Beattie/Fenton 2011.

6 Albrecht 2002, 143.

7 Cf. Albrecht 2002; Cahill 2011; Cahill 2014; Clark 2010; Scholz 1997.

8 Cf. Hinze 2009, 71–78.

them,⁹ in the films of the Dardennes gender stereotypes are not even allowed to form, as both men and women, as protagonists and in supporting roles, are developed as multi-dimensional, complex characters with a capacity for change, expressing strength and weakness, flawed and exemplary behavior, vulnerability and violence, openness to others and self-absorption. Roger in *LA PROMESSE* (*THE PROMISE*, BE/FR/LU/TN 1996), for example, is a criminal ruthlessly exploiting the despair and dependence of illegal migrants for his own profit. Without any attention to his son Igor's needs – endangering, for example, Igor's apprenticeship as a car mechanic and thus a future beyond criminality – he involves him in his illegal activities, forces him to adopt equally ruthless attitudes toward others and beats Igor brutally when he tries to help a migrant woman, Assita, whose husband had an accident and was left to die by Roger. Yet Roger also has a softer side, especially with regard to his son, with whom he tries to bond in various ways and for whom he cares as well as he can. Although Roger is, in relationship to his son and the migrants who depend on him, in a position of power, which he maintains through physical violence and domination, it becomes clear how fragile this power is when his son, with Assita's help, ties him up so that Assita can make her way to safety. In chains and without his glasses, Roger appears naked and helpless, his dominant masculinity stripped down to utter dependency on the assistance of a child and a woman – help which he is denied by them, as he had denied it them and others before.

While the films emphasize that individuals are not defined by their gender, they also acknowledge the impact of the social context of the patriarchal system, for example in the exploration of the particular vulnerability of Assita, an African migrant woman in *THE PROMISE* (1996). She is subjected to gendered violence when Roger's assistant assaults her sexually, from which she cannot seek protection for as an illegal immigrant she is dependent on Roger, and because her husband died, she is even more isolated. Although twice exposed under these conditions, Assita is represented as a strong, resourceful woman who actively embraces her identity as mother and wife and uses her agency to protect herself and her child. Here and in other cases, the films maintain the balance between, on the one hand, the affirmation of their characters' agency and freedom in how they define their identity and determine their life circumstances and, on the other hand, acknowledgement of the social conditions that expose them to violence or discrimination.

In addition to its development through the plot, this balance is further underlined through visual means. For example, characters are often represented as being a part of a larger situation in street shots that contextualize them,¹⁰

9 Cf. Knauss 2014.

10 David Walsh sees this differently: he criticizes the lack of context that “diverts attention from the structures responsible for human suffering and creates the impression, inadvertently or not, that the

yet given the lack of establishing shots, the preference for shots from a middle distance or close up, and the often blurry background, it is clear that the focus remains on the individual rather than their social context (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Film still, *THE PROMISE* (BE/FR/LU/TN 1996), 01:24:43.

Furthermore, the characters' agency is affirmed by how their actions seem to establish the scene, with the camera appearing to pick up on an action that is already in progress.¹¹ Characters often appear restrained by tight framing that uses framing objects within the image such as doorjambs to further delimit their scope and thus reflects interior and exterior limitations on their agency. But this impression is counteracted by the way in which characters guide the camera, which often follows their lead and occasionally stays behind to let them go into the distance or out of the frame (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Film still, *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (BE/FR/IT 2014), 01:28:00.

In addition, the shift between closely observing actions in all their details in seemingly documentary duration shots and elliptic cuts that leave large gaps in

blame for social ills lies at least in part with their victims" (Walsh 2009, 70).

¹¹ See Mai 2010, 54.

the narrative creates the impression that action (and characters) develop freely in the off, outside of the controlling observation of the camera (and audience).

The films emphasize complexity not only with regard to the individual personality of a character, but also with regard to the intersection of different factors of oppression or privilege, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality and economic status. In *LE SILENCE DE LORNA* (*THE SILENCE OF LORNA*, BE/FR/IT/DE 2008) the protagonist Lorna inhabits shifting positions of control, power and vulnerability that correspond to the instable connection between gender, motherhood, economic status and citizenship. With Fabio, Lorna is part of a scam to gain Belgian citizenship through marriage, taking advantage of the system of heterosexual marriage and the citizenship privileges that come with it. Once Lorna has won citizenship through marriage with a Belgian drug addict and her husband dies, the plan is for her to marry (in return for a generous payment) a Russian in order to pass citizenship on to him. Although a migrant and a woman, Lorna is in a situation of relative power as long as the scheme runs smoothly, because as the bride with the Belgian passport she is indispensable to Fabio, even though it is Fabio who negotiates the conditions with his clients. Also, because her “anchor-husband”, Claudy, depends on her financially and increasingly emotionally, Lorna controls their relationship with regard to sleeping arrangements and physical contact, and even by setting him up as an abuser so that their divorce will be fast-tracked. In addition, Lorna seems to be the main financial contributor to her and her boyfriend’s project of buying a snack bar with her double income from the marriage scam and her legal employment in a laundry. Her (relative) economic stability and financial power are underlined in several scenes that show her depositing money in the bank or negotiating a loan, whereas her boyfriend meets up with handlers on street corners at night in order to be shuttled across Europe to work illegal and dangerous temporary jobs. Yet once Lorna is – or thinks she is – pregnant, the balance tips, because at this point she becomes worthless as a potential wife and thus is no longer of interest to Fabio’s scheme. Her gender, once an advantage in the heterosexual system, now is a problem and she falls back into a relationship of gendered dependence, exploited by both Fabio and her boyfriend, who place the responsibility on her and make her pay. Thus whereas in an early scene the camera follows Lorna’s lead as she moves around her apartment and interacts with her husband, in this later scene, when she is no longer in control of her situation, she literally takes the backseat, sitting in the back of a car as her money is distributed among the men and she is taken away to an unknown destination. Yet Lorna, and with her other characters in the films of the Dardennes, both male and female, is not a passive, helpless victim, even when she is placed in a situation of disadvantage, dependency and exploitation. Sensing that something is not right when she is driven away by Fabio’s assistant, she does not submit to

her fate, but instead takes the situation into her own hands, knocks the driver out with a stone and runs away through the forest, determined, as she explains to her unborn – imaginary – child, to make a better life for them both.

It is noticeable that the films are firmly inserted into a framework in which heterosexuality normatively structures sexual, familial and social relationships.¹² While this system is not openly questioned through the inclusion of LGBTQI identities or relationships, the Dardennes subtly challenge it by shifting the focus from heterosexual, intimate relationships to broader networks of relationships that underline their social dimension and the dynamic interaction between different forms of relationship. But even more importantly, they challenge the naturalization of motherhood and fatherhood implied in heteronormativity by showing the insufficiency and failure of biological family relationships and offering alternative models. Biological mothers and fathers, such as Roger in *THE PROMISE* (1996), Cyril's father in *LE GAMIN AU VÉLO* (*THE KID WITH A BIKE*, FR/BE/IT 2011), Bruno in *L'ENFANT* (*THE CHILD*, BE/FR 2005), or Rosetta's mother in *ROSETTA* (1999), are represented as irresponsible and exploitative, and as neglecting, leaving or even selling their children. In a clear critique of essentialist notions of the innate mothering qualities of women and conservative notions of family values as they are promoted, for example, by Catholic teachings on gender and gender roles,¹³ biological parenthood is shown to be insufficient to establish caring, supportive relationships between adults and children in a family community that equally protects and empowers. Such communities are instead created through non-biological relationships of care and parenting, most explicitly in *THE KID WITH A BIKE* (2011). Not based on biological instincts, but rather on the ethical (and emotional) claim on Samantha that Cyril makes by holding on to her in a situation of need, her commitment to him is absolute, but not blind. When he asks her to live with her permanently *after* he has stabbed her with a pair of scissors and has hit a man and a child with a baseball bat, she accepts without hesitation or fuss, but then also takes him to the police to take responsibility for his actions, a process of which, because of one of the typical elliptic cuts of the Dardennes, we see only the result, when Cyril signs a contract with the man he hurt and apologizes in front of Samantha and a mediator. The family created by Samantha and Cyril does not allow for authoritarian dominance – when her boyfriend attempts such behavior, she leaves him – but is instead marked by openness, care and empowerment: not by coincidence is the boy most himself when he can ride around the streets on his bike, unrestrained and free, knowing that he will be able to return to the safety of Samantha's home.

¹² Cf. Warner 1993.

¹³ See Hinze 2009 for a detailed critique.

Thus in their films, the Dardennes pay close attention to the complexity of identity in which the impact of social factors such as gender is carefully negotiated with individual self-determination. I will turn now to the analysis of ROSETTA (1999) and TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT (2014), with their respectively more critical and more affirmative visions of self, relationship, family and work.

ROSETTA: WORK AS FREEDOM, RELATIONSHIP AS BURDEN?

What at first glance is most remarkable about Rosetta, the protagonist of the film ROSETTA (1999), is her intense bodily presence and energy, even if – or, perhaps, in particular when – she seems to lose her fight against the world of capitalism, damaged by unhealthy eating habits and living conditions and physical as well as psychological demands that go beyond the capacities of a teenager. This impression is mediated by the handheld “corps-caméra”, as the Dardennes describe the merging of the camera with the bodies of its operators to form a being of its own,¹⁴ that follows Rosetta, moves and even breathes with her, so that her body – her face; her hurting, cramping belly; her hands that want nothing but work – becomes familiar like our own (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Film still,
ROSETTA (FR/BE 1999),
00:49:53.

Commenting on the first sequence of the film, when Rosetta races through the factory after being sacked, hunting down a colleague she considers responsible for her losing her work and holding on to the lockers so hard that they are pulled away with her as she is removed by security, Joseph Mai writes, “our perspective is entirely and helplessly within the movements of bodies.”¹⁵ Rather than

14 See Mai 2007.

15 Mai 2010, 69.

perpetuating the dualistic split between body and mind with its gendered associations of women with their body and men with their mind,¹⁶ the film avoids the objectification and sexualization of Rosetta's body and instead echoes the feminist concern that we *are* our bodies, men and women alike, experiencing and expressing ourselves through our bodies, emotions and actions.¹⁷

Yet Rosetta's embodied self is situated in a social context that is marked by gendered violence against women in their bodies, which the film notes in a disturbing scene when Riquet, Rosetta's colleague and friend, follows her to the campground where she lives. Feeling threatened, Rosetta attacks him and they wrestle on the ground in a way that could easily be read as an attempt at rape as Rosetta's skirt rides up and it becomes unclear who fights whom. Although Riquet only came to tell her the good news that she got a job with his boss in a small waffle factory, viewers are left with a sense of the potential dangerous slippage of friendship into predatory behavior and the precariousness of the young woman's physical integrity.

This sense of permanent threat is further underlined by the way in which Rosetta tends to stake out a situation, looking carefully around a corner before entering it or checking over her shoulder for potential enemies. As Mai notes, *ROSETTA* (1999) is indeed intended by the directors as a film about war,¹⁸ and Rosetta is the lonely soldier who has to fight for her daily survival against the capitalist system at large and its male representatives in particular, such as her employers who hire and fire her as best fits their capitalist needs, without attention to her predicament as an underage young woman who carries the weight of responsibility not just for her own existence but also for her mother's, or the campground supervisor who relentlessly uses his power over the necessities of life (water, gas, electricity, free movement, access to food) and exploits her mother sexually.

The film centers on Rosetta's urgent desire – and need – to find paid work so that she can support her mother and herself. Rosetta can be seen as a typical example of a woman who is disadvantaged by the masculine identity of the economic system with its ideal of the autonomous, independent worker,¹⁹ and is made vulnerable by her commitment to a relationship of care with her mother. As Christine Firer Hinze describes the ideology of domesticity, the ideal worker, conventionally male, is complemented by the female whose family and care work enables the ideal worker to dedicate his attention and strength to work outside the home.²⁰ While in the late 20th century, the ideal worker role was

16 See for the long history of the gendering of body and mind Lloyd 1984.

17 Cf. Moltmann-Wendel 1995.

18 Cf. Mai 2010, 70.

19 Cf. Albrecht 2002, 148.

20 Cf. Hinze 2009, 72.

expanded to include women, the caregiver role has not come to include men. In general, women who engage in paid work in addition work a “second shift” at home. For women, relationships of care – according to complementary gender theories the form of relationship they are naturally most suited for²¹ – thus become a liability which might limit their educational or job opportunities, pushing them into low-income unqualified jobs.²² Rosetta is one of these women: she works at a minimum wage in precarious jobs that do not even afford unemployment benefits because she is fired when her probation period comes up, and yet she cannot not accept these jobs, because she needs her wages to care for her mother, whose alcoholism puts not just economic, but also emotional stress on the young woman. Rosetta is caught in the vicious circle of needing work so badly that she cannot afford to be choosy, but ends up with jobs that do not offer her the stability she needs to make a significant change in her mother’s and her own life, thus contributing to the perpetuation of the system.²³

While in the film, the world of work is critically shown as marked by the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism, of which women in particular are the victim because of their twofold obligations to their paid work outside the home and unpaid family work at home, it also emphasizes the positive aspects of work, paralleling thus the view of work in Christian social ethics. Rosetta wants a job not only because of the wage it pays, but also because of the social recognition it affords her. Her insistence on paid labor as a sign of normalcy might be seen as consequence of precisely those mechanisms that create her vulnerability – the ideal worker role and its complementary devaluation of relationships and family work – yet it also underlines the value of work as more than a means to make a living. When Rosetta is shown mixing the batter in the waffle factory, selling waffles in the stand or washing her apron, the badge of her status as a regular worker, with the camera focusing closely on her competent, economic gestures, it becomes clear that work is for her an existential human need and the expression of her individual capacity, and thus fundamental to her human dignity (fig. 4). While the film criticizes the exploitative capitalist labor system and the way it disadvantages women such as Rosetta, who have dependents for whom they care, it never suggests that care work is the kind of work that more fully corresponds to Rosetta’s feminine genius than wage work, as secular and religious complementary theories of gender would propose.²⁴

In tracing the complexities of Rosetta’s attempts to negotiate wage and care work, and her place within these worlds, the film notes the ambivalent value of relationships for Rosetta. Relationships are for her both a sign and a cause of

21 Cf. Hinze 2009, 75.

22 Cf. Clark 2010 for a discussion of the gender aspects of care work.

23 Cf. Albrecht 2002, 143.

24 Cf. Hinze 2009; Cahill 2014, 31.



Fig. 4: Film still,
ROSETTA (FR/BE 1999),
01:13:13.

weakness because they imply emotional and material dependency and exploitation, the typical traps for women in patriarchal society, which she experiences in particular in consequence of her relationship with her alcoholic mother. Instead of furthering her relationships, Rosetta therefore strives for autonomy and self-reliance, and refuses welfare and gifts that she has not earned herself. Rosemarie Scullion²⁵ argues that Rosetta has internalized the demands of neo-liberal capitalism that thrives on individualism and the pursuit of one's own best self-interest: when Riquet slips in the lake, Rosetta hesitates to help him out, because she might be able to take over his job, and she uses her knowledge about his illegal waffle sales to have him fired. While Rosetta represents the neo-liberal, precariat subject, according to Scullion, Riquet offers an alternative of solidarity, even if not without his own "ethical lapses" when he pursues Rosetta and physically threatens her.²⁶ When he offers Rosetta his hand to help her up at the end of the film, when she is at the lowest point and about to commit suicide, Scullion argues, his "gesture begins to release her from her abject pose ... a generous, forgiving act that holds out the possibility of restored trust."²⁷

However, in order to fully understand the importance of relationship and solidarity in the film, it is necessary to take two additional factors into account, namely Rosetta's relationship of care with her mother, and Riquet's independence – as far as we know – from others, which mirror the typical gendered reality of relationships and care in neo-liberal societies. Riquet acts only for himself when he offers to let Rosetta share his under-the-counter waffle sales, but he does so with the presumption that Rosetta is as autonomous as he is. Yet in Rosetta's situation, a legal job has a different significance than it has for Riquet:

²⁵ Cf. Scullion 2014.

²⁶ Scullion 2014, 77.

²⁷ Scullion 2014, 78.

it means dignity, normalcy, social recognition and permanence, as well as more material benefits such as unemployment insurance. While Rosetta's struggle to find a job even at the cost of betraying a friend – her only friend – could be read as an expression of ruthless neo-liberal individualism, it can also be read as the painful consequence of her commitment to her primary relationship of care and solidarity with her mother. She uses her income not to improve her own situation egotistically, but to ensure that her mother and she herself are able to live a life of relative dignity in their trailer and to establish a routine that will help her mother to control her addiction or even go to rehab. Given Riquet's earlier presumption to know what is good for Rosetta, and her continuous rejection of offers of help, his final gesture of helping her up is all the more significant: at this point, Riquet simply offers his strength, holding out his hand, and allows Rosetta to decide for herself to accept it. The film's final focus on Rosetta's face affirms her as a subject even in this moment of dejection, and underlines a new understanding of relationship, not as a burden or limitation, but as an extension and affirmation of the self.

The film's complex treatment of relationship is complemented by its sober look at the sphere of the family. From the perspective of Christian social ethics, Hinze underlines that the family is a sphere in which the vulnerability of the human person can be expressed in a protected space and the need for relationality is met, but "as the locus of special vulnerability – bodily, emotional, psychic – family and household are also places where the negative effects of sin and finitude can cut and scar intimately and deeply."²⁸ Rosetta's family life is certainly not romanticized: living in (consciously) temporary quarters in a trailer park with her alcoholic mother, Rosetta experiences family mostly as a sphere of dependency, exploitation and despair, in which she is forced to take on burdens that go beyond her strength. For Rosetta, the roles of mother and child are switched: she takes care of her mother, earns the family's income, offers emotional support for her mother, tries to protect her from sexual exploitation, and defines moral codes of conduct for her, for example when she insists that her mother can start drinking only after 6pm, or that they won't accept gifts. When the exhaustion of having to care for an unresponsive mother and struggle for recognition in the labor market finally is too much, and Rosetta attempts to kill both her mother and herself, this can be taken as a warning that the continuous demands on women to sacrifice themselves on all fronts will end in catastrophe without greater structural and financial support for caregivers, in addition to a complementary social discourse of gender equality and protection of women's

28 Hinze 2009, 68.

rights and further reflections on what it means to be male in the world of work and family.²⁹

The film ends with a fleeting sign of hope that Rosetta might yet experience relationships as mutual and respectful, affirming her sense of self and dignity rather than creating dependency. Yet overall, the film offers a critical perspective on the damaging effects of neo-liberalist capitalism on women, in which relationships of care can become burdens for women and make them vulnerable in different, more immediate ways than men.

TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH RELATIONSHIP

Without denying the continued problematic aspects of the capitalist organization of relationships and labor, *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014) can be seen as a vision of how gender, self, relationship, family and work can interrelate in a way that is empowering for individuals and supportive of the common good, a vision that can be understood in terms of the universalization of an ethics of care and the socialization of the feminine. Universal care feminists acknowledge the positive value of care work, mutual responsibility, relationship and solidarity, but critique the notion of difference feminism that women are inherently more capable of living these values than men. Instead, they argue for the need to “achiev[e] social consensus around an understanding of caring activities as valuable and necessary practices that respond to universally-shared conditions of human embodiment.”³⁰ Along similar lines, Gloria H. Albrecht calls for the socialization of the feminine as the general recognition “of the social value of the stereotypical virtues of the feminine. That is, who we are as moral agents-in-relationships-of-care-and-trust should not (cannot, does not) metamorphose in the commute to and from the workplace.”³¹ The film provides a glimpse into the socialization of the feminine in its representation of its female protagonist, Sandra, her husband, Manu, and her relationships with friends and colleagues. This vision is limited to an individual case and does not claim a more structural change, but it nevertheless shows that the world of work and relationships as we know it is not the only possible one.

While Sandra was on sick leave, her employer realized that the work could get done without her, and thus, when she returns, he asks her colleagues to vote either for her keeping her job or for each of them receiving a one-time bonus of one thousand euros. She now has a weekend – two days and a night – to

29 See Hinze 2009, 81–82.

30 Hinze 2009, 84.

31 Albrecht 2002, 150.

gain her colleagues' support. Sandra's exposure to a hostile situation and her ultimate loneliness in her struggle are underlined by the camera that is often positioned to shoot her from slightly above or at a distance (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Film still, *Two Days, One Night* (BE/FR/IT 2014), 00:19:57.



She appears small, frail and dejected, a visual reflection of her interior situation as she is recovering from depression, and feels invisible and non-existent, psychological states that, in a rare exception in the films by the Dardennes, are made explicit in dialogue, in addition to their visual rendition. Furthermore, the colleagues who support her are mostly invisible and inaudible presences that interact with Sandra by phone. She is discouraged by the task that she has in front of her, and needs medication to combat her depression. More than once, she is ready to give up, and only her husband's encouragement or the news that another colleague will support her make her continue until at one point, the series of disappointments becomes too much for her and she attempts suicide.

Yet Sandra is not simply the helpless victim of a hopeless situation. Even when having to face potentially hostile colleagues, she moves with purpose, energy, and strength, and in the moment of greatest physical weakness after her suicide attempt, she gathers all her psychological strength and decides to continue. She insists that she does not want to be pitied and seen as a victim, and the film respects this wish of its character: when she has a breakdown and cries in a parking lot, the camera is positioned in relation to the actress in a way that hides her face from view, as if to protect her privacy, and avoids using her emotions to manipulate the viewers (fig. 6). In contrast, Sandra faces the camera frontally when on the day of the vote she challenges the foreman about his attempts to sway the vote against her, showing the confidence that she has developed in this weekend of fighting for herself. This new self-confidence is visible even when she walks away from the factory after the ballot is cast and she loses by one vote: far from being discouraged, she walks upright and with a small smile on her face as she talks with her husband on the phone, satis-



Fig. 6: Film still, *Two Days, One Night* (BE/FR/IT 2014), 00:27:52.

fied with their efforts and determined to immediately start looking for a new job. When the camera stays behind as she moves away, walking away into her future, the image underlines the idea that even if she lost against the capitalist instrumentalization of self-interest, she has developed agency and a new sense of self-worth.

In a departure from their usual practice of working with relatively unknown actors, the Dardennes cast Marion Cotillard as Sandra, experimenting again, after working with Cecile de France in *THE BOY WITH A BIKE* (2011), with the possibility to integrate a well-known actress into their “family” of cast and crew members, and quite deservedly, Cotillard was nominated for and won a number of best actress awards for her intense representation of Sandra.³² Yet even if Cotillard stands out as an actress and her character is at the center of the interest of the film, she does not dominate film or cast, because, as usual in the films by the Dardennes, supporting characters are developed with complexity and receive considerable attention as well, underlining that although Sandra might feel alone, she is in fact embedded in a supportive, empowering network of relationships.

In focusing on Sandra not as an atomic individual, but as a subject-in-relation-ship, the Dardennes reflect a central concern of feminist theory and Christian ethics, namely the affirmation of the importance of relationship for the flourishing of the subject and the realization of the common good, together with the critique of the traditional gendering of the autonomous subject as masculine and the relational subject as feminine.³³ Sandra is shown to be a part of a large network of different relationships, most importantly the one with her husband in addition to relationships with her children, friends, colleagues, the foreman of the factory and her employer. As she visits her colleagues at their homes,

32 Among other nominations and awards, Cotillard was nominated for an Oscar and a César and won the European Film Awards.

33 Mackenzie/Stoljar 2000, 5–11; Scholz 1997.

further relationships of family obligations or religious affiliations are introduced with their impact on her colleagues' decision to support her or not, underlining the interdependence – although to varying degrees – that exists between all members of a community.³⁴ Relationships are shown to be of existential importance, both psychologically and materially. Sandra's relationships with her husband, family and friends help her to see herself as a valuable human being, and the building of relationships with her colleagues is the only means to at least attempt to keep the job she needs to support her family. The value of relationship is further underlined by the way in which Sandra's interactions with her colleagues are represented. She calmly explains her situation, responds to queries and listens to her colleagues' arguments, and even if they refuse to support her, she takes her leave with a handshake or kisses on the cheeks that signal the possibility to continue the relationship in spite of disagreements. The theme of relationship is visually developed through the directors' choice to show characters in the same frame even if they represent opposing views, so that while their opinions contradict each other, they are still united in one frame (fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Film still, *Two Days, One Night* (BE/FR/IT 2014), 00:57:30.

Additionally, as in other films, pans from one person to another during a conversation trace their relationship instead of slicing it up through cuts in the classic shot/reverse-shot technique, often used for dialogue.

Most remarkable from the perspective of a feminist development of Christian social ethics is the way Sandra's relationship with Manu, her husband, is depicted in a vision of universal care ethics. Disrupting stereotypes of the female family worker who provides emotional support for her husband, and the authoritative male head of the household who is the breadwinner and steps in to fix the situation if a woman is in difficulties, the relationship between husband and wife is one of true partnership. Both share in the work at home – preparing meals, looking after the children, offering emotional support – and paid work.

34 See Scholz 1997, 24.

However, this is not simply a matter of arithmetically dividing up the work, but of justice and of responding to actual needs: because Sandra is in a more vulnerable position at the moment, both because of her sickness and because of the threat of losing her job, Manu takes over a larger part of the stereotypically feminine role of caregiver for both his wife and the children. But most importantly, his support of Sandra is offered in a way that their relationship empowers her³⁵ and helps her to develop an agency based in her sense of herself as a subject, underlining the feminist vision of relational autonomy. Manu encourages Sandra to fight for her job and to stand up for herself, persuading her to continue even when she is ready to give up, but he does not take over for her. She is on her own when she has to ask her colleagues to give up their bonus so that she can keep her work – not an easy task – but he provides the safe space where she can rest when discouraged and shares her joy at having gained the support of another colleague. This vision of relationship that empowers the subject to develop agency is extended, with different degrees of intensity, beyond the husband-wife dyad into the family and Sandra's circle of friends and colleagues. When Sandra takes up the fight for her job, her whole family is shown gathered around the dining table, with adults and children working together to help set up the series of visits to her colleagues. In contrast to the image of family relations in *ROSETTA* (1999), here the children are not forced to take over roles that are too much for them so that relationship becomes a burden, but each member of the family contributes according to their own capacities to the wellbeing of the others.

However, the film is not one-sided in this positive image of empowering relationships. As Sandra visits her colleagues and listens to their reasons why they cannot support her, it becomes clear that different relationships might sometimes impose competing claims, and that negative relationships – feeling let down by a colleague or even encountering violence – can damage a subject as much as the positive ones can empower her. The relationship of Sandra's co-worker Anne with her husband can be seen as a counter-image to Sandra's relationship with Manu: although only partially developed in the film, it becomes clear that Anne's marriage is inserted into a framework of masculine authority and physical domination. Here, gender relations are oppressive rather than empowering, and Anne's husband's disregard for the needs of his wife and her right to make decisions within their partnership extends to a disregard for Sandra's existential needs when he puts his own material interests first. That Anne leaves this abusive relationship and finds her own voice as she decides to vote for Sandra can be seen as a consequence of Sandra's example and a further

35 Mosley (2013, 1) notes as a general characteristic of the films by the Dardennes “a will to empower their protagonists and so liberate them from economic circumstances, personal relationships and mental states that oppress, restrict and destabilize them in one way or another”.

instance of mutually empowering relationships between individuals. Not by coincidence is it Anne's appearance at Sandra's house to tell her of her support that saves Sandra from her suicide attempt.

Furthermore, the film offers the exploration of a particular form of relationship, solidarity, and its value in contemporary society over against the capitalist logic of individualistic self-interest. As Sally Scholz argues, feminist theory and Christian social ethics are united in their equal support of the moral duty of solidarity in response to the real fact of interdependence among people.³⁶ In the situation from which the film departs, the factory owner pitches the workers against each other by making them choose between receiving a bonus (and thus putting their individual self-interest first) or allowing Sandra to keep her job (thus prioritizing solidarity with Sandra). Although the employer denies any preference for one choice or the other, he is shown to be a representative of the logics of capitalism by making his workers choose between these two alternatives. This impression is further confirmed when at the end, after the narrowly negative outcome of the ballot for Sandra, he offers to give her job back at the cost of letting one of the temporary workers go, expecting her to choose self-interest over solidarity. Instead, Sandra remains committed to solidarity and refuses his offer.

Scholz³⁷ underlines that solidarity asks a person to put herself into the place of another in an act of respect and mutuality – something that Sandra (sometimes literally using these words) asks her colleagues to do as she represents her situation to them, and does herself as she tries to see the situation through their eyes. The importance of solidarity is most clearly expressed in the case of Sandra's colleague Timur, who tearfully realizes his moral obligation to respond to Sandra's previous act of solidarity when she had taken the blame for him for damaging materials. In addition, solidarity impacts the self-identity of a person as a self-determined, autonomous being-in-relationship, which is reflected in Sandra's encounters with her colleagues and their mutual solidarity, which provide, to use Scholz's words, "a forum for identity formation" and "a source of dignity".³⁸ This formative experience enables Sandra in her final conversation with her former boss to stand up for herself and her values and to leave the factory and walk into her future with self-confidence and dignity. Informed by the practice and experience of solidarity, her resistance against her employer, who has been in a position of authority over her and even tells her where to sit during their final conversation, can be seen as the final act of liberation from

36 See Scholz 1997, 24; Scholz adds critically that the Catholic Church does not yet fully apply the duty of solidarity to itself with regard to the recognition of the equal personhood of all human beings and their inclusion in all levels of decision making (26).

37 Cf. Scholz 1997, 25–26.

38 Scholz 1997, 26.

structures of gendered and economic domination through which she fully becomes who she is.

One final aspect for gender and feminist theories to consider in the context of this film is its attention to the diversity of women's and men's experiences. As mentioned above, one of the issues that have shaped the development of feminist theory over the last few decades is the increasing awareness of its own bias toward the experiences of white western middle-class women and the need to include the diversity of women's experiences in its reflections.³⁹ In addition, masculinity is not just one thing either, but men's studies have shown that patriarchal society affects men in different ways, too, depending on in how far they fit the mold of the ideal white heterosexual man.⁴⁰

The Dardennes consistently underline the singularity of experience and existence at the same time as they recognize the effect that social identity categories might have on their characters. In *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014), the diversity of men's and women's experiences is particularly visible in the "slices of life" presented to viewers as Sandra visits her colleagues at home. Her co-workers represent a variety of ways of life in the Belgian working class, including families with Belgian and migration background, white and black, living in social housing or their own homes. Viewers are offered glimpses of their diverse material living arrangements – Sandra never enters their homes, but speaks to her colleagues on the doorstep or outside, remaining on the margins of their lives – family life and leisure activities. An even better insight into their needs and aspirations in life is afforded through the reasons they offer for not being able to help Sandra, which range from being otherwise unable to meet the needs of the family to having to support a daughter in college or wanting to buy new furniture. While from the outside, some of these reasons seem more valid than others, Sandra – and with her, the film – does not judge them: each is an expression of the dreams and hopes of individuals for the good life; after all, Sandra herself needs her job to be able to pay the mortgage on her house and to fulfill her own dream of a good life for herself and her family. The film thus underlines that any evaluation of the competing claims of individuals will have to depart from the actual immersion in their situation and the appreciation of their experience.

The same range of forms of existence is noticeable when it comes to the representation of men and women in the film. Many of the families that we encounter with Sandra are organized – as far as we can tell – according to the model of the mother being responsible for the sphere of the home and the father being involved in activities outside the house. Furthermore, the male characters of the foreman and the factory owner can be seen as examples of

39 Cf. Cahill 2014, 27–28.

40 Cf. Connell/Messerschmidt 2005.

a traditional view of masculinity as authoritative and ruling through division rather than building community, oriented toward individual profit instead of the common good. Yet the non-gendered ethics of care in Sandra's family and the empowering relationship between Sandra and Manu show that different forms of relationships and community in which an ethics of care and the virtue and duty of solidarity become normative are indeed possible, even under the still-persisting conditions of patriarchal, capitalist society.

CONCLUSION

The two films I have discussed here in more detail, as well as the work of the Dardennes more broadly, represent a variety of issues that lie at the intersection of feminist theory, gender studies, feminist ethics and Christian social ethics, and thus provide important material for further reflections from the perspective of gender on the flourishing of the individual and the common good. I have argued that their contribution is particularly focused on three aspects. First, the dialectical tension between individual freedom and the impact of social identity categories is expressed in their representation of complex, non-stereotypical characters while acknowledging the impact of patriarchal society, especially in terms of family and work relationships. Consequently, while the effects of the patriarchal gender system have to be included in any analysis of social relationships and individual existence, the films remind their viewers to be careful to allow for the individual appropriation of gendered identity, so as not to delimit the singularity of the subject through stereotypical expectations as to what being a woman, man, intersex or transgendered person means for an individual. Second, the films' representation of gender in the context of other social factors, expressed for example in the ways in which gender, employment status and family relationships together have to be taken into account in order to understand Rosetta's experience of self, underlines the need for the intersectional analysis of individual existence and social contexts. Finally, the films' exploration of relationships as both a burden and a source of empowerment contribute to the further development of the concept of relational autonomy as a concept of subjectivity that negotiates the singularity of the self with its need for relationship. These aspects are developed in two ways in the films: in *ROSETTA* (1999) through the critique of problematic developments, yet with a concluding suggestion of hope, and in *TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT* (2014) through the development of a vision of an alternative way of being that results from a universalized ethic of care and solidarity within the continuing problematic conditions of the masculinized logic of capitalism. Through critique and vision, the Dardennes thus contribute to the ethical labor of reflecting on the conditions that enable the good life of all human beings, doing justice in their depiction of

individuals, their relationships, and social contexts, to the immeasurable, sometimes frustrating, and certainly liberating complexity of human existence.

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FILMOGRAPHY

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Open Section

Alyda Faber

Film, Parable, Reciprocity

Frederick Wiseman's "Reality Fictions" and Social Change

My attitude toward him is an attitude towards a soul.
I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.
Ludwig Wittgenstein

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
W. H. Auden

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that social criticism may be an effect of Frederick Wiseman's "reality fiction" films only if that effect is understood as analogous to that of parable, an awakened responsiveness to the unknown and the unresolved. The irresolution witnessed repeatedly in his films is the reality of "radical inequality" within institutions in democracy, with domination ranging from explicit exploitative relations to subtle aural and bodily cues. Within those relations, Wiseman opens up the space of parable as a vision and practice of reciprocity and more-than-reciprocity through, among others, filmic strategies of "lyric portraiture" and expressive "democratic noise". Furthermore, Wiseman's camera extends more-than-reciprocity to animals in a filmic style that shows human and animal relations as visceral markers of what otherwise might remain unseen in human-to-human relations.

KEYWORDS

parable, reciprocity, Frederick Wiseman, documentary, social change

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Alyda Faber is an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics at Atlantic School of Theology. Her first poetry collection, *Dust or Fire* (Goose Lane Editions/Icehouse) appeared this year, and includes an 18 part poem entitled "Berlinale Erotik: Berlin Film Festival".

A medium shot, a man on the left, a woman on the right, seated at a table in a room in the National Gallery in London. The woman says, “And I don’t mean this to be a criticism.” The man replies, “It’s quite clearly not a criticism.”¹ The woman speaks in paragraphs about the need to advertise to the broader public what the gallery has to offer. The man says very little. This conversation early in the film NATIONAL GALLERY (Frederick Wiseman, US 2014) gives the woman’s sense of what art might be for (a variety of intellectual, emotional, spiritual goods), while the man objects that he doesn’t want to “play to the lowest common denominator of public taste” (NG 7), along with non-verbal resistance to her words. In a Wiseman film, what is not said is as important as what is said, if not more so. The woman gestures widely in movements that sweep the table toward the man; making bowing motions, she avoids eye contact for the most part, while he sits, face impassive, arms crossed, leaning away from her, scratching his arm, looking up and away from her, at one point shifting ever so slightly farther away (fig. 1).² When he begins to respond with more than “Yes”



Fig. 1: Film still, NATIONAL GALLERY (Frederick Wiseman, US 2014), 00:08:15.

or “Yeah”, he leans forward slightly, there is more eye contact between them, the woman’s face relaxes; she smiles. The animality of enigmatic and clear bodily, tonal and facial cues, the subtle play of dominance and submission in this

- 1 Transcript of National Gallery, Wiseman 2014, 2. Further page references from this transcript will be cited in the text, the title abbreviated to NG. I gratefully acknowledge Zipporah Films for providing me with transcripts. Thank you to M. Gail Hamner, David Heckerl, Jon LeBlanc, S. Brent Plate, and two anonymous reviewers who commented on earlier drafts of this essay.
- 2 Images are provided courtesy of Zipporah Films. More information on Frederick Wiseman and his films can be found at Zipporah Films, www.zipporah.com.

exchange between articulate people, may resonate for the viewer as much or more than any of the intellectual arguments presented.

The limits of intellectual arguments in this and countless other sequences in Frederick Wiseman's films suggest that his vision of art does not include the desire to provoke social change through didactic film.³ Social criticism may be an *effect* of Wiseman's art, but only if this effect is understood in an expansive and elusive way – just as parables draw us toward the unknown and the irresolvable with awakened responsiveness. As Wiseman points out, given the vast range of competing sources of information in a democratic society, a filmmaker would have to be living in a fantasy world to expect that his or her work would affect significant social change: “thousands of people aren't that easily moved in a democratic society.”⁴ Animated by the strangeness of the world, Wiseman doesn't attempt a didactic project, but simply tries to evoke the complexity of everyday life: “It's unpredictable what people's experiences or judgments will be. Part of the fun of making documentaries is the constant surprise, and the fact that people are always doing or saying things in a way that you wouldn't have predicted. When you're meeting them in the kind of situations that I'm meeting them in, it always runs counter to clichés.”⁵

Wiseman's films communicate the enigmatic everyday in a “novelistic” way,⁶ so that “reality fictions” is a more apt term than “documentaries”, in his view.⁷ That is, his films' dramatic structure, rhythm and point- or points-of-view convey, indirectly, his attitudes and feelings toward events and persons. He began his over 50 years in filmmaking with some fairly polemical work,⁸ but reflects that “my films have become less didactic ... I like to think I'm better able to express complex ideas in film terms ... So it's not that I'm without, for lack of better words, ‘ideological’, conceptual views, but I try not to ... exclude things that don't fit with whatever my ideology is at the moment.”⁹ When interviewer Daniel Kasman interprets non-didactic to mean “open text”, Wiseman clarifies, “Not open in the sense that it doesn't have a point-of-view or well defined points-of-view. Whenever you deal with reality as a subject, it should be complicated and ambiguous, and it shouldn't... if I could express the point-of-view of the film in twenty-five words or less I shouldn't make the movie.”¹⁰

3 Grant 1992, 1–41. Grant refers to Wiseman's style as “political cinema” that refuses “authorial superiority”.

4 Hamacher/Wiseman 2015; Atkins 1976, 40, 56, 79–80.

5 Ricks/Wiseman 1990, 9.

6 Kasman 2013.

7 Atkins 1976, 82.

8 Peary/Wiseman 1998.

9 Gerow/Toshifumi/Kramer/Wiseman 1997.

10 Kasman/Wiseman 2013.

PARABLE

While the analogy of a novelistic technique is fitting for Wiseman's work, I consider his films to be parable-like in their structure and lyric address. In a companion piece to this essay, "Silence-effects: Frederick Wiseman's Films as Parables",¹¹ I began to develop this analogy by comparing the silence of parable with Wiseman's "silent" films. What I call the "silence of parable" draws out the insight of parable scholars and theologians that parable exists on "the edge of language and the limit of story".¹² I have learned from Jan Zwicky to read as *lyric* both parable and Wiseman's films. Both foster fugitive moments of acute, wondering and even painful responsiveness to the world, a fleeting capacity to live without a why or, in Zwicky's phrase, in "the erotic embrace of speechlessness"¹³ that opens out into more-than-reciprocity. Parable is unstory.¹⁴ The parables of Jesus witness to the more-than-reciprocity of the empire of God, not as a project to implement in society, but as shared images that shape our sensibility and our relations in new directions.¹⁵ Parables disrupt the logical, causal, and linear *explanation* of story, of myth.¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan notes, however, "it is not possible to live in parable alone. To live in parable means to dwell in the tension of myth *and* parable."¹⁷ In other words, it is possible to distinguish myth (narrative) and parable (lyric) conceptually but not practically. Everyday speech mixes the two, and some works "employ both lyric and narrative structures".¹⁸

Wiseman's aesthetic in his films about public or private institutions reveals this tension between myth (story) and parable (lyric). Narrative sequences include film subjects' attempts to explain the values and practices of the institutions explored in the films, which imply a broader understanding of the world (myth). Yet these sequences also create lyrical "silence-effects" with the absence of extra-diegetic music, long sequences without dialogue or with very minimal dialogue, the lack of voice-over narration and lack of questions for the film subjects. Certain types of sequences and images are repeated in all of Wiseman's films (traffic montages; corridors; single, double and group portraits; close-ups of faces, bodies, hands) without an overarching explanatory narrative

11 Faber 2015, 138–152.

12 Crossan 1975, 46.

13 Lilburn/Zwicky 2010, 145.

14 This neologism plays with the recent proliferation of un-things: an ungame, for instance, is a non-competitive game without winners and losers. I use the term to amplify my point about parable as lyric rather than story.

15 See Williams 2000a.

16 Zwicky 2006, 87–105. Zwicky's contrast of lyrical witness and narrative explanation is particularly resonant for me when considering Wiseman's work.

17 Crossan 1975, 60 (italics in the original).

18 Zwicky 2006, 100.

structure, and with the spare characterization of film subjects that “portraits” suggest – a parable-like non-didactic, non-directive cinema.

I compare Wiseman’s style and the effect on the viewer in different sequences of his films and develop these interpretations through a discussion of parable, reciprocity, and more-than-reciprocity in order to flesh out the specific aesthetic strategies at play in his films. I argue that the effect of the play between myth and parable in Wiseman’s films (or in his terms, the “abstract” and the “literal”¹⁹) is an elusive yet galvanising vision of more-than-reciprocity that opens up the space of parable, the enigmatic everyday, in his work. The viewer is not directed toward any particular action, but disturbed by visceral responsiveness – bewilderment, curiosity, pain, sadness, wonder, joy – seeing and hearing people and animals that social practice consigns to invisibility and silence. At the same time, people with social prestige – like the director of the National Gallery in the scene described in the first paragraph of the essay, the medical staff in Wiseman’s *NEAR DEATH* (US 1989), the judge in *JUVENILE COURT* (US 1973), among others – are filmed in ways that complicate their public stature.

RECIPROCITY AND MORE-THAN-RECIPROCITY

In classic liberal theory, rooted in antiquity, reciprocity can be understood as justice wherein equal persons mutually consent to limits to their actions in relation to each other.²⁰ Simone Weil’s essay “Implicit Forms of the Love of God” recounts a tragic sense of reciprocity’s limits, given “facts of radical inequality”²¹ and “all that the strong can impose upon the weak.”²² She notes that Thucydides dramatises such force in the Athenians’ war with Sparta when they meet the resistance of the neutral island of Melos. The Athenians destroy the city, kill all the men and sell the women and children into slavery, claiming that justice as reciprocity is negotiated between equals, whereas “if one is strong and the other weak, that which is possible is imposed by the first and accepted by the second.”²³ They appeal to a law of “mechanical necessity”: the strong can take advantage of the weak in every way, treat them like things, like slaves. Next to this, Weil considers an indirect love of God as *more-than-reciprocity* in response to the neighbour, “behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship. Exactly, in every respect, including the

19 Hamacher/Wiseman 2015.

20 Rawls 1999, 190–224; Skerrett 2005.

21 Williams 2000a, 78.

22 Weil 1973, 142.

23 Weil 1973, 141.

slightest details of accent and attitude”.²⁴ Despite her attention to the finest shifts in “accent and attitude”, Weil sees this possibility as a supernatural gift without strong human participation. My perception of more-than-reciprocity, while indebted to Weil, has more in common with Kathryn Tanner’s sense of human malleability open to radical transformation, through grace, through grace, as an expression of “natural” possibilities, and Kathleen Skerrett’s tender sensibility of the responsiveness in the flesh of one being to another when they share “images of reciprocity and self-respect and grace.”²⁵ Weil, Tanner and Skerrett imagine these possibilities as emerging within persistent relations of domination, consistent with a vision of reciprocity and more-than-reciprocity in Wiseman’s films.

Though it doesn’t necessarily have a theistic orientation in Wiseman’s films, *this disposition of more-than-reciprocity with the dominated, humiliated and weak* – whether in the style of filming his subjects, or the actions and attitudes of persons filmed – *is the compelling vision of all of his work*, witnessed in “the slightest details of accent and attitude”. In a quiet, yet disturbing way Wiseman creates an effect in viewers similar to the effect of Jesus’ parables described by Rowan Williams: they invite people to “decide for or against self-destruction, for or against newness of life, acceptance, relatedness.”²⁶ Williams contends that the enigmatic language of parable is consistent with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s call (in his letters from prison) for a non-religious language to proclaim the word of God for the renewal of the world. As is gradually becoming clearer to me, this means an acceptance of a life-giving, unpredictable unknown in the midst of everyday life: something that we usually resist. Eric Santner interprets, through Sigmund Freud and Franz Rosenzweig, God as such an unknown, “the name for the pressure to be alive to the world, to open to the too much of pressure generated in large measure by the uncanny presence of my neighbour”,²⁷ encountered as a stranger, that is, without a program or plan of action. This is parable as lyric, a call to a responsiveness of more-than-reciprocity to that which we can *acknowledge but not know*, to use Stanley Cavell’s resonant distinction.²⁸ Thomas Merton interprets the synergies of faith and doubt in a similar but theistic way, as a life of bringing “the unknown into our everyday life in a living, dynamic and actual manner” that holds in abeyance our exciting and energizing efforts to explain, where the “unknown remains unknown.”²⁹ Like parable, Wiseman’s filmic style brings the enigmatic everyday into focus, where the discounted or

24 Weil 1973, 143.

25 Tanner 2010, 1–57; Skerrett 2012, 242–244. For Tanner, “natural” means to live by God’s grace.

26 Williams 2000b, 41.

27 Santner 2001, 9.

28 Cavell 2002, 238–266.

29 Merton 1972, 136.

ignored appeals of the weak are made visible and audible, and relations of damaged or compromised reciprocity are disrupted with a vision and a practice of more-than-reciprocity, as we see in his films NATIONAL GALLERY (2014), NEAR DEATH, PRIMATE (US 1974), BELFAST, MAINE (US 1999), MEAT (US 1976) and JUVENILE COURT (1973).

LYRIC PORTRAITURE³⁰

Portraiture is the most resonant and enigmatic strategy in Wiseman's films for evoking reciprocity and more-than-reciprocity within subtle power dynamics of strong and weak, and even those who appear as equals. Andrew Delbanco contends that Wiseman "is not primarily a social commentator or an investigator of this or that institution ... He is a portraitist, and his favourite genre is the double portrait."³¹ These portraits often show a person or a group in a subordinate role to an authority figure/group, and the gestural, aural, postural and other cues that reveal dominance and submission, but equally persistently how these hierarchies are undone in film's structure (and sometimes also the content, as in NEAR DEATH [1989]). Again and again we see these portraits and hear hectoring, pleading, advising, insulting, listening, teaching and counselling in exchanges that either intensify the inequality or bridge it in some way, on a spectrum ranging from cruelty to indifference to compassion. The structures of inequality vary, and overlap, and include (1) authority of office, of the law, military, church, medical profession, government; (2) social circumstances of poverty, aging, disability, lack of education, racism; (3) extreme power differentials in interspecies relations: hunting, trapping for fur, vivisection, factory meat production; (4) benign and less benign hierarchies of art, education or rehearsals for various kinds of performances. I begin my consideration of more-than-reciprocity that emerges within relations of inequality with a recent Wiseman film, NATIONAL GALLERY (2014), which explores unequal relations in a playful manner.

In NATIONAL GALLERY (2014), shot at the National Gallery in London, portraits are numerous: gallery patrons, staff, and representational paintings. With the shot/reverse-shot structure conventionally used to film conversations, the paintings are often filmed in close-up without the frame visible, the silent expressive portraits appearing to meet, or look away from, the silent expressiveness of gallery visitors looking at them (fig. 2).

In the first narrative sequence of the film, a woman describes a medieval painting of haloed saints for a group in the gallery, suggesting that a picture takes on qualities of what it represents, for instance, just as we might resist tossing darts

³⁰ I owe this term to Jon LeBlanc, developed in conversation about this essay.

³¹ Delbanco 2010, 94.



Fig. 2: Film still, NATIONAL GALLERY (Frederick Wiseman, US 2014), 02:33:39.

at the eyes of an image of a fluffy grey kitten to avoid hurting it, even when we know it is just a picture (NG 2). In other words, more-than-reciprocity emerges in seeing and being seen, as if the representation of a human or animal face or body elicits respect beyond the painting's "thingness", displacing the usual relation of person to thing, of strong and weak. This implicates the viewer of the film in an almost vertiginous layering of looking – looking at people looking at figures in paintings (who are also looking)³² – resonant with Jean Luc Nancy's sense of parable's address. In his view, parable doesn't convey a particular message or understanding of a "text", but makes the person looking (and hearing) aware of his or her capacity for looking and hearing. Any message is incidental to the awareness of this capacity for responsiveness.³³ Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests such a richly sensorial awareness with his remark, "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul."³⁴ My attitude is a sensual awareness of reciprocity with another that, in being gifted to her, redounds to me.

Throughout the film, in the discussions of the gallery staff and commentators, paintings share attributes of human animality and spirituality: described as "organic", they begin to age as soon as they are made (NG 84–85); they suffer "misguided" restoration efforts (NG 51); despite their being centuries old, it is not possible to definitively interpret them, or to understand particular details (NG 55); they change depending on where and by whom they are seen, in

32 Hamacher/Wiseman 2015.

33 Nancy 2008, 9.

34 Cited by Zwicky 2009, 116.

what lighting and next to which other paintings; in strong exhibitions “works start talking to each other” (NG 54); and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks* “sings” (NG 95) when placed next to other da Vinci paintings in the exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan*. In Wiseman’s style of filming them, and as human artefacts sharing multifaceted “humanness”, the paintings receive the kind of attention and care, the more-than-reciprocity, that in other Wiseman films can be received by humans or animals disadvantaged in some way, though they are also subject to similar risks, suffering inattention or destructive attention. These risks include inadvertently destructive methods of restoration and deliberate vandalism of paintings by gallery visitors (NG 73).

NATIONAL GALLERY (2014) is a film that, perhaps more than any of his other films, is indirectly about Wiseman’s film style and its effects. With reference to Leonardo da Vinci’s and Johannes Vermeer’s work discussed in the film, we see how he makes use of the visual play of looking implicated in human animality and spirituality. Although Wiseman does not interview his subjects, in NATIONAL GALLERY (2014) he films an interview given by the curator of the Leonardo da Vinci exhibit. His description of Leonardo’s work gives some apt characterizations of Wiseman’s films: the “paintings show figures that are incredibly present, incredibly vital, and yet extraordinarily remote and other, [revealing] ... a quality of thought allied with a kind of pitch of emotion and an intensity of craft” (NG 37). Reference is also made to the spiritual quality of Leonardo’s work that emerges through a “capacity to paint the invisible, the just out of reach ... an artist who constantly refines, revisits certain themes over and over again” (NG 38). Similarly, Wiseman has observed that all of his films can be considered as one long film, revisiting similar subject matters,³⁵ while various commentators consider how they take us beyond the patiently observed everyday.³⁶ What techniques are used to take us beyond the everyday? An art historian describes Vermeer’s painting *Woman Standing at a Virginal* (c.1670–1672) as creating an inaccessible yet inviting “ideal world” – which surprised me with its aptness for the effect of Wiseman’s unflinching realism of “the slightest details of accent and attitude”.³⁷ The art historian characterizes Vermeer as finding “a balance between realism and abstraction ... as you get closer, just like [in] impressionist painting that sense of realism dissolves into abstraction, and it remains forever elusive ... creating a barrier between our world and this ideal world represented in the paintings” (NG 90). She says that she has given many different interpretations of this “very ambiguous painting”, but with the “absolute regular-

35 Atkins 1976, 87.

36 Christley 2015. Christley describes Wiseman’s most recent film, IN JACKSON HEIGHTS, as follows: “Within a small precisely defined set of city blocks ... is an incalculable human animation, defiant of geography. Through brilliant planning and a variety of miracles of timing, this small film suggests the infinity.”

37 Weil 1973, 143.

ity and almost austerity of the composition, it's hard to tell exactly what the painting is about" (NG 90). Wiseman's films share the ambiguity, regularity and austerity of Vermeer's work, but I wouldn't characterise Wiseman's films as creating "a barrier between our world and this ideal world". Rather, they invite the viewer into the "ideal world" (for lack of a better term) through evoking, as a fugitive awareness, an "unknown that remains unknown", that exists alongside the compulsion to explain, a compulsion for bridge building over the unknown that may also erect barriers to the enigmatic. The effort to explain paintings (by art historians, curators, restorers, the gallery director, gallery staff, etc.) is repeatedly observed in NATIONAL GALLERY (2014) but does not form a narrative arc of the film. The play of known (or effort to know) and unknown is visually evoked through paintings shot with and without frames, with and without someone offering a narrative explanation. Wiseman's filmic style of wordless looking at an image intensifies the pressure of an encounter with a stranger, be it animal, monstrous creature or human, in the National Gallery paintings. The "ideal world" in Wiseman's films is a responsiveness of more-than-reciprocity to a person or animal in its weakness: in film terms, its aural and visual presence.

Similar to what the art historian calls Vermeer's "balance between realism and abstraction", which keeps ambiguity in play, Wiseman's films create a tension between what he refers to as the "literal and the abstract".³⁸ Nowhere is the tension of "literal and abstract" more teasingly felt in all its energetic demands and joy (and endless repeatability) than in NATIONAL GALLERY (2014). I interpret Wiseman's "literal" to mean all that we experience at the level of inchoate sensation or the "speechlessness" of lyric (Zwicky) or "is-ness" (Meister Eckhart) or "infraperception" (William Connolly).³⁹ In other words, the "literal" creates the visceral shock of parable. All we can do is multiply analogies: such inchoate expressiveness cannot be resolved into any final, definite explanation (or social action), try as we might, and we do try! As Crossan observes, we cannot live in parable alone; we need the explanation of myth and story. What Wiseman calls the "abstract", I regard as our dogged efforts to explain, systematise and narrate elusive experiences, in other words, the consolations of myth or narrative. In visual terms, these explanations are like frames we put around things, the choice to tell the story in a certain way (Wiseman's term, "reality fictions"),⁴⁰ which a painting must do in an instant. Vermeer's *Woman Standing at a Virginal* has many frames within the frame of the painting, implying the hospitality of art to see the world in many different ways and also its invitation to many possible readings. A man talking to a group at the gallery observes, "in

38 Hamacher/Wiseman 2015.

39 Lilburn/Zwicky 2010, 145; Eckhart 1981, 187; Connolly 2002, 27.

40 Atkins 1976, 82.

art you can be right in lots of different ways, but in maths, you can only be right once, otherwise you're wrong" (NG 31).

There are images and sounds where the "unknown remains unknown" in NATIONAL GALLERY (2014), both in terms of being human and elusive, but also in Wiseman's reticent style. Unlike videos about the National Gallery on YouTube, Wiseman doesn't include titles to inform viewers about the identity of speakers; he doesn't explain controversies about acquiring a painting for 80 million dollars, and so on. Challenges that the gallery faces are intimated in a trustee meeting about the annual budget and cutbacks, at a discussion about appropriate sponsorships for the gallery and through a cutaway of the hanging (at night) of a Greenpeace banner on the gallery façade ("IT'S NO OIL PAINTING #save the arctic" [with the Shell logo in the "o" of "oil"]). A montage of single, double or group portraits frames the beginning and ending of the film (and as cutaways throughout the film): silent faces on canvases, gallery visitors looking at paintings, people lined up outside the gallery or watching the Greenpeace banner being hoisted up, accompanied by mostly unintelligible speech (except for the swearing). A sense of speechlessness, of the limits of explanation, carries the film's final sequences, amplifying similar sequences throughout the film: murmuring blended voices in the gallery, footfalls of shoes on floors, sounds of hoists, floor cleaners and other equipment used in the gallery. Rather than attempting to explain Titian's *Diana and Callisto*, a poet reads her ekphrastic poem created in response to the painting. Between the words, she imagines "white noise star crunching, crackling noises" (NG 99). She thinks of language's limits as fortuitous: "we're always in a way hampered by language, and that's what's wonderful... And [words] never quite do. But the gap is, the meaning is all in the gaps" (NG 101). This sequence is followed by dancers performing in front of Titian paintings, their flowing movement contrasting the arrested movement of figures in the paintings, followed by the montage of portraits that ends the film, among them Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* and several Rembrandt self-portraits.

DEMOCRATIC NOISE

A very different Wiseman film, but also resonant with meaning in the gaps, NEAR DEATH (1989), was filmed in Boston's Beth Israel Hospital. The hospital functions according to Quaker principles, complicating the usual hierarchy of command in medicine. Within the Pulmonary Intensive Care Unit, house staff, the attending physician, the patient's personal physician, the patient's family and the patient (if he or she is competent) are involved in decisions about patient care. In practice, however, it is often physicians, who, believing a patient is near death, persuade his or her family to modify their wishes that "everything" be

done for the patient, and to adopt a more realistic care plan, as we see in the four cases followed in some detail in this film, along with brief encounters with other patients.

The film opens with a shot of a team of rowers that suggests these contraries of collaborative work and hierarchy. Rowers work while a person in the bow calls out the timing of the strokes, the boat and oars like a water spider moving in a diagonal across the water. The camera pulls back for an establishing shot of a river and a sunburst of light on city buildings on the edge of the water. The opening sequence evokes a complex beauty: nature, human movement, human technology, directed teamwork and borderlands. This sequence is followed by cutaways to traffic, the exterior of the hospital building, the Beth Israel Hospital sign, the hospital entrance, corridors, cleaning staff at work. Not only will these images be repeated throughout the film, with day and night shots of both traffic and the hospital exterior, but this pattern is also familiar from Wiseman's films. This invites comparisons with his other films; they begin to "talk" to each other. For example, in this language-intense film, Dr. Scott Weiss, the most philosophical of the physicians, observes, "there are a few situations ... in life where the critical meaning of what you say and how you say it has as much ramifications as it does around this [end of life] issue."⁴¹ Yet Wiseman's other films expand the places and events where such critical conversations take place in all their aural and non-verbal complexity.

The soundtrack of *NEAR DEATH* (1989) is a complex ecology. The physicians and nurses speak about treatments and symptoms in language that ranges from incomprehensibly technical (for medical outsiders) to graphically metaphorical. Around an unresponsive patient's bed, doctors say, "That's doll's eyes"; "That's positive doll's eyes" (ND 9). A number of sequences include several conversations going on at once, or a physician talking to family members with machine "white noise" in the background, or conversation interrupted by beeps of the doctor's pager, a layering of sound amplified with non-simultaneous sound where conversations begin before the viewer sees the speakers, or carries on over cutaways. Despite the admitted uncertainty of outcomes for patients, nurses and physicians offer clear, logical explanations of treatments and prognoses (with hesitations, pauses, repetitions); a rare clear directive from a patient offers some comic relief (Mr. Gavin asks the attending physician to scratch his back). More frequently, patients and families give uncertain directives and ask repetitive questions that accentuate the enormity of the situation they face. Patients' voices are muffled by oxygen masks, another patient shapes words, her voice inaudible, and Mr. Sperazza's communication is limited to squeezing

41 Transcript of *NEAR DEATH*, Wiseman 1989, 81. Further page references from this transcript will be cited in the text, the title abbreviated to ND.

a hand, wiggling his toes and animal-like heaves and grunts between effort-full breaths. A sketch of this man emerges in his wife's conversations with their family physician, Dr. Taylor, as someone with mental health issues and described metaphorically by his wife as a "bit of a cry baby" and "the little boy who cried wolf once too often" (ND 96). What he means to her is expressed in her search for his hand under the sheets, her anxiety about his laboured breathing and her sudden outbursts of anguish while talking to Dr. Taylor: "He's my life. He's my life" (ND 85), and simply, "oh, Dr. Taylor" (ND 88).

The aural layering amplifies the visual layering of the film. For the most part, with the exception of Mrs. Sperazza, intense emotion is relayed with impassive facial expressions and tonal flatness. Patients near and after death look impassive, as do the physicians when speaking to patients' families – Dr. Taylor speaks with a family member on the phone, looking as though he will fall asleep on the spot – all mirrored by static "faces" of computer screens and heart monitors. Several sequences involve more than a dozen people working on a patient, or a group of medical staff discussing a case during rounds or in conferences. A variety of shot styles compose single, double, triple and group portraits: pans from the close-up of a physician to a patient or a family member, shots zooming in and out of close-ups, a shot/reverse-shot structure. In a spare medium sequence the viewer encounters a contrasting pace: a still camera creates a theatre effect, held for a lengthy conversation between Dr. Taylor and Mrs. Sperazza. Given her husband's critical condition, the table's edge seems to cut the frame with a horizontal line like a flat line on a heart monitor (fig. 3). As these shot styles suggest, the pacing blends slow, leisurely transitions with quick cuts, drawing the viewer into the conflicting boredom and anxiety that patients and their families face. The aural and visual cacophony in the film, interrupted by shots that evoke stillness (close-ups of faces, hands, the hospital façade, the hospital entrance), reveals a paradoxical space where parable opens up textures of more-than-rec-



Fig. 3: Film still, *NEAR DEATH* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1989), Disc 3, 01:24:14.

iprocity within inequalities of medical expertise and family members who lack this knowledge and are further disadvantaged by their distress.

The “literal” (visual and aural) layering is compounded by “abstract” layering that implies reciprocity between patients, their families, and medical staff in the enormity of the situation they face. Their sense of powerlessness is evident in references to God and in repetitive speech. In a conversation between two physicians about a patient, the attending physician says, “God decides. God decides. We don’t decide. These things have a life of their own; they really do, you know, I mean they really do, they have a life of their own” (ND 73). Mrs. Sperazza also appeals God as an expression of her helplessness: “I’ll put it in the hands of God. There’s nothing I can say or do except pray” (ND 82). The doctors have limited tools at their disposal while facing unrealistic expectations that they can and must *do something* for patients near death, an existential situation that relativises the social hierarchy of physician-patient relations. Dr. Weiss observes that physicians are “minor actors” dealing with “things ... that are bigger than us” (ND 110). Despite their expertise, physicians often tell patients’ family members that they don’t know how to interpret a patient’s symptoms, or how to predict his or her future (ND 82). Dr. Weiss expresses, in metaphorically vivid language, his sense of helplessness and despondency about medical technology’s limits: he refers to a treatment as using a “pea shooter against an atomic bomb” (ND 2); says he feels like Sisyphus pushing a rock up a hill only to have it roll down again (ND 58); is frustrated at not being able to express limitation (“we can’t do anything for that, we have no way to help that yet” [ND110]) or to be frank about the “torture” of cancer treatments (ND 57), not to mention rising costs of medical care that conflict with the wishes of family members to have “everything” done for patients. His colleague conveys the physician’s dilemma in a futile desire to help when a patient receives a devastating diagnosis: “If you wanted to give people quality of life, you could like be a furniture salesman ... it’s easy to fix things that are fixable” (ND 58). In conferences, grand rounds and one-on-one conversations, medical staff repeatedly debate questions: what is informed choice? (ND 57); what is “dead”? (ND 58); what is hopeless? (ND 72–73); “When does a terminal illness really become terminal?” (ND 73). Such questions are difficult to answer, while communication with patients and family members demands some kind of answer. And this doesn’t even begin to address the family problems that manifest themselves at hospital bedsides. The Intensive Care Unit brings together paradoxes and terrible ironies: an autopsy conference for Mr. Cabra, a thirty-three year old man, reveals that treatment for his testicular cancer successfully eliminated the cancerous growths but caused fatal pulmonary fibrosis. One of the physicians comments, “This is an example of curing the tumour but that the cure is deadly, the therapeutic index is very low” (ND 76).

The hospital policy of consultation with patients (if competent) and family is shown in its complexity and tediousness in the case of Mrs. Bernice Factor. The repeated efforts of medical staff to get clarity about Mrs. Factor's wishes is hugely complicated by the fact that, while considered competent to make decisions about her own care and characterised as the "strong one" in her family, she can only shape her words, without vocalising sound. She has to decide whether she will have the breathing tube removed or have a tracheostomy operation. There are numerous bedside and corridor consultations and discussions about her case – at first staff are certain she doesn't want treatment, then they are unsure, and finally the decision is made by her personal physician. In one consultation with Mrs. Factor, the first shot is a close-up of her in the bed, and throughout most of the sequence we see her in the centre of the frame with at least three medical staff on the edges of the frame (fig. 4). A longer shot near the end of the sequence reveals that at least nine people are in the room while this conversation goes on. Dr. Weiss, the spokesperson for the group, says that the decision is hers to make, but it isn't difficult to see how the odds (both in terms of physical frailty and in terms of authority) are weighed against her. He shifts from euphemisms to more direct language: the choice before her is life or death. In another sequence, a doctor observes that her way of posing questions and presenting options to a patient leads the patient toward the option she thinks is best, rather than really offering a choice (ND 57). Here, Dr. Weiss seems impatient with Mrs Factor's indecision and his difficulty understanding her (a nurse translates what she is saying), and, as the viewer knows from other sequences, he thinks that her death is likely imminent and that everything possible has been done for her: it is time to put an end to interventions to "see if she flies on her own" (ND 51).



Fig. 4: Film still,
NEAR DEATH (Frederick Wiseman, US
1989), Disc 2, 00:41:26.

Mrs Factor, mouthing words and making hand gestures, keeps the phalanx of medical personnel arrested when Dr. Weiss wants clarity and decision, though

he admits later to her personal physician, “If I were there I am not so sure how certain I would be about what I wanted to do” (ND 50). The spare close-up shots of those around the bed, with the medical staff “pushed off” to the edge of the frame, their numbers not revealed until the end of the sequence, are contrasted with the frequent close-up shots of Mrs. Factor in the centre of the frame, her hand gestures and a close-up of her hand covered in tape with tubes running off it, her livid eyes contrasted by the immobility of her body in the bed. The spectator doesn’t see her overcoming the authority of the medical profession, but rather, through her hesitation and deferral, she makes it pause and wait. An intensive effort is made to understand her obscure hand gestures, changing points of view, her mouthed few words: in those pauses and efforts, an unsettled more-than-reciprocity emerges. The way the sequence is shot amplifies these efforts as efforts *as if* between equals, despite the actual inequality of power.

Davide Panagia’s discussion of democratic noise in his book *The Political Life of Sensation* amplifies what may be in play in Wiseman’s lyric portraiture that constitutes his vision of more-than-reciprocity. Panagia contends that political theory’s “common sense” is a “narratocracy” of turning everything into *reading*, similar to the deliberative forms of narrative sense making discussed above as myth (the “abstract”). Such common sense has political effects of compromising reciprocity: it classifies people into those who can speak and those who cannot, those who have the official authority of word (speech) and those who are “just making noise”⁴² – the scene of Wiseman’s more-than-reciprocity. Panagia attends to the interruptions of declarative, authoritative speech by the *noise of democracy*, which requires attention not only to what is said, but also to the “aurality of an utterance” (46), its vocal qualities (49), its duration, its pauses, its interruptions, its babble and “democratic non-sense” (73). In other words, “sensation interrupts common sense” with its disrupting effects of “the experience of unrepresentability” elicited through a “heterology of impulses that register on our bodies without determining a body’s nature or residing in one organ of perception” (2). He wants us to listen for “the noises people make *when saying before stating, when enunciating before making sense*” (73, italics added) which shifts our perception concerning those who can take part in democratic conversation.

Wiseman’s filmic strategies allow the viewer to experience “democratic noise” visually and aurally, which may be the reason that he isn’t polemical about political discourse as “narratocracy”. His films quietly juxtapose deliberative, explanatory speech with so much that resists explanation and control, leaving a felt impression of the vastness of the unknown, the attempts to ex-

42 Panagia 2009, 53. Further page references will be cited in the text.

plain just small ships on a vast ocean, with something larger than politics at play. In NATIONAL GALLERY (2014), for example, commentators refer to restoring paintings “as a work of art that you read” (NG 84), of “learning ways to decode paintings” (NG 14) and, in a drawing session with a female model record, “we can’t help ourselves but add narrative when we’re dealing with the human body” (NG 34). These efforts at explanation are held in tension with repeated acknowledgements of how “very very ambiguous” and amorphous paintings are (NG 18–19). Beyond statements about the ambiguity of paintings, a resonant speechlessness emerges in Wiseman’s reiteration of images of silent yet expressive paintings, and faces of people looking or waiting in line. Furthermore, Wiseman’s films present an expansive range of human and animal aural address along with sounds made by the technological extensions of humans (traffic noise, ships’ horns, beepers, machines),⁴³ thereby expanding the range of democratic noise and its participants, and inviting the viewer into the unknown of an “attitude toward a soul”.

THE ANIMAL IN US AND WITH US

Wiseman’s work – its expansive aurality, the visual presence created through portraiture – invites kinship with humans compromised in their capacity to communicate, as well as animals (or representations of them in art). The threat of force in social relations is actual in PRIMATE (1974), shot at the Yerkes Primate Research Center in Atlanta, Georgia, where treatment of caged animals includes gentleness, dispassionate use in experiments, and forced constraint of the primates when they resist. In Newborn Reception, women hold, bottle feed, hug, play with and diaper baby orangutans, gorillas and chimpanzees; elsewhere, interaction with the primates ranges from observation to vivisection. Despite the scientific detachment, the use of words like “hands,” “arms” and so on to describe primates’ parts suggests an implicit acknowledgment of kinship, along with images of primates clinging to, or being held by, humans as if they were infants. In one sequence, a Rhesus monkey with a metal box on its head containing electrodes into its brain is prepared for a zero-gravity experiment, its head, arms and legs confined in a plastic form of “stocks”. A visitor to the research centre breaks with the scientific detachment of the researchers with her facial and vocal expression of concern, “Oh, he does resent it, doesn’t he?” The researcher replies, “Yeah, generally he does.”⁴⁴ The monkey’s vocal expressiveness is perceived by the scientist, but ignored or discounted. In the film’s opening sequence, after a montage of images of eminent scientists, two

43 McLuhan 2013, 57.

44 Transcript of PRIMATE, Wiseman, 1974, 19. Further page references from this transcript will be cited in the text, the title abbreviated to P.

researchers discuss observational techniques at the centre – a person watches a cage of gorillas and records, in timed intervals, what the primates are doing. The observer notes that the orangutan giving birth makes sounds (“It vocalizes ... It stops vocalizing ... It vocalizes briefly.” [P 4]), but none of this counts as data when the animals resist or protest capture, or when they create a cacophony in adjoining cages when a chimpanzee is rolled by on a trolley after surgery. It is impossible not to notice the resistance of animals taken from cages for experiments (resistance overcome with the animal’s arms held behind its back, or with plastic devices that immobilize the head and waist, or with anaesthesia). A man repeatedly attempts to inject a caged chimp with anaesthetic; the animal’s fingers reach out through the bars, swat at the needle; it makes high-pitched sounds whenever the needle hits its flesh. These and other scenes in *PRIMATE* (1974) evoke the ambiguities of competencies in moral reasoning and various professions that train us to question and even discount “animal recognition” in the achievement of some purpose.⁴⁵

Near the end of the film, equally clear “messaging” from a creature is ignored. As in other Wiseman films, the least powerful creature in a scene has a large visual and often aural presence, images of more-than-reciprocity. A man tries to catch a spider monkey – it escapes the man’s gloved hands by moving to the far side of the cage, gripping the mesh side; it chirps, squeals and chitters; when the gloves confine it to the other side of the cage, it clings to the inside of the door; the man swings the door open with the monkey clinging to it, and pries it off the door. Outside the cage, the monkey signals anger and fear with its agitated tail, the only expressive participant in this sequence, the man’s back to the camera. Just before another man immobilizes the monkey in a plastic “stocks”, it bends over the man’s glove and attempts to clasp onto it; even as its neck is being forced into the device, it makes an open fingered “appeal” (fig. 5). When secured, it opens its mouth without producing sound and stops resisting, the contrasting silence as expressive as its noise. It is anaesthetised, head shaved, cut open and stitched; the other spider monkeys are agitated and noisy when its inert form is placed back in the cage. The second stage of the process begins with the monkey being sliced open, inner organs pulsing, the head cut off and the brain removed to prepare for sections to be taken from it and examined under a microscope. Repeated close-up shots of the spider monkey’s face convey its presence before (fig. 6) and after the removal of the brain, while the men capturing and immobilizing the spider monkey are filmed in ways that minimise their expressiveness, with their backs to the camera or brief shots of their faces in profile along with close-ups of their giant gloves.

45 Williams 2000a, 43. This issue of ignoring cues has also been raised in discussions of sexual assault by Melanie Bere in Anderssen 2014.



Fig. 5: Film still, *PRIMATE* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1974), 01:11:32.



Fig. 6: Film still, *PRIMATE* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1974), 01:11:32.

Parable happens in the disquieting gap between the deliberative speech of the researchers and the gestural, facial and aural communication of both human and animals. The researchers discuss their observations, experiments, data and the importance of basic research with expressionless faces, a contrast to the mothering attention given to the newborn primates and the primates' range of vocalisation, their gestural and facial expressiveness (some of it agonisingly clear in its messaging, some of it ambiguous). The ambiguity of parable opens up a sense of kinship with these animals, and some alienation from the monotone humans. What lingers, in my perception of the film at least, is not the deliberative discourse, in Panagia's sense of "narratocracy". I am undone by the protest of the spider monkey in all its bodily and vocal resistance to capture; it brings me to a painful place of more-than-reciprocity. Although this is one of Wiseman's early and more polemical films, it doesn't allow the viewer a free pass to judge scientists, for all of us benefit from the medical and other technology that results from curiosity-driven research involving animals. It may also raise questions for the viewer: what aural and physical cues am I missing or ignoring in my daily encounters?

Just as Wiseman's films can insinuate themselves into consideration of large social questions about the use of animals in the development of technology, they also insinuate themselves into more everyday habits, like opening a can of tuna for lunch, again in light of the question of what or who remains unseen, unnoticed.⁴⁶ BELFAST, MAINE (1999), shot in a blue-collar city on Maine's coast, has a sequence of about 14 minutes wherein even the great inequality of assembly-line workers and the fish that they process into tins of sardines is mobilised into a kind of reciprocity through visual and aural democratic noise. The people involved in the processing are reduced to quick repetitive mechanical functions, fixed facial expressions, very minimal speech or silence, in a space with clattering machines and mechanical sounding voices over a PA system.⁴⁷ The shot/reverse shot takes in workers and a continuous stream of sardines, neither of which regards the other – they are simply in each other's physical space. A life-like stream of dead fish, close-ups and extreme close-ups of the fish, alternate, in quick cuts, with images of the workers; the relation between workers and fish "told" through the rapid cutting as much as in the persistent focus on the fish. More on-screen time is given to the fish, with a ratio of about five to one. The workers are shown in extreme close-ups of their faces, but just as often as arms, hands or bodies working machinery or interrupting the stream of cans for inspection (fig. 7). Even when the fish are packed in symmetrical patterns in cans, before the lids are stamped on, they are more visible than the workers. This sequence in the film doesn't create a celebratory reciprocity; rather,



Fig. 7: Film still,
BELFAST, MAINE
(Frederick Wiseman,
US 1999), Disc 2,
01:14:16.

46 For a detailed discussion of BELFAST, MAINE and MEAT, see Faber 2015, 143–148.

47 Another sequence of Belfast, Maine, in which a teacher lectures on Moby-Dick as a working-class tragedy, is suggestive for this assembly-line scene.

it is the strange likeness of assembly-line workers with the product that they produce out of once living things. Their mind-numbing labour, ignored by most people opening cans of mass-produced food, suggests a state similar to that expressed by a former student of a high school in a letter read by the principal to a group of teachers (HIGH SCHOOL, Frederick Wiseman, US 1968): “I am just a body doing a job.”⁴⁸

Wiseman’s film *MEAT* (1976), shot at Montfort slaughterhouse and meat-processing plant in Colorado, shows the industrial processing of beef cattle and sheep, reduced to a thing, but a thing with a face. The workers are often shot on the edge or to the side of the frame, the faces and bodies of the cattle in the centre. While the workers mechanically perform their kill, or single cut, the camera records the faces of the workers (fig. 8), but even more persistently the dead animals – a macabre circle of skinned faces move in a circle like an eerie merry-go-round, workers barely visible behind them (fig. 9).



Fig. 8: Film still, *MEAT* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1976), 00:35:53.



Fig. 9: Film still, *MEAT* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1976), 00:34:58.

48 Benson/Anderson 1989, 138.

As in other Wiseman films, there is a complex layering of sound and image, the cacophony of tools for processing the animals, workers reduced to very little sound, while images of the killed animals parody life-like movements: the shudder of a leg when a carcass is first hung, a swinging tail when the hide is torn off, twitching muscles on decapitated heads. Repeated images show the cattle as if at rest when they are bled just after slaughter, and later the heads on metal stakes look like stabled cattle in stanchions with feeding buckets nearby. The camera records every part of the disarticulated animals, the masses of internal organs, the parts salvaged on an assembly line, others disposed of down massive chutes, the blood pooled on the floor. In more leisurely cuts than the sardine sequence in *BELFAST, MAINE* (1999), the camera brings together the life-like movements of the dead with the death-like movements of the living – a reciprocity of inattention – with attention that neither can give the other. The space of parable happens in this gaping silence of reciprocal inattention that addresses us (and we do not look away).

Inattention is a powerful theme revisited in many Wiseman films, and highlighted with a discussion of Giovanni Bellini's *The Assassination of Saint Peter Martyr* in *NATIONAL GALLERY* (2014). A man asks a group of gallery visitors why this representation of the story includes woodcutters going about their work, taking up more space in the picture than the assassin and martyr. He suggests that a tragic event is intensified if there are people who “don't really notice these things happening ... they just keep going on and on and on” (NG 33–34). He also refers to the *Fall of Icarus*: “Fantastic painting where almost all of the painting is people not noticing what's going on, people out plowing the fields and doing lots of other things, while in the background [Icarus] plunks into the ocean and dies” (NG 33). Many sequences in Wiseman's films notice what people are not noticing, a paradox that intensifies the address of the films to the viewer to be aware of seeing and hearing, and enter into a possibility, both realised and unrealised by film subjects, of more-than-reciprocity. I consider *JUVENILE COURT* (1973) as a final example of such an invitation.

Wiseman has a number of films that explore court cases (*DOMESTIC VIOLENCE I* and *DOMESTIC VIOLENCE II*, US 2001/2002), but none with such an extreme power differential as *JUVENILE COURT* (1973), shot in the court of Memphis and Shelby County in Tennessee where children come face to face with representatives of the powers of the state. The children become “cases” and numbers, are deliberated upon, and judged with a variety of techniques: case history, assessments of drawings, Rorschach inkblot tests, a polygraph test, etc. The judge in *JUVENILE COURT* (1973) exercises the power to retain jurisdiction over a juvenile or to waive it, sending the defendant to adult court, and to send children home or to foster homes or training school. These are all critical decisions, but such measures seem paltry in the face of the overwhelming need of the

children standing before the judge or considered in photographs of damage done by a severe beating. Scene after scene raises the complexity of what to do with children running away from home, shoplifting, getting into prostitution, selling drugs, taking drugs, along with questions of whether a child is loved or cared for, with no simple answers and no obvious solution to their problems. The larger circumstances of such deep human need for nurture and love relativizes the judge's authority, exercised in a diplomatic and often caring way, even as he also communicates the coercive power of the state explicitly through references to incarceration and the death penalty. A play of domination occurs when the judge, in chambers, refers to the punishment of death in the electric chair to a boy who persistently denies a charge of molesting a little girl he was babysitting. The judge follows his remark (likely intended to get a confession) with the assurance that Tommy would not be subject to such punishment. In the final sequence of the film, the same threat is leveraged in the case of Robert Singleton, in the judge's chambers and in court.

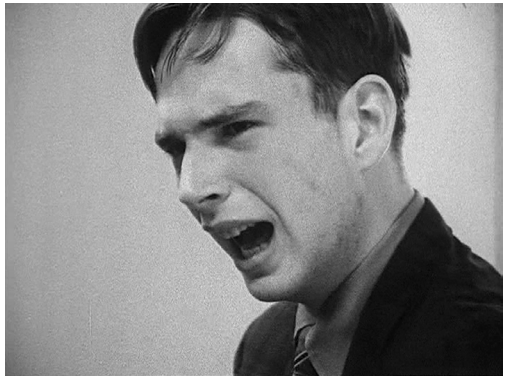
The power differential is acute. Robert has entered a guilty plea in juvenile court against his own wishes, a tactic advised by his lawyer to avoid sentencing in adult court. Robert tells his story while the judge sits on the bench as defender of an impartial law (but here, as elsewhere in the film, shows subtle "tells" that imply that he is not as dispassionate as he appears). Robert is very emotional, while the judge appears controlled and rational, an impersonal tone and manner usually accorded greater social authority. The hierarchy of the situation is usually amplified by the physical position of the judge, seated higher than the defendant. Yet the filming of this scene "scrubs" the scene of these visual markers of the hierarchy of judge and defendant (though the gavel, symbol of the judge's authority, is visible in some shots of him). Robert's address to the court is shot like a conversation between equals in conventional cinema, alternating close-up shots of Robert and the judge in a shot/reverse-shot sequence. The judge appears in medium close-up (fig. 10), while Robert appears in close-up shots, accentuating attention to his facial expressions. In a debate within a huge power differential, Robert questions justice while the judge defends the law. Rather than diminishing his authority, the aurality of Robert's inadvertent gestures and sounds – he pauses, gasps for breath as if there is not enough oxygen in the room, his mouth gapes open as if caught in surprise (fig. 11) – leaves a lingering impression that he is telling the truth, despite the judge's comment "You've been doing some rationalizing and you've convinced yourself that what you're saying is true, but you haven't been able to convince anybody else."⁴⁹ The viewer may be convinced by Robert's anguished pleading, and may

49 Transcript of JUVENILE COURT, Wiseman, 1973, 83. Further page references from this transcript will be cited in the text, the title abbreviated to JC.

Fig. 10: Film still, JUVENILE COURT
(Frederick Wiseman, US 1973),
Disc 2, 00:28:20.



Fig. 11: Film still, JUVENILE COURT
(Frederick Wiseman, US 1973),
Disc 2, 00:28:56.



also note the judge's rationalising in this case with the aim of doing what he thinks is in the "manifest best interest of this boy" (JC 79). (Even if the judge may be right.)

In the democratic noise evoked in this sequence, Robert's presence has authority, however calmly and authoritatively the law speaks in opposition to his pleading and his distress. The judge and lawyers argue for a pragmatic resolution to the case, rather than an investigation of Robert's contention that his co-accused threatened to kill him if he did not drive the man to the location of two armed robberies. Asked if he wishes to speak, Robert says:

All I can say sir is I'm innocent, and I feel like I've been trapped. Is there any justice, isn't there any justice for me? Must I either spend six months in the training school for something I didn't do or take the chance that somebody's gonna trap me again and put me in jail for twenty years? I have no choice, either way I'm trapped. (JC 82)

Robert has no choice but to submit to the guilty plea on two counts of robbery with a deadly weapon, but he does raise unanswerable questions about jus-

tice. Can they be heard in this context any more than animal distress in *PRIMATE* (1974)? After the verdict is heard, Robert asks, “But why must they lie? Why?” (JC 85). A man insists that in ten years the matter can all be erased, to which Robert replies, “An injustice has been done” (JC 85). Alongside the rational and pragmatic deliberations of the judge and lawyers, the sequence keeps in play “democratic noise”: the auralities in all the participants’ reasoning, their coughs, averted glances and gestures that express emotion. The power differential here is weighted in the judge’s favour: his speech is supported by the coercive powers of the state that may incarcerate or even kill citizens. Within this intense exchange, however, Robert pleads questions of truth and justice that will resonate with some viewers along with the conviction that he is telling the truth, but this carries little weight with those who have been tasked to end deliberations and to make a decision (largely based on pragmatic assessments). Robert is coerced into going the way the judge and counsel have set out, but the camera records his protest, going his own idiosyncratic way against the common sense of counsel and the judge. More-than-reciprocity emerges in the art of the film where it does not exist socially, amplified by the style of filming the judge’s and Robert’s visual proximity, aural cues and references to questions much larger than the parties present. In so doing, the film opens up the space of parable, unsettling the resolution arrived at in the court.

CARCASSES AS DRESSES

Transporting parable into the visual and aural medium of film, as I’ve done in this essay – parable as aural image – accentuates the formative capacity of images to shape a vision, to form capabilities, while remaining elusive and enigmatic. It may also push Jesus’ parables out of the bored familiarity with which they are sometimes greeted by religious practitioners. While the visual art of cinema can’t entirely escape the “language game of information”,⁵⁰ Wiseman, in a move away from didacticism, shifts his film style toward aural and visual “democratic noise” for an effect of visceral sensation and shock consistent with the way scholars characterise the effect of parables. Furthermore, whatever Wiseman’s own views on religion, the structure of his films (and some content) consistently evokes – within the public sphere of social institutions – a religious vision and practice of reciprocity and more-than-reciprocity with a neighbour. The films catch what political liberalism misses: the need, within democracies, for “comprehensive doctrines of life, relation, and purpose”⁵¹ that have the potential to resist “a strong technological destiny that deactivates religious ways

50 Ludwig Wittgenstein cited in Crossan 1973, 3.

51 Skerrett 2005, 190.

of being in the world.”⁵² The capacity to perceive this requires a religious sensitivity to the ways in which everyday practices shape persons – whether those practices are shopping, worship, modes of travel, work, food preparation and so on – routines of human relating that appear in Wiseman’s films in the “slightest details of accent and attitude”.⁵³ Conceptual ideas are quite powerless against such formative practices; usually unnoticed, these practices require “engagement in a set of counter-practices through which our bodies acquire the vitality of better possibilities.”⁵⁴ In Wiseman’s films, reciprocity between “peers”⁵⁵ (the effect of parable on the listener, and Wiseman’s films on the viewer) and more-than-reciprocity are not ideas but images of transformed relations. These sensual images remain elusive, an ever-renewable responsiveness to the unknown in the midst of life: call it the soul, the neighbour as stranger, God.

Parable forms capabilities (again, not information) for proximity to the unknown, patience with the unknown, bearing frustration in relation to the unknown: parable bears witness to the unknown. Wiseman’s films open up the space of parable as aural and visual perplexity. At the same time, the films observe the social incitement to *explanation*, the excitements of abstraction, rationalisation, deliberation, argumentation, which for Wiseman bear risks of social regimentation and domination. His films patiently register the layered sounds and appearances of inequality as it emerges, whether in human-to-human or human-animal relations. The social dynamic is usually one in which there is a plan or process into which these humans and animals must fit. The most often cited example of this comes from *HIGH SCHOOL* (1968), in which the Dean of Discipline tells a student who protests unfair punishment that being a man means learning to take orders. In the stream of cattle headed for slaughter, there is one who runs in the opposite direction, away from the steady walk to the kill site, but it is soon turned around and made to join the others. In the stream of fish, one gets caught in a gate as the others flow by, but eventually it is released and discarded. In the courtroom, the hospital or factory assembly lines, people and things are regimented into “the army of the upright”.⁵⁶

With his lyric portraiture, Wiseman envisions a radically egalitarian possibility within the given social world of persistent hierarchies and domination. He invites the viewer into an “erotic ... speechlessness”⁵⁷ of animal presence with other humans or animals, so that the physical cues of openness or resistance within relations matter more than any social status – in the scene that opens

52 Skerrett 2005, 189.

53 Weil 1973, 143.

54 Hauerwas/Coles 2011, 178.

55 Wayne Booth cited in Crossan 1973, 2.

56 Woolf 2008, 104.

57 Lilburn/Zwicky 2010, 145.

this essay, in relations of doctors and patients in *NEAR DEATH* (1989), judge and defendant in *JUVENILE COURT* (1973), assembly line workers and cattle in *MEAT* (1976), among others. Resistance is usually overcome by the socially powerful one in the dynamic, as we see with the researchers and the spider monkey. Yet Wiseman's films also expose the limits of social power, manifest through physical and aural "democratic noise". The dominant ones in the relation, as we see most explicitly with the workers in the meat-processing plant, may be as benighted as the ones dominated. Along with witnessed moments of social grace, the camera sees something in excess of observed relations of domination in the "is-ness" of the face, alive or dead; in plaintive sounds or alarms; in shorter or longer gaps in vocalisation, between words. Wiseman's lyric portraiture invites possibilities of transformation made by us, found by us, or that find us, suggested in unlikely visual images: carcasses draped in cheesecloth become a parade of dresses (fig. 12), a vault of ribbed flesh sings with light (fig. 13).

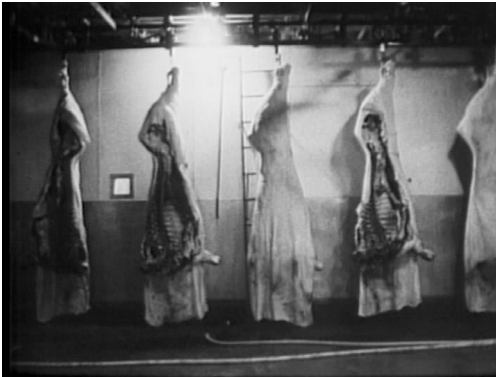


Fig. 12: Film still, *MEAT* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1976), 00:48:16.



Fig. 13: Film still, *MEAT* (Frederick Wiseman, US 1976), 00:48:56.

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Losers, Food, and Sex

Clerical Masculinity in the BBC Sitcom REV.

ABSTRACT

Clerical masculinities, much like their lay/secular counterparts, often appear unchanging because they are the products of naturalization processes. Clerical masculinities, however, are far from stable, for they live and breathe the dynamics of both their socio-religious context and their secular “others”. The BBC sitcom REV. (BBC2, UK 2010–2014) is a refreshing take on the everyday life and problems of a vicar in the Church of England trying to avoid stereotypes that often come with clerical roles. REV. (2010–2014) can be interpreted as an attempt to explore the negotiation processes of masculinity within an institution that is involved in the “production” of religion and gender roles. It shows that being a man in an institutional setting is as much a performance as it is a more or less successful negotiation of other people’s expectations and one’s own worldview. In particular, the main male clerical characters in REV. (2010–2014) inhabit a position of power but all have their flaws. They can best be understood as losers whose clash with masculine systems renders them more human.

KEYWORDS

BBC, masculinities, clerical, television, gender, religion, Church of England

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INTRODUCTION

ALEX: Don't be the vicar for the day, for once.

ADAM: I can't, it's a calling, isn't it. It can't be un-called for the day.¹

“Being” a male vicar entails more than just one’s calling: it means a very specific form of “being” a man and performing masculinity. It means to live one’s clerical masculinity in a so-called secular society (which more appropriately is described as shaped by a complex relationship between religious pluralization, a renewed interest in religion, and an ongoing secularization process)² that seems to clash with traditional religious values on many levels. The critically acclaimed BBC2 show *REV.* (BBC2, UK 2010–2014) portrays some of the struggles with and over clerical masculinities in a secular-religious setting, that is, in the context of a religious community, the Church of England, that is affected by and affects the secular community it lives in.

Clerical masculinities are not stable but live and breathe the dynamics of both their socio-religious context and their secular “others”. *REV.* (2010–2014) is not the first or only TV show to feature clerics, but its exploratory, searching approach points out that (higher ranking) members of the hierarchy, and masculinities in general, are never just beneficiaries or performers of power but are also subject to power and socio-religious momentums as well as to their own personal “baggage”. *REV.* (2010–2014) can be interpreted as an attempt to explore the negotiation processes of masculinity within an institution that is involved in the “production” of religion and gender roles. It shows that being a man in an institutional setting is as much a performance as it is a more or less successful negotiation of other people’s expectations and one’s own worldview. In particular, the main male clerical characters in *REV.* (2010–2014) inhabit positions of power but all have their flaws. They can best be understood as losers whose clash with masculine systems renders them more human. While all male characters are losers in their own way, the loser-masculinity is best embodied through Adam Smallbone, the protagonist of the show.

After a brief discussion of masculinity and television, this article offers three perspectives on the negotiation of masculinities in *REV.* (2010–2014): the loser, sexual bodies, and threatened masculinities. The conclusion draws these three perspectives together and shows that the male characters struggle with fitting into predefined notions of being a man but at the end of the show learn to appreciate and celebrate their own masculinities. While the show consists of three seasons, most of the examples in this paper are taken from the first two sea-

1 Dialogue between Alex Smallbone and her husband, the vicar Adam Smallbone, in BBC2’s show *REV.* (2010–2014), S01/E06.

2 Cf. Weisse 2016, 32–33, 39.

sons. In particular the ending of season two is important for the discussion of masculinities because in an iconographic Christmas meal staged as a Last Supper, the characters – and the audience – learn to see through their “corporeal eyes”.³

SCREENING AND NARRATING MASCULINITIES ON TELEVISION

REV. (2010–2014) is a very well received⁴ BBC2 sitcom that aired from 2010 to 2014 and was co-created by British actor Tom Hollander, who also plays the main character, Adam Smallbone, the vicar of the London parish of St Saviour’s. At the heart of the sitcom is the renegotiation of what it means to be a clergyman, husband, father, friend, or someone seen as “religious other” by secular society. It also addresses that clergymen are sexual bodies with sexual desires, rejected or fetishized bodies, or queered bodies.

In his response to REV. (2010–2014), Robert Stanier, chaplain of Archbishop Tenison’s School in Kennington, argues that the show is “just a series about a 30-something man”;⁵ and in many ways it is, and in many other ways it is not, for it can be seen as a way to work through and discuss contemporary issues. In the context of TV news, John Ellis argues that television is a form of “working-through”⁶ – it draws on “raw data” and transforms them into narratives.⁷ Doing so, television aims to bring order and stability to messy images and information fragments of local or global events.⁸ Yet, that does not mean that television offers easy solutions to complex problems; instead it remains an open process that ultimately remains inconclusive.⁹ Thus television structures, responds to, and tries to anticipate cultural needs and transformation processes.¹⁰ Television, its aesthetics, narratives, and processes of production, can reproduce and perpetuate existing social structures and lead to passivity. However, as a forum in which moral questions are discussed and shared, it can also foster critical engagement and become an agent of change.¹¹

REV. (2010–2014) emerged out of Hollander’s curiosity about what it might be like to be a vicar and – according to Hollander – much research went into the crafting of the characters. Indeed, a number of clergy recognized a little

3 Cf. Fulton 2006.

4 Cf. Fraser 2010.

5 Arnold 2011.

6 Ellis 1999, 55.

7 Cf. Ellis 1999, 55.

8 Cf. Ellis 1999, 56.

9 Cf. Ellis 1999, 55, 58–59.

10 Cf. Hartley 2009, 21.

11 Cf. Zborowski 2016, 13; Dant 2012, 2–3; Cardwell 2006, 76–78; Cardwell 2013.

of themselves and their lives in the stories and the people on screen.¹² The socio-cultural context that gave birth to the show needs to be considered, too: church attendance in the Church of England is at an all-time low,¹³ and in recent years the Church has been struggling over issues such as homosexuality, the role of women in the Church, and the ordination of women bishops. Thus, drawing on *Ellis, Rev.* (2010–2014) can be understood as working through narratives of clerical masculinities. It draws on a mix of traditional understandings of clerical and secular masculinities, on masculine roles and ideals such as the virtuous leader, the pious man, the father of the community, or the successful careerist. It works with and through them, pokes fun at them, and questions these very understandings in order to show that the male characters in the show themselves struggle with performing these masculine roles. In particular, *Rev.* (2010–2014) works through clerical masculinities in its aesthetic and narrative style as a sitcom, by lampooning them, not taking them quite seriously, and by portraying the men as losers who are very likable nonetheless.

The sitcom style is more than mere entertainment and important to consider when reading and interpreting *Rev.* (2010–2014). Brett Mills argues that “the pleasures of sitcoms are not simple, and certainly require an understanding of complex social conventions and generic rules in order for them to be enjoyed”.¹⁴ They can, of course, re-inscribe rather than challenge existing social structures, stereotypes, or heteronormativity.¹⁵ Yet they are an important site for both the negotiation and the study of masculinities.¹⁶ In particular the comic aspect of sitcoms can be used to subvert hegemonic masculinities or, if not subvert or challenge, then at least show disrespect. What Hanke argues in his analysis of “mock-macho” sitcoms such as *Home Improvement* (ABC, US 1991–1999) holds true for *Rev.* (2010–2014) and its presentation of clerical masculinities, too: “By making a mockery of masculinity, these comic narratives simultaneously present men as objects of laughter and as subjects moving between ‘old’ and ‘new’ subject positions. While this process of resubjectification may not signify a change in social structures of hierarchy and inequality, such comic texts can imply a lack of reverence for conventional masculinity, especially as it is defined in terms of competence and infallibility.”¹⁷ By poking fun, a sitcom can destabilize and call into question existing and seemingly rigid social structures. As a complex genre, the sitcom can invite the audience to respond to social conventions represented on screen and can thus be employed for a critical reading of

12 Cf. Hartley 2009, 21.

13 Cf. Archbishop’s Council 2016.

14 Mills 2009, 5.

15 Cf. Mills 2004.

16 Cf. Hatfield 2010.

17 Hanke 1998; cf. also Mills 2009, 5.

hegemonic masculinities, rendering visible what would otherwise remain hidden from social discourse.¹⁸

The way *REV.* (2010–2014) creates its story arc from the first to the last episode is important to consider, too. The way we tell stories is part of learning and teaching practices and thought processes. The art of storytelling teaches us how to use language, how to think and frame, make sense of, and mediate our experiences. Analyzing narratives, their content, aesthetics, forms, and the practices they emerge from and are embedded in, then, can allow for insights into how knowledge, power, myths, ideologies, and histories are (re-)created and communicated within and across societies and cultures.¹⁹ Narratives, however, are also a means to draw boundaries, create and naturalize difference and inequality, or subvert existing hegemonic structures. Narratives and masculinities, therefore, are closely linked because our experiences, the way we make sense of and create gender, are situated in a socio-cultural narrative context. For the context of this paper, I therefore understand masculinity as “not what it means to be a man (if it were, it would, for instance, be unchanged through time as biological maleness has remained constant for centuries) but a set of assumptions about what men are like which are projected on to those with male bodies and which almost inevitably affect the experience of inhabiting a male body”.²⁰ In the production, adoption, and renegotiation of masculinities, media are active agents.²¹ They provide a playground and resources for gender roles and gender practices, but as active agents they are never neutral but inherently ethical and political.²²

Although discourses about gender and gender roles in Christianity often draw on the notion of natural order, for example, the innately motherly role of women or the fatherly role of the priest, the male cleric’s representing the male Jesus, or the male perspective’s being the default (or naturalized) perspective in the writing of history or narratives, Christian masculinities and femininities are not stable; they are as much a (naturalized) construct – and often deliberately so – as their secular counterparts. In particular the gender identity of (male) clerics has undergone change over time. Its production has been co-dependent on different factors, such as whether the cleric is a parish priest or a monk, whether he is/was married, the particularities of the specific Christian denomination, or the religious or secular context, to name just a few. Christian gender narratives often drew on existing models of religious and secular masculinities

18 Cf. Mellencamp 1992, 342–343; Mills 2009, 5; Hanke 1998, 89–91; Butt 2010.

19 Cf. Hartley 1999, 45; Hartley 2009, 12–13, 26.

20 Reynolds 2002, 98 (emphasis in the original).

21 Cf. Benschhoff/Griffin 2004, 250.

22 Cf. Byars 1991, 4, 6; Fiske 1987, 179.

and reconfigured them.²³ What we are faced with, then, both historically and today, is not one clerical masculinity (we are, however, often faced with a hegemonic clerical masculinity) but a rich, fluid, and at times highly contested diversity of clerical masculinities that are always also tied to their secular counterparts and the struggle over the relationship between masculinity, sexuality, and virility.²⁴ These rich and competing clerical masculinities are also expressed in *REV.* (2010–2014), for example when Adam encounters (and envies) colleagues who appear much more competent, cooler, and more hip, in other words, who are more masculine (from his perspective anyway) than he.

A challenge for research and members of the clergy themselves, however, is the question of how to make sense of and talk about clerical masculinity and what it means to use terms from secular contexts that might not necessarily make sense in an ecclesial context. As Derek Neal points out, “masculinity” typically refers to a position of power, while he links “clerical” to a more serving role, raising the question how masculinity can be negotiated with this (sub)servient understanding.²⁵ What complicates Neal’s distinction, however, is that in public discourse, the church as institution and its (clerical) representatives are often associated with a position of power, authority, and wealth. Therefore, clerical masculinities are always both “discursive trope and ... lived identity”²⁶ trying to negotiate a range of competing perceptions and ascriptions.

Clerical masculinities are always related to other (secular) masculinities or femininities, which shape their understanding, and they are continually renegotiated in relation to these (changing) others. Often, however, these renegotiation processes themselves contribute to a transformation (and naturalization) of ideas and boundaries.

THE LOSER

Different understandings and perceptions of clerical masculinities clash already at the beginning of *REV.* (2010–2014) and thus set the tone for some of the struggles throughout the TV series. In episode one, the audience encounters different clerical masculinities in the character of Adam Smallbone: husband, host for the parish community, the guy who is available 24/7, manager, transvestite, or (closeted) gay. Viewers are also introduced to non-clerical masculinities, and all these different forms of being male compete with each other: Adam, the

23 Cf., for example, Lutterbach 2013; Bailey 2007; Thibodeaux 2010, 8, 12.

24 Thibodeaux 2010, 1–3.

25 Neal 2010, 18. The multifaceted nature of priesthood is also expressed in many documents of the Catholic Church that describe the priest as teacher, minister, and leader, though this requires further discussion with respect to theology and actual practice as well as to the relations between the different orders of deacon, priest, and bishop; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1999.

26 Neal 2010, 33.

clumsy and often naïve vicar who seems to fail at everything he aims to achieve; Archdeacon Robert, the lordly clerical and gay careerist; homeless Colin, who just wants a job and a girlfriend and sees in Adam his best friend; and again Adam, who does see in Colin his best friend but seems already to be looking for the next best friend. As the narrative progresses, however, the show uncovers that all these different forms of being a man (and cleric) require the other for their own self-understanding. The audience is drawn into boundary processes to learn that while boundaries often exclude and alienate, they always require an inside and an outside and thus connect what they separate.²⁷ As such, *REV.* (2010–2014) shows that the previously othered is complementary rather than alien: Adam learns from Colin to appreciate true friendship, Robert becomes a better or more likeable character through his interactions with Adam, and Colin learns to see in Adam the person, not the vicar. And even though all these main characters seem to be losers, it is through their interactions that they grow in acceptance of each other.

The series uses the emphasis on the mutual dependence of masculinities as a means to subvert a hegemonic understanding of masculinity and to show how masculinities can transform each other. To do so, it relies not only on the plot but also on visual and acoustic means. Adam is affectionately portrayed as clumsy vicar who loves his wife, his job, and his congregation, but also lacks energy, is disillusioned by what is going on around him, and often tunes the world out by listening to sacred music on his iPod. This tuning out of this world and tuning into another, maybe more spiritual, world affects the viewer and their viewing experience as well. As soon as Adam plugs in his earplugs, the background noise fades, and the audience, too, tunes out of the filmic world, and maybe into another world, even a sacred one. In *REV.* (2010–2014), music is not limited to Adam's spiritual journey, but is also used as a technique to connect and set apart different masculinities. In episode *S02/E06*, for example, Johann Sebastian Bach's motet "Jesu, meine Freude" (BWV 227) is used as overlay music to connect two scenes and three different embodiments of masculinity. The episcopal see of Stevenage is vacant and the career- and power-minded Archdeacon Robert aspires to become the next bishop. He is not really a "people person" but has been playing it nice in light of his expected appointment. He is gay, in a relationship, and very much aware that this could negate his chances of climbing up the hierarchical ladder. Despite Robert's attempts to keep his relationship below the radar of the hierarchy, a member of the crown committee somehow finds out and asks during the interview, "One final question: Are you involved in an active gay relationship?" There is a cut from the committee to a close-up of Robert, whose face goes pale as he realizes that this question just

27 Cf. Ornella 2014.

put an end to his career aspirations, and Bach's motet starts playing. While the music still plays, the film cuts to Adam sitting on a park bench, with his earplugs in, listening to the very music we hear and smoking a cigarette. With Bach's motet still playing, yet another cut takes us to see Adam from behind while the homeless man Colin swears and kicks beer cans around, apparently angry at something. Prompted by Colin, Adam takes the earplugs out and the music fades.

Music here serves as a leveling factor between Robert, Adam, and Colin, bridging differences and connecting their masculinities. Despite their differences in social and ecclesial status, they all share the struggle of having to negotiate different masculinities (and the expectations thereof). The diegetic sound we tune into when Adam plugs in his earphones connects Adam with the audience and other characters in the show, and serves to connect different scenes. The music we hear is Adam's music, suggesting that while he might not be perfect, he still might be the one that holds the community together just as the music connects us with Adam and several scenes within the show (though every so often Adam needs his wife to motivate and support him in being the anchor for his parish community).

In contrast to Adam's acting as an anchor for the community, the careerist Archdeacon Robert seems to be only interested in exerting the power and authority invested in him and pursuing his own career. Yet, his male (clerical) identity is not as settled as it might seem either. He struggles with the institution's perceptions of gay relationships, which get in the way of his career ambitions. We only learn of Robert's sexual orientation late in the show, when Adam and Nigel, the closeted gay lay reader in St Saviour's, catch Robert and his partner shopping for a new bed. The situation is quite awkward, and we can assume that Robert has to negotiate his private/personal/sexual life with his institution's perception of an appropriate clerical and episcopal masculinity, that he struggles to fit in. Even if Robert is not the most likeable character, the filmic staging of the scene and the acting of all the characters on screen show him struggling with the very power he shares in and exerts over others. As such, he has to negotiate idealized and normalized notions of an episcopal masculinity as either heterosexual or celibate in an almost dichotomous fashion.

The element of food is a further vital ingredient in portraying and expressing the relationship between different masculinities in *REV.* (2010–2014), in particular Adam's and Robert's. In his study on food and sex in biblical texts, Kenneth Stone argues that "food and sex both play a central role in the social exchanges and symbolic associations by which male characters establish and manipulate their relations to one another".²⁸ In the beginning of the series, whenever the

28 Stone 2005, 83; cf. Nixon 2008.

archdeacon visits Adam, he dismissively pours the coffee Adam offers him into the sink. Adam and Robert both inhabit a position of power: Adam as the vicar of St Saviour's, and Robert in his role as archdeacon. And yet they are not equals; one is clearly subordinate to the other, not just in terms of church hierarchy but also in terms of performance. Coffee, what is done with coffee and what is said about it, becomes an expression of the power relations between those two very different embodiments of masculinity and shows that masculinity always has to be thought of in the plural, as masculinities.



Fig 1: Film still, Christmas Meal, Rev. (2010–2014), S02/E07.

Towards the end of the show, however, food is also used to symbolically express a transformation in power relationships. When Robert fails to be appointed bishop because of his gay relationship, he is outed by a member of the committee, but he also stands up for his sexual orientation and his love for his partner, as we later learn. Being able, finally, to be true to himself causes a change in the archdeacon and the way he performs power as well as his masculinities. In the last episode, S02/E07, Adam and his parish host a Christmas meal in the church. Robert stops by at the parish on his way back home; he had missed his flight into the holidays due to bad weather and was stuck in the departure lounge for 18 hours. As he wishes Adam a Merry Christmas, pays back a few pounds he owed, and is about to leave, Robert is invited by Adam to stay for the Christmas meal. Rather than making a dismissive comment as we might expect from his earlier pattern of behavior, Robert thankfully accepts:

ADAM: Stay with us, please! C'mon! We'd be honored.

ROBERT (*nods and seems to be quite moved by the invitation*): Thank you, Adam.

With the invitation, Adam reclaims his masculinity and dignity; one could even argue that in inviting Robert, Adam inhabits a position of power, albeit a form of power not rooted in having power over others but in the ability to establish relationships and create community. Rather than begging the archdeacon or

humbly requesting him to attend, Adam offers a friendly, encouraging gesture that is powerful and respectful at the same time. Through the Christian praxis of sharing food, the two men, representing very different masculinities, are transformed into “equals in Christ”.²⁹ This scene also renders visible the problem of applying labels when talking about masculinity: what does masculinity mean? And if we understand masculinity as performance, as power, we need then ask: who performs for/over whom?, who is in power and in which contexts?, and what kind of power are we actually talking about? Power, too, can have many different forms and effects: it can oppress, but it can also empower. This iconic Christmas meal also turns around power relations: the main “loser” character suddenly finds himself in the position of power and brings the community together.

The third and final season ends again with a gathering of “equals in Christ”, although there is no food in the final scene. The small community gathers in front of St Saviour’s parish church. It is the last Easter Vigil both for St Saviour’s, because the church is shut down for financial reasons, and for Adam, because he decided that being a vicar is not appropriate for him anymore. Even though there is no actual food, the theme is present in a theological sense. As the community gathers around the Easter fire and celebrates the resurrection, Jesus becomes their food: they consume Christ and are consumed by Christ. Both the Christmas scene and the Easter scene then seem to call for a celebration of life in all its shades and colors to overcome the power of one particular master narrative.³⁰

Fig 2: Film still, Celebration of the Easter Vigil in front of St Saviour’s, Rev. (2010–2014), S03/E06.



29 Cf. Gal. 3:28; Méndez-Montoya 2012, 113–156; Counihan 1999, 6.

30 One can, of course, argue that today’s incarnation of Christianity is itself a master narrative that prevailed over other Christian narratives.

SEXUAL BODIES

Martin Stringer argues that the priestly body, celibate or married, is also a sexual body. In fact, the worshipper's body, too, has to be understood as sexual. Real/lived bodies engage in worship, prayer, and liturgy, and these real bodies are always already sexual bodies.³¹ This is made very explicit in *REV.* (2010–2014) when Adam's wife complains several times that there is not enough sex in their relationship. In episode *S02/E01*, for example, Alex throws her reproach “you don't shag me enough” into Adam's face.

Clothing becomes an important marker of the sexual, priestly body, setting the vicar-body apart. Clothing can be understood as practice that eroticizes but also emasculates the priestly body. In the very first episode, we see Adam cuddling up to his wife Alex:

ALEX: And if you think I'm gonna let you shag me in your dog collar, you're very wrong.

ADAM: I'm not trying to shag you, I'm trying to mobilize your trunk muscles.

ALEX: I hate it when you wear that thing in the bedroom, it's like you got no cock.

ADAM: All right, I'm taking it off, there it is, it's off.

ALEX: Nooo, leave it on, and don't bash the bishop.³²

Right after this dialog the film cuts to a scene on the following day, so we do not know what happened next, but the way Alex and Adam interacted suggests that they did not have sex that night.

Paradoxically, the emasculating clerical collar can also produce a specific clerical masculinity that becomes the object of (sexual) desire, an eroticized, fetishized, hyper-masculine masculinity. Adoah, the cassock chaser of the parish, is very fond of Adam (to say the least). He is her hero, not only because she thinks he overwhelmed the thief who stole her purse (*S02/E01*), but also because collar-wearing vicar bodies seem to inhabit a very special place in her heart. Archdeacon Robert mentions that rumor has it that Adoah can become quite aroused during sermons, and the way she hangs on Adam's every word during liturgy suggests that there is something to this rumor and that she is indeed experiencing bodily pleasures. Priestly clothing, priestly bodies, and a desire that appears unfulfillable seem to be intimately intertwined.

In the context of Anglo-Catholics, Martin Stringer argues that there is something camp/drag about the colorful Anglo-Catholic worship, about men “garbing themselves in lace and grandly bejeweled robes in order to perform before admiring crowds”.³³ We do not find any of the traditional Catholic colorful richness in *REV.* (2010–2014). There is no incense; liturgical vestments are very sim-

31 Cf. Stringer 2000.

32 Dialogue between Adam and Alex, *Rev.* (2010–2014), *S01/E01*.

33 Stringer 2000, 42.

ple to say the least; and the music is not played by an orchestra or organist but comes out of a CD player. And yet some of what Stringer says about the Anglo-Catholic context resonates in the character of Adam:

The priest within Anglo-Catholicism was not like other men. In many cases he was celibate, but even if he was not, he did not drink and gamble and “fight like a man.” He was a “man of the cloth,” less brutish than the average man, or by implication, than the average husband. It is no coincidence that the most loyal followers in Anglo-Catholic churches were women, nor that these women actually enjoyed and revelled in the camp/drag humour of their clergy. Many entered into this world with enthusiasm and something of a sense of liberation. The man in the frock at the altar was part of the escapism. In part, he was attractive, totally unlike other men they knew, but he was also, and literally, “unavailable.”³⁴

Clothing, however, cannot only render the priestly body an object of desire, but it can also turn it into the body of a pervert, or a “perverse body”. In one of the opening scenes of the very first episode, three construction workers next to the church yell at Adam, asking, “Mr. Vicar, where’s your dress? Are you gonna dress like a girl today?” The prejudice against priests as sexual perverts thrown at Adam shows that there is not one but many clerical masculinities: lived, experienced, stereotyped, othered, expected, imposed, chosen. Throughout the show, Adam tries to negotiate all these different aspects, and we take part in the journey of a pretty average, heterosexual, overall happily married guy who happens to be a vicar, who tells us that he will have a wank, who is fed up having to be – or play – the clergyman, who is looking for a true friend, and just enjoys and longs for the attention of women. All the different ways the sexual comes into play in *REV.* (2010–2014) show that the male priestly body is not just a body that is sexually abstinent (celibate) or practices sexuality within a (heterosexual) marriage, but that the priestly body as body always is and has to be thought of as sexual body. As sexual body, such “sexual markers of manliness”³⁵ are an important ingredient in the negotiation of masculinities both within a clerical context and in relation to non-clerical masculinities.

THREATENED MASCULINITIES

After years of struggle and debate, the Church of England allowed the ordination of women as deacons, priests, and bishops in several steps. As Rob Clucas and Keith Sharpe show, however, the ordination of women priests represented only a formal equality. In the *Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993*, a

34 Stringer 2000, 50.

35 McLaughlin 2010, 22.

set of masculine/patriarchal rules existed that allowed Parochial Church Councils, for example, to reject women priests solely based on the fact that they were women, while it was not possible to reject male priests solely because they were men.³⁶ Parochial Church Councils could also request alternative oversight if their (male) bishop supported the ordination of women. And Clucas and Sharpe argue, “we see the idea that something about women priests is so powerfully wrong that male bishops willing to ordain women are contaminated also.”³⁷ Different – and more rigorous – restrictions apply to the pastoral ministry of women compared to that of their male counterparts, contributing, as the authors argue, to the idea that masculinity is natural, normative, and unchangeable.³⁸ “Yet women priests have the additional restrictions of the 1993 Measure. In this way – being subject to additional regulation to men, and the specific content of that additional regulation – women priests are clearly understood and defined as deviations from the male norm.”³⁹ This deviation from the male norm is inscribed and reproduced on a structural, legal, and doctrinal level.⁴⁰ The naturalization of masculinity has often rendered masculinities – understood as a perspective of seeing and engaging with the world – invisible. Therefore, in her study on the construction of masculinities and femininities in the Church of England, Sarah-Jane Page points out that “masculinity as a concept has been little documented in terms of the church, but it can be observed that masculinity has been naturalized so that its existence is not self-evidently manifest. It is only when the presence of women’s bodies disrupts this ‘naturalized’ order that masculine identity comes to be noticed.”⁴¹ And yet, what effect such disruptions through female clerical bodies (or pregnant female clerical bodies) might have is a complex issue.⁴² The increasing number of women being ordained (in 2009: 266 women and 298 men),⁴³ however, might at some point contribute to a more balanced clergy and understanding of gender.

That the Church of England is still a predominantly masculine institution and that female vicars and office holders are seen as a threat to masculine roles and power is rendered visible in the TV show especially through material objects

36 Cf. Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 164–167. Alternative Episcopal Oversight and the “Five Guiding Principles” published after the 2014 decision finally to ordain women as bishops too make provisions for those who reject women ministry on theological grounds, cf. Church of England 2016.

37 Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 165.

38 Cf. Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 166. In their argument, they draw on Chrys Ingraham who analyzes how feminist theory sometimes contributes to heterosexual imaginaries. She argues, “For example, theories which foreground and bracket off its link with heteronormativity – the ideological production of heterosexuality as individual, natural, universal, and monolithic – contribute to the construction of (patriarchal) heterosexuality as natural and unchangeable” (Ingraham 1994, 207).

39 Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 166.

40 Cf. Clucas/Sharpe 2013, 167, 171–172.

41 Page 2008, 33.

42 Cf. Page 2011, 92–109.

43 Cf. Church of England 2013a.

and clothing. The so-called dog collar not only sets the (male) vicar body apart, but also represents the predominantly masculine and patriarchic institution, as I argued earlier. Yet the dog collar does not automatically put the person wearing it in a position of power; instead different people perform the “dog collar” in different ways. In S02/E02, Archdeacon Robert, Adam’s superior, visits the vicarage to let Adam know that a young female curate, Abigaile (Abi), will join St Saviour’s to support Adam. When Robert shows Adam a picture of Abigaile wearing a dog collar, what Robert says, how he says it, and his gestures express a feeling of superiority that is erotically charged. Robert is gay, and assuming he has no sexual interests in Abigaile, it seems that in this scene, it is a mixture of power, its symbols (the dog collar), and gender that excite and become a fetish.

ROBERT: Abi is one of our bright stars, very able, very, very able, highly intelligent, terrific communicator, and a popular touch, I think she is really going to be able to help Adam out. ... You can help her flourish, guide her (*Robert wiggles his hips*), enable her.

The dog collar we see Abigaile wearing on the picture Robert shows Adam, however, does not seem to bestow the same institutional authority onto Abigaile as onto Adam and Robert. As a representative of the Church hierarchy, with his voluptuous insinuations Robert embodies the Church as a patriarchal and masculine institution (even though the Church is usually thought of in feminine terms, as the bride of Christ), as an institution that is concerned with itself and its power fetish and attempts to contain a possibly dangerous and disruptive clerical femininity which is seen as a threat to masculine ideas and patriarchal structures.

Adam seems to be completely oblivious to the sexual, patronizing undertone of the conversation. His replies to Robert render visible how naturalized the male perspective has become. Rather than envisage a mutual relationship, Adam sees in Abigaile a tool to achieve his goals – or have someone achieve his goals for him: “This is great, I’ll be able to achieve a lot more than other priests, push through some more of my plans.” For Adam, Abi is an asset that will give him a competitive advantage over other (presumably male) priests rather than a younger colleague to be supported and to learn from. The *mise-en-scène* adds to the texture of the scene. The conversation could have happened anywhere in the parish but is set in the vicarage kitchen. Traditionally, the kitchen of a household has been regarded as a feminine space inscribed with expectations about which gender ought to occupy that space for what purpose.⁴⁴ The idea that the kitchen is a woman’s domain is also expressed when Archdeacon Robert, at the end of the conversation, almost naturally hands his coffee cup to Alex,

44 Cf. Swenson 2009.

who was witnessing the conversation, and not to Adam, his host, to clear away. Here, men not only condescend to women, but they do so in a feminine space. This must be interpreted not as men subverting traditional understandings of gendered spaces but as a masculine intrusion into feminine space, a safe space for women, in order to express their domination.

When Adam finally meets Abi, the audience perceives her as ambitious, energetic, motivated, and a natural leader. Abi embodies everything Adam is not and everything that is traditionally associated with a masculine character type, without acting like a man or being butch. Adam feels threatened by Abi to the point that he bullies her. This episode, S02/E02, provides a good example that masculinity does not depend on being male (that is, on having a male body), but that gender relations and who is considered to be or act masculine or feminine often emerge from and are rooted in positions of power.⁴⁵ As a curate, Abi is not in a formal position of power, but the way she connects with people, her leadership and her organizational skills invest her with power and authority. At the same time, this episode subverts the link between masculinity and power exactly because Abi does not “act” in a masculine fashion, pointing out that the link between masculinity and power is as much a naturalized social construct as the notions of masculinity and femininity themselves.

Abi is not the only female priest to challenge Adam’s clerical masculinity. In episode S02/E04, it is women-only night, with five spouses of vicars coming to the vicarage, hosted rather unwillingly by Alex. As the first guests arrive, it turns out that in addition to being married to vicars, three out of the five women are vicars themselves. The get-together starts with the women chatting over wine and snacks. Time progresses; it is almost 3 a.m. and we hear loud music playing. Adam is turning in his bed and we hear him thinking in voice over, “They are making so much noise, it’s really annoying. ... Why won’t Alex shut up? Right, I’m gonna go and tell her to shut up.” He crawls out of bed, the scene cuts to the party downstairs and we see all the women, including the female vicars, drinking, smoking, and dancing. Rather than tell Alex and her guests to quiet down, however, Adam mumbles something about the planned interfaith football match the next morning and reminds Alex of the curry she promised to make for the game. The facial expressions of Alex and the other women clearly show what they think of Adam’s idea of ending the party: nothing. And Alex replies to Adam, “We’re only making curry for some fat dads, it’s not a UN conference.” A little bit humiliated and stumbling over his words, Adam excuses himself and withdraws from the scene to go back to bed.

This scene can be interpreted in different ways. It can be seen as masculinity’s attempt to control and exert power over femininity by referring to a tradi-

45 Reynolds 2002, 100.

tional female duty (cooking) and the notion that a vicar's wife has the duty to support her ordained husband and contribute to parish life. At the same time, masculine power is rendered ineffective not just by Adam's insecurities and clumsiness but also by the female vicars' stealing the show from him. Even if he inhabits a position of power and authority as the head of the parish and the vicarage, Adam does not seem to hold either. Additionally, half of the women present at the party inhabit a traditionally masculine position of power, that of a vicar. But their behavior undermines stereotypical perceptions of both clerical identity and femininity: they smoke, drink, and party. The partying in *REV.* (2010–2014) has a subtly excessive and thus subversive undercurrent. Excessive drinking is still considered improper behavior for women, while it seems to be more acceptable for men. Most importantly, however, the women are, in effect, running the show. They *are* the show. Not caring about or sharing in Adam's concerns about the curry and the late hour, they render masculine power ineffective.

Season three introduces two new female members of the Church hierarchy, area dean Jill Mallory and diocesan secretary Geri Tennison. They plan to close down St Saviour's for financial reasons. Unlike the other female characters working for the Church, Mallory and Tennison do not come across as overly sympathetic characters. They seem to “act masculine”, and appear closer to what is stereotypically labeled “mannish women” than to vibrantly celebratory female vicars who threaten existing power structures. Their presence in the show, then, seems to suggest that we are still stuck with relating masculinity with male bodies and femininity with female bodies and that something is at odds if female bodies “act” masculine.

SUBVERSIONS AND RECONCILIATIONS

Raewyn Connell argues that we cannot stop at noting that there are different masculinities but that we need to analyze how they are related to each other, operate, and construct alliances, or how one version of masculinity can dominate or be subordinate to others.⁴⁶ Connell calls this play of domination and subordination “hegemonic masculinity” and argues that “at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted”.⁴⁷

BBC's *REV.* (2010–2014) exalts a loser type of masculinity embodied predominantly through the dreamy, naïve, clumsy, and not very authoritative Adam. All Adam seems to need is a hug and the acknowledgement and approval of someone he considers an authority figure. The same holds true for the other

46 Cf. Connell 2005, 37, 76–77.

47 Connell 2005, 77. For a critique of the concept of hegemonic masculinity cf. Jefferson 2002; Connell/Messerschmidt 2005.

male characters such as Colin and Archdeacon Robert. While Robert seems to be in a position of power, he has his own struggles with the institution and his personal life. But it seems that exactly what many would perceive as weakness makes the male characters more human and sympathetic. These fractured loser-masculinities featured in the show turn out to be quite subversive. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks argues,

Viewing the male experience as universal had not only hidden women's history, but also ... prevented analyzing men's experiences as those of men. The very words we used to describe individuals – “artist” and “woman artist,” for example, or “scientist” and “woman scientist” – kept us from thinking about how the experiences of Michelangelo or Picasso or Isaac Newton were shaped by the fact that they were male, while it forced us to think about how being female affected Georgia O’Keefe or Marie Curie.⁴⁸

By focusing on the “loser qualities” of its male characters, *REV.* (2010–2014) portrays some of the struggles individuals face when trying to cater to expectations of clerical masculinities, of always being there and available for others. As Hollander stated in an interview,

They [vicars] are being good, they are being nice to people, their door is always open to people when there's nowhere else to go, you can still go to the church. So they don't have ... their private life is rather compromised the whole time. There is often somebody knocking on the door. And they are often exposed to rather irritating people, but they as vicars can't say please go away, you are irritating, because they are the vicar. The rest of us can choose who we hang out with.⁴⁹

The series pokes fun at some of the everyday experiences a male cleric might encounter, without ridiculing personal struggles with faith. One thread present throughout the series is how the different male characters negotiate their being male with expectations of what it means to be male: their own, their partners', their friends', the parishioners', and the institution's. While the individual problems of the main characters are different, through its humor the series makes clear that they all share in the struggle over embodying male identity. The series draws on stereotypical and popular images but also gives space to subversion and transformation.

The portrayal of masculinities in the show, however, is not unproblematic. This becomes particularly obvious in the male characters' relationships with women. Adam seems to feel unsettled – even threatened – by women entering traditional male arenas. Robert and Adam perceive their female colleagues as

48 Wiesner-Hanks 2002, 601.

49 Hollander 2013.

(sexual) objects to be instrumentalized for their own gain rather than as equals. Nigel, the lay reader in the parish, too, objectifies women and invents a girlfriend to hide his homosexuality.

What, then, should we do with these different masculinities on screen? On the one hand, they are there, on screen, for us to enjoy. But on the other hand, they can be seen as speaking out of and to the sensibilities of contemporary culture. When writing the show, Tom Hollander interviewed vicars and observed services. While this does not qualify as academic research, it shows that television is entangled with real life on the level of content, production, and consumption. Through its pervasion of society, its both ephemeral and material nature, television is a contested site for the production and reproduction of society and culture. It is a discursive practice that links and organizes a range of social actors, viewing and fan practices, and online and offline social discourses.⁵⁰ It is a part of the ordinary, the normal, the everyday, but always also points beyond the ordinary. Stuart Hall argues that television needs to be understood as communicative process, and its production as an open circuit and a discursive practice that

is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. Further, though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, “definitions of the situation” from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part.⁵¹

The clerical masculinities we see in the BBC show *REV.* (2010–2014), then, are as much a construction as their real-life counterparts, shaped by those they are intended to cater to, whether or not they want to render visible, disrupt, or subvert naturalized viewing patterns.⁵²

To better understand the production process of *REV.* (2010–2014), the way the show stages clerical masculinities on screen, and the issues it discusses, its cultural context and its cultural “prologue” need to be considered. In 2008 – and this seems to hold true to date – David Nixon argued that the questions the Church of England seems to concern itself with are: “Is it OK to be gay and a Christian? Is it OK to be gay and a priest? Is it OK to be gay and a bishop?” Nix-

50 Cf. Mittell 2001; Hartley 1999, 16, 29.

51 Hall 1999, 509.

52 For a discussion of the construction of TV masculinities cf., for example, Fiske 1987, 198.

on continued, “Seeking an answer to these questions, the church invokes two major themes, or rather, structures its answers to these questions in response to two historic arguments: purity and pollution; text and authority.”⁵³ And he went on to argue that “purity systems function by making the human body and its boundaries a symbol for the social body and its boundaries”.⁵⁴

The struggle over “Is it OK?” seems to be at the heart of the various negotiation processes over masculinities in *REV.* (2010–2014): vicar, husband, sexual male body; being female in a predominantly masculine and patriarchic hierarchy that imagines itself as female, as Christ’s bride; archdeacon, careerist, and gay. All the different male characters on screen are trying to live up to a specific form of masculinity. Yet only when they learn to say “it is OK” and accept their own way of being male, appreciating the diversity in being male, do we see them starting to thrive and becoming subversive.

The end of season two, with the iconic Christmas meal resembling the Last Supper, provides a key for understanding the negotiations of masculinities in the show. In a pessimistic reading one could conclude that all is not well in ecclesial space and that while women have now been admitted to all levels of ordination, the institution is still a patriarchal heteronormative space governed by ideas of purity/pollution and authority/text.⁵⁵ Masculinity dominates femininity, but that is only one part of the picture. In ecclesial space, one master narrative of masculinity still seems to dominate over all others – including those of deviant masculinities – and the diversity of masculinities throughout the history of Christianity is often forgotten. As the current debates in the Anglican community over homosexuality show, such master narratives of specific (religious) masculinities, with their roles and expected behaviors, disrupt communities rather than unify them.

The iconography of the Last Supper, however, invites a more positive, a more Eucharistic interpretation. The Eucharistic meal invites, draws together, gives body to community and is itself body. Eating and drinking, we absorb someone or something else into our own bodies.⁵⁶ Psalm 34:9 says, “Taste and see that the Lord is good [or sweet, depending on the translation]”.⁵⁷ The Eucharist, then, allows one to see through the body with one’s “corporeal eyes”⁵⁸ and to understand differently and see differently, “suggesting a significant correlation between the apprehensions of the soul and the sensory experiences of

53 Nixon 2008, 598.

54 Nixon 2008, 599.

55 Cf. Church of England 2013b; Heneghan 2013; Nixon 2008, 599.

56 Cf. Fulton 2006, 170.

57 For a discussion of the sweetness of the Lord and the different versions of translation, cf. Fulton 2006, 181.

58 Cf. Fulton 2006, 175.

the body”.⁵⁹ The reference to the Eucharistic meal suggests that this Christmas meal does have Eucharistic qualities as it opens the characters’ eyes for each other, allowing them to share in this bodily experience, and experience peace and forgiveness. The idea that sharing food has Eucharistic qualities is something we come across long before *REV.* (2010–2014), in the film *BIG NIGHT* (Campbell Scott/St Stanley Tucci, US 1996), for example, where at the end of the film the two brothers share breakfast in silence after a fight that almost ended their relationship. In both narratives, the Eucharistic qualities of the food consumed express more than what could possibly be said. The overcoming of differences becomes possible and is expressed through the bodily and sensory/sensual experiences of sharing food.

Making us aware of our corporeal eyes, the plot, aesthetic form, and iconography of the BBC sitcom *REV.* (2010–2014) can teach us that despite existing master narratives, masculinities are not “natural” or “normal” but negotiation processes that are always open and thus vulnerable, even or especially in ecclesial space. Adam, with all his shortcomings and insecurities, can teach us that “appropriate roles” are just that: roles. *REV.* (2010–2014) is not overly provocative or critical of existing power structures. And yet, with the archdeacon who works hard to advance his career in the Church but eventually learns to say, “it is OK”, and the clumsy vicar Adam Smallbone, who sometimes enjoys a drink too many or is all too human in his male, priestly, sexual body, the audience, too, might learn that religion is very human. Maybe church representatives of all Christian denominations will come to a similar conclusion one day, learn to appreciate the richness and diversity of masculinities, and give space to all those different masculinities. And with church officials, the series, too, wants us as audience (believers and non-believers) to appreciate the struggles we often impose on clerics with our expectations and stereotypes.

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59 Fulton 2006, 175.

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Beyond Cinematic Stereotypes

Using Religion to Imagine Gender Differently

ABSTRACT

In films, religious characters are often gendered in quite traditional ways, but there are some notable exceptions. This article discusses two Scandinavian films that partly break the mold. The analysis illustrates how in films varied forms of religion are gendered quite differently, and explores the ways in which religious themes can open up for alternative male and female characters. Different ways of understanding the representations are discussed and related to views on the place and role of religion in the contemporary Scandinavian context. The article draws on the mediatization of religion theory as a theoretical framework, but also highlights the challenges that complex images of gender and religion pose to this theory.

KEYWORDS

scandinavian cinema, religion, spirituality, gender, mediatization, agency

BIOGRAPHY

Sofia Sjö is a researcher and lecturer in Comparative Religion at Åbo Akademi University. She received her doctorate in Comparative Religion from Åbo Akademi University in 2007. Her research interests include: religion and film, religion and media, digital religion, religion and gender, religion and youth.

INTRODUCTION

Gender and film has long been an interest of mine, as has been the relationship between religion and film. I have also occasionally combined these interests and discussed the gendering of religious characters and themes in films.¹ In this article, I want to further explore questions of religion and gender in film, with the focus on Scandinavian films, a favorite area of research of mine. Finding

1 Sjö 2007a; Sjö 2013a; Sjö 2015a; Sjö/Häger 2015.

Scandinavian productions worth exploring from a religion and gender perspective is not difficult. Religion is a fairly common theme in contemporary Scandinavian cinema, and many of the films present memorable characters. Although religious characters in Scandinavian films are often gendered in quite traditional ways, there are also some notable exceptions. It is these very exceptions that I want to focus on here. I argue that, although it is common to represent a religious character or characters in religious settings in quite stereotypical ways – underlining in a sense the view that religions affirm traditional, unequal gender roles – religion or religious themes can also be used to gender characters differently by, for example, opening up spaces of agency and challenging simplistic ideas of gender. This is not a novel idea, but I find it to be an aspect worthy of more attention as it allows for a more complex view on the relationship between religion and film.

Here, I approach both religion and gender in film from a constructivist perspective, as I am interested in how both gender and religion are “done” in films. Building on research into gender and popular culture,² I explore how elements of religion are introduced, imagined and reimaged with the help of film language, narrative structures and genre conventions. I focus mainly on the construction of femininity and masculinity and argue that notions of gender are primarily developed when male and female characters are associated with each other or characters of the same gender are contrasted with each other. Bringing the questions of religion and gender together, I discuss how the construction of both gender and religion is interlocked in the films and analyze how religion is used to shape characters and characters are used to shape religion. Finally, I explore how these filmic processes and representations can be understood in the Scandinavian socio-religious context and what challenges to the theory of the mediatization of religion they highlight.

Although I treat religion and gender as separate entities for the sake of the analysis here, I argue, as do many others,³ that gender and religion (and for that matter gender and film) must be understood as being interrelated. Religion is deeply gendered, in film as well as in real life. Ideas about gender shape religious structures, beliefs and behaviors and can be argued to influence ideas about gender in society at large as well. However, saying that religion is gendered is not saying that there is just one way to understand the relationship between gender and religion. There are more common ways of gendering religion in Scandinavian films, but also some fascinating alternatives. I will focus on the alternatives below, but also highlight some more common features.

2 Inness 2004; Buikema/Van der Tuin 2007; Gledhill 2012.

3 See for example King/Beattie 2005; Aune/Sharma/Vincett 2007.

Why is it relevant how religion and gender are constructed in films? With Christopher Partridge, I argue that “popular culture is both an expression of the cultural milieu from which it emerges and formative of that culture, in that it contributes to the formation of worldviews and in doing so, influences what people accept as plausible”.⁴ This means that it is generally important to analyze popular culture and how popular culture, such as films, constructs both religion and gender. Popular culture is not a direct reflection of our culture, neither does it affect us in a straightforward manner, but it is a part of our symbolic world and ties into how we understand the world.

Popular culture also allows us to identify and further comprehend central issues in a culture or, as Andrew Nestingen puts it, “popular texts continually mediate socially significant conflicts through narration, music, and image”.⁵ Studying contemporary film narratives is thus one way of highlighting modes of thought regarding religion and gender in present-day culture. In addition, as popular cultural users we are more likely to turn to popular culture and popular cultural imaginings when relating to or reflecting on issues we have only sparse knowledge of.⁶ Since in Scandinavia a large number of people do not have much direct contact with religion or religious institutions, film images are likely to be used to fill in the gaps and form an understanding of how religion is gendered and genders. Thus to understand contemporary views on religion, film, too, needs to be explored.

Religion and media scholars in the Nordic countries in particular have lately focused on the theory of the mediatization of religion in a number of studies.⁷ This theoretical perspective also frames this study, as I argue, in line with Hjarvard’s thinking,⁸ that media such as film structures and shapes how religion is represented, given space and comprehended today. In addition, media of course also plays a central part in how gender is understood. Classical film narratives usually represent men as active and women as passive, in line with a conventional understanding of gender and gender roles, and even though this structure is sometimes challenged today, female heroes are still often represented with a lot more focus on their physical appearance, their feelings of guilt and their exclusivity – they are often represented as exceptions to the rule – than male heroes.⁹ Gender has not been a central topic in Hjarvard’s mediatization theory but has been discussed in other studies that have aimed to expand

4 Partridge 2004, 123.

5 Nestingen 2008, 9.

6 Lynch 2005.

7 See Hjarvard/Lövheim 2012.

8 Hjarvard 2011; Hjarvard 2012.

9 See for example Inness 2004.

the theory's perspective.¹⁰ These studies have, among other things, highlighted the role of gender in mediatization of religion and the need to look at gender when exploring religion in media. This study, too, aims to bring new insight to mediatization theory by questioning a too simplistic understanding of media logics, particularly when one focuses on gender.

Next I will analyze how religion and gender are “done” in two Scandinavian films that have both inspired a great deal of discussion in their local contexts: *SÅ SOM I HIMMELEN* (*AS IT IS IN HEAVEN*, Kay Pollak, SE/DK 2004) and *KAUTOKEINO-OPPRØRET* (*THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION*, Nils Gaup, NO/DK/SE 2008). I conclude the article with a discussion of what the way in which religion and gender are done in the films suggests about social attitudes to and understandings of the relationship between gender and religion today, particularly in a Scandinavian context, the possible challenges to the theory of the mediatization of religion that the representations entail, and further questions worth exploring.

AS IT IS IN HEAVEN – A SAVIOR CHALLENGING THE GENDER MOLD?

Kay Pollak's *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) represents the director's return to the director's chair after an absence of almost two decades. It has been discussed in a number of articles, many of them focusing on gender and/or religion.¹¹ Discussing the film in yet one more article can feel redundant. However, the enormous commercial success of this film even now, more than ten years after its making, makes it difficult to ignore, and a more thorough discussion of the different religious themes in the film and their different gender structures is still needed.

AS IT IS IN HEAVEN (2004) tells the story of the famous conductor Daniel, who after a breakdown returns to his home village, becomes the cantor of the local church and inspires the transformation of many of the people in the village through his work with the church choir. A study of how viewers perceive religion in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004)¹² has identified the following three main religious themes of the film: religious hypocrisy, spirituality and a Christ figure. Each of these themes can be related to gender and each is gendered very differently.

Starting with religious hypocrisy, this theme is tied to one of the central characters in the film, the pastor Stig. As I have argued elsewhere,¹³ Stig is a good example of how religion in Scandinavian films is often constructed as a problem that is almost always tied to masculinity and masculine religiosity. Stig is the pastor in the village where most of the story takes place. He welcomes Dan-

10 Lövheim 2013; Sjö 2015a.

11 See Hammer 2006; Wallengren 2006; Sjö 2013b; Sjö 2015a.

12 Sjö 2013b.

13 Sjö 2015a.

iel to the village with the Bible in his hand, telling Daniel how he always gives newcomers to the village a Bible. In this scene, there is an obvious distance between Daniel and Stig. They are placed at different ends of the room and their conversation is filmed in a shot/reverse-shot sequence. Medium close-ups highlight their facial expressions and gestures, showing the stiffness of Stig and the reserved uncertainty of Daniel. Daniel does not refuse the Bible, but he does not actually take it in his hand, either; instead Stig places it on a piece of furniture. The distance between Daniel and Stig is made even clearer in the following scene, when the third central male character appears, Conny. Conny brutally bullied Daniel when they were children, and now he is known to beat his wife. Conny brings Stig a hare that has just been shot, a hare that Daniel had admired in an earlier scene, when it was still alive. In this scene, Stig and Conny are placed closely together in the same frame, which directly links them to each other. Daniel is placed either outside the frame or at a distance from Stig and Conny, and his facial expression highlights his discomfort.

While Daniel is represented as a lover of nature and a peaceful man – several scenes show him in a natural setting smiling broadly at the world around him – Stig is associated with the violent Conny, whose behavior he knows about, but has never tried to restrain. For Stig, as for many other male pastors and bishops in Nordic films,¹⁴ what is important is the status that their position affords them. In several close-ups and medium close-ups Stig's facial expressions indicate his judgmental attitude. Through most of the film, no matter where he is, Stig is shown wearing his clerical collar, highlighting his role as pastor and religious leader. Yet his church is fairly empty and very often, Stig literally preaches to the choir, since there are not many other people attending the services. Stig does not think very highly of the choir and is surprised when Daniel asks for the job of cantor and choir director. He quickly becomes suspicious of Daniel, even though, or rather because, many of the choir members, including Stig's wife, seem to be inspired and moved by Daniel. Finally, Stig has Daniel fired, which leads to the choir marching out of the church and Stig's suffering a mental breakdown, lamenting his lost purpose and status.

Through Stig, the Lutheran Church as an institution is constructed as removed from its members and uninterested in serving their needs. In addition, Stig focuses a lot of attention on questions of sin and, like other male pastors in Nordic cinema, too,¹⁵ struggles with his sexuality, something that even further constructs this church as a limiting, repressive and uninviting space. Stig's struggles with his sexuality also undermine his masculinity. Often in films, particularly for male characters, problems with sexuality seem to be linked with problems

14 Sjö 2015a.

15 Sjö 2015a.

with identity and questions of status and position. The contrasts that are established between Stig and Daniel as well as several female choir members – where Stig’s focus is on rules and power, Daniel and the female main characters express the need for community and love – further highlight how the church as an uninviting space is largely gendered as masculine. The opposite is true of the second religious theme in the film, spirituality.

The focus on spirituality in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) has been discussed in several studies.¹⁶ Lars Johansson¹⁷ has compared the film to the idea of a spiritual revolution presented by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead.¹⁸ The film represents the idea that institutional religion is negative, but that spirituality in the sense of a turn to the self and a belief in the human spirit is something positive. The connection of the human spirit to the religious sphere is underlined visually in the film by a focus on angels and, as I will discuss below, the central role of the Christ figure in the film. This spirituality rejects the institutional church and Stig’s talk of sin and punishment and instead highlights the positive aspects of body and sexuality.

While Daniel is clearly central to the form of spirituality developed in the film – his teachings and actions inspire processes of change – three female characters are even more closely tied to this theme, with the film thus gendering a positive spirituality as largely feminine. One of them, Lena, is represented as a nature child, tying femininity to nature, the body and sexuality,¹⁹ a fairly traditional way of presenting femininity in films. Lena is a young woman who always seems to have a smile for everyone. She is one of the first to approach Daniel and invites him to come and listen to the choir. She feels that the choir should be open to everyone and wants everyone to feel welcome. However, she, too, has a troubled past. Some in the village consider her a slut, and she has been badly hurt in an earlier relationship. Lena becomes Daniel’s love interest, and she enables Daniel to open up and let go of his restraints. Visually Lena is associated with angels on several occasions – she is shown wearing angel wings, or is framed by images of angels and tells the story of how one of the angels in a painting in the old school where Daniel lives is in fact she (her grandfather painted the extra angel when Lena was to start school).

A second central female character related to the theme of spirituality is Stig’s wife, Inger. At first, Inger is represented as a fairly typical pastor’s wife. She tries her best to support her husband and dutifully attends services, but as she is working with Daniel and the choir, it becomes clear that Inger feels that something is missing in her life and slowly she begins to change, expressing more of

16 See for example Johansson 2005; Sjö 2012; 2013b.

17 Johansson 2005.

18 Heelas/Woodhead 2005.

19 Wallengren 2006.

her emotions. She is often filmed in close-ups or medium close-ups that highlight her facial features and her emotional development. As with many other female characters in films, her transformation is largely related to questions of body and sexuality and who she is as a sexual being. Inger also formulates some of the central ideas of the film. In a key scene, set at the parsonage late in the evening in low-lit rooms that metaphorically express the shadows in Inger and Stig's marriage, Inger tells her husband that she is tired of his incessant talk of sin. According to Inger there is no such thing as sin. For one night she manages to convince her husband to let go of his restraints and give in to a night of passion, but the next morning, Stig again turns away from his wife and asks for divine forgiveness. When Stig fires Daniel, Inger exposes Stig's hypocrisy and finally leaves her husband. The spiritual turn in the film is directly characterized through Inger's development, illustrating how it leads to conflict but also to freedom and a new kind of community in the form of the loving community the choir grows into.

And finally, there is Gabriella, Conny's abused wife. In many ways, Gabriella is the classical woman as victim. Everyone in the village knows that Conny beats his wife, but no one seems interested or able to do something about it. The exception is Lena, but she is physically unable to stand up to Conny. Daniel tries to stop Conny on several occasions, but instead is severely beaten himself. However, being a choir member entails a change for Gabriella as well. In what might be considered the strongest scene of the film, a scene bathed in light, Gabriella sings a song that Daniel has written for her. The song is performed at a concert for the village and Conny is in the audience. In the song Gabriella states that her life is her own and she wants to live it freely. The scene cuts between Gabriella on stage and Conny in the audience. Conny, as can be expected, reacts badly to the song, abusing Gabriella again after the concert, but in the end Gabriella leaves him and also reports him to the police. Thus, for Gabriella, too, the spirituality awakened by Daniel's ideas and the choir leads to a profound transformation: she breaks with her role as victim and instead takes control of her own life. Again, this is a process in which the community in the form of the choir plays a role, as does the savior character in the film, Daniel.

The central female characters in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) are all fairly common female film characters – the pastor's wife, the victim, the sexualized woman – but taken together they offer fascinatingly different female voices, placed at the center of the film. On one hand, one might argue that because the film has a male lead and the female characters are all related to this character and partly dependent on him, they lose some of their agency. On the other hand, the savior figure in the film also depends on the three women and they change him as much as he changes them.

So what is it that turns Daniel into a Christ figure? Daniel's Christ-like appearance and his role as savior or messiah have been discussed in a number of publications.²⁰ In line with the traditional savior storyline,²¹ Daniel comes to a community in need, suffers with them, transforms them through his beliefs and actions, is unjustly accused and finally dies, but not without leaving something of himself behind. Several scenes visually and thematically associate the story of Christ. In one central scene, Daniel steps into the river and lowers himself into the water. Previously Daniel did not dare to enter the water, so the scene illustrates a change. But the scene acquires a symbolic function when Daniel surfaces with outstretched arms, associating the idea of a baptism. It is worth pointing out that Daniel baptizes himself, which ties in with the theme of spirituality with its focus on the self and distrust of organized religion.

Right after his baptism, Daniel is attacked by Conny, who beats him bloody. The three central female characters are shown caring for the badly bruised Daniel and cleaning his bloody body with white linens. This scene brings to mind iconographic traditions of women with the dead Christ and the women at Christ's grave. The connection to Christian art is particularly obvious via a long shot that captures all characters within the same frame and is further underlined in the *mise-en-scène* that brings to mind scenes of classic Christian paintings with *pietà* motifs. Conny's assault of Daniel is one of the reasons why Gabriella finally manages to break with her husband. Daniel's readiness to repeatedly protect Gabriella with his body, despite the gruesome consequences, inspires her to believe in her self-worth and right to a better life. This is also Daniel's central message: everyone has an individual voice and the right to this voice and when they come together, amazing things can happen. But this is a lesson Daniel also learns for himself through his work with the choir as he slowly opens up and dares to love and trust others.

Thus Daniel is not a flawless savior. At the beginning, he appears to be uncomfortable around people, somewhat rude and impatient. However, over time, and in particular with Lena's support, he becomes a much more open and caring person for whom every voice in the choir is essential. The way that emotions are shown to play a key part in his life – he expresses a range of emotions, from joy to anxiety – turns Daniel into a somewhat unusual male character. In contrast to Conny, who is also very emotional, but whose emotional outbursts consist of anger and jealousy, over time Daniel learns to show love and affection. And in contrast to Stig, Daniel shows no interest in his standing and image in the community or any desire to return to his old life of fame. In the end, what matters are love, community and the right for everyone to be themselves.

20 Johansson 2005; Larsson 2005; Hedling 2006; Sjö 2013b.

21 See for example Malone 1997.

Through all of these aspects, Daniel challenges conventional norms of masculinity. Yet, is this different gendering of this male character due to the fact that he is portrayed as a savior figure, or is it a more general challenge of ideas of masculinity? As I have illustrated elsewhere,²² there are male saviors for whom more “feminine” values such as love and relationship are essential and seem to aid them in their struggles. Yet in many other films, male saviors are represented in more conventional ways, with relationships an obstacle for their mission, and force and power the primary means of saving the world. Thus the savior character as such is not always a character that is gendered in alternative ways, but there are several cases in which this specific mythic structure seems to open up for a different understanding of maleness or femaleness, and I would argue that this is the case with Daniel.

However, there are problems with this argument that need to be addressed. Regarding strong female characters and female messiahs in films, it has often been argued that they tend to become less of a provocative alternative because they are often the only strong women in the film and tend to die in the end.²³ So if there is only one male character who breaks the mold of conventional representations of masculinity, and this character dies in the end, what does this suggest about the pervasive power of traditional gender norms? Daniel, too, dies in the end, but he does leave a large group of followers behind, both men and women, so perhaps there is space for his type of masculinity even after he is gone.

THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION – SPIRITUALITY AS A DOOR TO AGENCY?

Although *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) was not as big a commercial success as *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004), it is interesting because it caused some debate in the Nordic countries. This film is directed by the Norwegian director Nils Gaup, known in particular for having made *OFELAS* (*PATHFINDER*, Nils Gaup, NO 1987), the first film ever in the Sami language, which also became a “pathfinder” for later Nordic films with its focus on narrative, individualism and genre.²⁴ *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) can be described as a genre film, more specifically it is a “northern”, a western set in the north of Scandinavia. Like many westerns, it tells the story of the struggles between natives and settlers, in this case the Sami and Norwegian and Swedish merchants. But in contrast to many westerns it is based on historical events, a Sami rebellion in Kautokeino in the north of

22 Sjö 2007a; 2007b; 2011.

23 Tasker 1993; Inness 1999; Inness 2004; Sjö 2007a.

24 Nestingen 2008.

Norway in 1852. And in further contrast to many westerns it is not a story about strong men trying to make their way in a dangerous world, but about a young woman fighting against injustice.

THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION (2008) sparked a great deal of interest in Norway and in the north of Sweden and Finland, where many Sami live. The Sami are native to northern Europe, and like many native minority groups, they have been suppressed and mistreated. THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION (2008) illustrates this very well and so the film sparked a long-overdue debate about the Sami's current situation and their treatment in the past. Here, however, I will focus on how religion and gender are "done" in the film.

The two central characters in the film are the young Sami woman Elen and the old male pastor Stockfleth. As a character, Stockfleth is similar to Stig in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004), with the exception that Stockfleth has a lot more power to control others and cause harm. When the Sami, inspired by the preacher Laestadius and led by Elen, break with the merchants in Kautokeino and thus also with the Lutheran Church, which, through its pastors, supports the merchants, a new pastor, Stockfleth, is sent to Kautokeino. From the first scenes, Stockfleth is constructed as a problematic personality, while at the same time his role as a religious figure is underlined. He is always dressed in black robes and other religious insignia that highlight his position as pastor, but also give him a threatening look. When he first arrives in Kautokeino, he is filmed from behind as he walks through the community. His face is not shown until he enters a small house where a group of Sami are holding a religious meeting. Elen's grandmother is frightened by Stockfleth's sudden appearance and his dark look and immediately identifies him as a man of evil, upon which Stockfleth strikes her. As in other scenes, Stockfleth is filmed from a low angle so that he towers over the Sami, indicating his position of power over them. After his first violent reaction, Stockfleth tries to excuse himself and invites the Sami to come to the church, but the scene is set for a struggle.

Through Stockfleth the official church is constructed as a problematic space that is not concerned about the needs of the Sami and instead chooses to support the merchants and their abuse of the Sami. The church is constructed as an institution that preaches love and care, but turns a blind eye to real suffering. Through Stockfleth's actions the church is even shown to break the law, for Samis are arrested for minor misdemeanors and held prisoner without trial. Since all the pastors are male and represented as traditional male leaders and "bad guys", the church is constructed as a masculine space where female voices are silenced.

The film, like westerns in general, works a great deal with contrasts, for example in the representation of Elen and Stockfleth.²⁵ Elen is a young Sami woman, while Stockfleth is an elderly Norwegian man. While Stockfleth's faith is constructed as restrictive and focused on rules and control, Elen's faith is constructed as supportive of individuals and directed at solving their problems. A major problem for the Sami is alcoholism. The Sami men get drunk at the bar run by the merchants and are forced to sell off their reindeer, their main livelihood, to cover the bill. While the men squander the family income, the women are left alone to take care of the reindeer and fend for their families. Building on Laestadius' teachings, the religious group led by Elen preaches temperance and inspires the men to stop drinking.

THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION (2008) constructs masculinity as problematic in many different ways. Male characters, particularly Norwegian and Swedish characters, are represented as mostly interested in money and power, while the Sami men are represented as weak individuals, unable to say no to alcohol. All the male characters also easily turn to violence and abuse in order to solve their problems. By contrast, the Sami women are represented as strong, caring and community oriented. One of the central scenes that highlight this construction of femininity shows Elen alone in the mountains, fending off wolves that threaten the reindeer. An extreme long shot highlights Elen's exposed position, alone in the wilderness, whereas close-ups underline her determination and strength, as she scares away the predators.

Central for the Sami is their faith. Though the Sami are represented as Christian, their faith has a number of particular aspects. As Cato Christensen and Siv Ellen Kraft²⁶ have illustrated, the Sami's faith is represented as very much tied to nature. In some scenes, Elen is shown leading religious meetings outdoors, with the stunning nature of northern Norway as a backdrop, captured and highlighted in panning shots. In particular, the film underlines the importance for the Sami of reindeer, which have a strong symbolic function in traditional Sami faith. One example is the scene where Elen scares away the wolves, but the role of the reindeer throughout the film and the pain shown by the Sami when reindeer are slaughtered to pay off debts also highlight the symbolic importance of this animal.

What also makes the faith of the Sami exceptional is that they are represented as Laestadians. Laestadianism is a Nordic Lutheran revival movement inspired by Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), a Swedish Lutheran pastor who is also briefly portrayed in the film. Laestadianism has traditionally had a strong impact on northern Scandinavia. In the film, as already indicated above, Laes-

25 Sjö/Häger 2015.

26 Christensen/Kraft 2011.

tadius' preaching of temperance inspires Elen, and Laestadius' words also have a profound effect on Elen's husband, who stops drinking and joins in the services led by Elen. Overall the movement inspired by Laestadius' words and led by Elen in Kautokeino is portrayed as very loving and caring. The members are shown to be close to each other and to help each other out. Interestingly, this positive representation of Laestadianism contrasts with the way in which members of the movement are usually portrayed in Nordic films and other media as hypocrites or prone to violence, much more similar to Stockfleth or Stig. In general, both in media and in society at large, the movement has been prone to prejudice due in part to its very traditional lifestyle choices.²⁷ In *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) its followers' image is very different, illustrating perhaps the filmmaker's interest in highlighting the essentiality of the movement for the Sami community at the time and in showing respect for it today.²⁸

Although the Sami appear to be Laestadians in the film, it is worth highlighting the way in which the movement is constructed. At first the characters are inspired by Laestadius and are shown reading his texts, but the scenes with the Sami are focused not on preaching but rather on community and nature. This gives the movement a more spiritual tone. The Sami's break with the Lutheran church also highlights the movement's difference from what is represented as the traditional church and traditional Christianity. For the purposes of this study, it is interesting to note how the movement and the religious space it creates are gendered. Since the community is led by a woman, a space is created for women, and with its focus on family and community the movement can be argued to be gendered as feminine. However, the fact that men also have a place in this community and are shown to be changed by the community means that this is a space where masculinity, too, is imagined somewhat differently.

The Sami community and the movement led by Elen are represented as an ideal, but that ideal is not allowed to last. After first breaking free and creating something new, Elen and her community reach a new low when Stockfleth and his compatriots retaliate, causing the Sami to rebel, with murder and executions following as a consequence. In the end, the church is partly redeemed through the figure of a young bishop who sees the struggles of the Sami and through a pastor who prays for the Sami who are to be executed toward the end of the film. Despite the tragic end, in the final scene, set a couple of decades later and showing Elen talking to her now grown-up son, the film alludes to the idea that the Sami's plight is honest and just and that faith can play a part in the struggle against oppression and open up spaces for agency and alternative gender ideals.

27 Sjö/Häger 2015.

28 Christensen/Kraft 2011.

CONCLUSION: WHOSE RELIGION?

Although there are many Nordic films and films from other contexts that imagine gender and religion in very conservative ways and often represent religious people as following more traditional gender norms, the two films discussed above illustrate that religion, variously constructed, can also be represented as a space where alternative ways of imagining gender and gender norms are possible. How is one to interpret this? Are these films only exceptions to the rule or do they actually tell us something essential about contemporary views on religion and religion's relationship with gender? What do the representations propose about how media shape religion and views on religion today? How do representations of this kind possibly challenge the notion of the mediatization of religion?

Although I would argue that the films discussed above are somewhat unusual in the way they imagine and construct some aspects of religion and how these aspects are gendered, there are other films that also fit this model, and thus the films chosen for analysis here are not simply an exception to the rule. In the Scandinavian context, for example, a number of comedies have pastors as central characters and represent them in ways that often go against convention and gender norms. In these films, male pastors are represented as very unusual heroes: as lost and struggling individuals who are trying to find their way in life. The genre here is essential, for the comedy format as such allows for breaking conventions. Nonetheless, the fact that a religious setting is used is noteworthy as it does indicate that this context can be thought of as a space for alternative images.

Even if religion is not commonly used to imagine gender in alternative ways, it does happen, and these films highlight some noteworthy aspects relating to religion, gender and media, at least for the Scandinavian context. Of course, these films do not represent the official Lutheran stand on gender and religion. They are made neither for nor by the Lutheran Church, and many aspects of how religion is gendered in the films do not fully reflect reality. With a large percentage of female pastors and women in other church leadership positions, the Nordic Lutheran churches are far less male dominated than many Nordic films would suggest. In the Nordic countries religion is increasingly becoming a feminine sphere, in line with a process that has also been identified elsewhere.²⁹ Since *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) is set in the past, its portrayal of the church as male dominated is more natural, but interestingly, that depiction is also fairly common in films set in current times, which do not then reflect the gender structures of the Nordic Lutheran churches today.

29 Trzebiatowska/Bruce 2012.

That films do not directly reflect reality is hardly news, but what the films do represent and what this suggests about attitudes to religion is still noteworthy. With their constructions of femininity and masculinity, the films propose that the Lutheran church represents rather traditional gender norms. However, the films discussed here also indicate the idea that the religious sphere might open up alternative gender norms as well. There are different ways of understanding this diversity of gender norms. One can tie it to a lot of research on religion and gender, for as many studies have illustrated, different religious traditions allow for many different roles for both women and men³⁰ and this could be argued to be reflected in the films. One cannot deny that many religious traditions promote rather traditional gender norms, but these traditional norms can also be considered alternative in contemporary society and as such make religion a space that challenges secular gender norms.

However, the films' use of religious settings to gender characters somewhat differently may also stem from the fact that in the contemporary Scandinavian context religion is understood as a largely non-restricted sphere without a set authority; we are each allowed to imagine religion as we like. In the Scandinavian context religion is generally not understood as a central sphere or a general space, and the marginality of the space and its possible liminality might open it up to being a transformative arena.³¹ If one is not in the center, one is in a sense not only expected but also allowed to be different, and this might inspire alternative ideas of gender, too.

With regard to how religion is constructed and gendered in the films discussed above, it must also be noted that the form of religion that is associated with alternative ways of gendering characters is focused on community, and on community that puts the individual at the center. As has been pointed out elsewhere,³² it is not surprising that one can find this form of religion in Scandinavian films and that it is constructed as beneficial and inspiring of change because it fits well with ideas of the individualization of religion in which community can also play a part as long as it is a community that focuses on the individual. It is worth noting that this form of religion is also perceived as allowing for alternative gender roles, as I have shown above.

Though films always suggest something about the contexts in which they are made, here we are dealing with images of religion and gender shaped by media and media logics, in this case the logics driving filmmaking. When we discuss religion and gender in films, as I see it, the theory of the mediatization of religion can be very useful. One way of understanding the gendered construction of religion in *THE KAUTOKEINO REBELLION* (2008) is by taking into account the genre

30 Palmer 1994; King/Beattie 2005.

31 Sjö 2015b.

32 Sjö 2012; Sjö/Danielsson 2013.

conventions and media logics related to westerns, drama and film narratives more generally. Film narratives often build on contrast, which can be developed through characterization, including the different ways of representing a character's religious life or their gender. This logic can be seen behind how Stig and Daniel are gendered contrastively as men in *AS IT IS IN HEAVEN* (2004) and the different ways in which the religious worlds related to them are constructed. By gendering the characters differently and by relating them to quite different religious ideas and worlds, the film highlights the conflict between them and creates a tension that can help guide the story.

Yet the mediatization of religion theory does not explain everything and must not be used to explain away everything. The theory can be challenged, for example, by the use of religion to gender characters in alternative ways. Instead of saying that only religion is shaped by the needs of media, one can also argue that filmmakers are inspired by ideas of religion and thus guided in their media production to think gender differently. At this point, it is unclear what is influencing what, and the simplified idea that media always clearly sets the agenda is problematized. Furthermore, this underlines the problem with some notions of media logics that are used in the theory of a mediatization of religion. The talk of media "logics" suggests that media always works in a set way, but this is far from the case.

The ways in which religion sometimes opens up for alternative ways of imagining gender does not overthrow the mediatization of religion thesis, but it does underline the complexity of the relationship between religion and media and questions who sets the agenda for how we understand religion. For those with no personal relationship to official religious groups, media can play a central role in how religion as well as religion and gender are understood. The open character of religion today together with the, to some extent, liminal place of religion in Scandinavian society allow for many types of representation, and representations that may inspire many and complex images of religion. Media such as film might then to some extent set the agenda, but this is by no means a simple process and leaves space for alternative voices and recognizes the shaping influence of many different factors on media.

We need more research on the processes of mediatization, but this research also needs to look at gender and be open to questioning crude ideas of how different media work. In this article the focus has been on the Scandinavian context, but research on other contexts is also necessary. How are religious spheres gendered in other films and how is religion used to gender characters in certain ways? What do films from other contexts suggest about current ideas of and attitudes toward religion and gender? Future research will hopefully add more voices to the discussion and deepen our understanding of the interrelation of film, religion and gender.

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Reviews

Stefanie Knauss

Book review

John C. Lyden/Eric Michael Mazur (eds.),

The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture

London/New York: Routledge 2015, xvii + 583 pp.,

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From television to fashion, from sport stadiums to electronic dance music events, from Hinduism to contemporary Paganism – with its 28 chapters, *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* comprises a vast array of “Mediated encounters”, “Material encounters”, “Locative encounters” and “Religious traditions”, as the four sections of the collection are titled. As John Lyden’s introductory chapter, entitled “Definitions”, notes, the three terms involved here – “religion”, “culture”, “popular” – are all notoriously difficult to pin down, and thus this volume takes the approach of embracing the blurriness of these categories’ boundaries and casting its net as wide as possible, both with regard to the material discussed (including not just television, popular literature or music, but also food, fashion, toys, kitsch and monuments/memorials), and with regard to the forms the encounter between religion and popular culture may take. Lyden writes, “We cannot precisely define where religion leaves off and culture begins, or vice versa; and that’s okay. This does not erase our discipline. Rather, this reveals what we are actually doing; we are constructing our own identity out of a variety of materials, and not refusing to consider materials for being either too ‘popular’ or too ‘religious’” (19).

The first section focuses on prominent media of popular culture: television, journalism, film, radio, music, video and Internet games, the Internet and social networking, and advertising. Although the exclusion of comics or popular literature from this section could seem somewhat arbitrary, the focus here is on audio-visual, electronic mass media and how they facilitate the encounter between religion and popular culture in their representations, forms of communication and community building or through practices that are analogous to religious practices. Thus, Elijah Siegler discusses television in terms of its various religious roles, based on Weber’s types of religious leadership: in its priestly function, it conservatively affirms shared values and provides social stability, in particular by reinforcing Protestant ethics over against those portrayed as “other” (Catholics, atheists, and fanatics). Yet this is not all there is to television;

Siegler also notes a more prophetic, critical voice that offers life-changing alternatives, for example in animated shows or through the introduction of flawed heroes. And finally, Siegler introduces a third function of television, namely its rabbinic facilitation of argument about and reflection of values and traditions among its viewers. In spite of the rich material offered by television, even in times when its reception is changing (through DVD or Internet streaming instead of the classic television set), it remains a “largely unexplored territory” open to more detailed exploration (60).

Where one-way communication is predominant in television, in their chapter on Internet and social media Heidi Campbell and Paul Emerson Teusner introduce a medium shaped by interaction and mutuality. Religious groups have used the Internet both as a useful technology and “as a spiritual medium, facilitating spiritual experience ... a sacramental space” (157). Current research on religion and the Internet notes in particular how the Internet contributes to the development and negotiation of religious identities through the possibilities of deliberately (new or different) religious self-presentation online, although this online identity may be supported by offline cues or patterns in moments of insecurity. Internet-based communication fosters a sense of community and belonging that might complement offline membership in religious communities, but is also shaped by the structure of personal networks developed through social media sites such as Facebook. While the Internet is often perceived as a space of egalitarian, democratic communications that might challenge traditional religious authority, this does not mean that it is a space without authority structures, and, in fact, institutional power may be both affirmed and challenged through new media. These insights underline that the online and offline spheres are less clearly separated than often imagined, and thus future research will have to look at “how offline religion imprints online behaviors and how innovations in religion online may transform religious culture in the larger sense” (165).

The second section of the *Companion* focuses on physical objects as elements in the encounter between religion and popular culture: popular literature, comics/graphic novels, food and cooking, fashion, games and dolls, and kitsch. The extension of popular culture to include material culture is a positive development, as often popular culture seems limited to those electronic mass media discussed in the first section, with no attention given to the resources for meaning making that the often-unnoticed elements of material culture such as clothing or food provide. Unfortunately, however, in most of the chapters in this section, materiality seems to be simply what their subject of study *is* – a book, a toy, a T-shirt – without a more conscious use of “materiality” as a category of analysis: what does it mean to be able to handle these objects, to place them on one’s nightstand or exhibit them in the living room or to share them with others? How do they change or decay through use? What difference does

the physical format of a comic book make, or its thickness, the quality of its paper or colors? Thus, while offering fascinating insights into the large market of religious popular print literature, including developing new genres of African American and Islamic religious literature, the chapter by Jennie Chapman does not reflect in more detail on what the physical materiality of the books means in terms of production, the representation of religious themes, or the religious experiences through reading and sharing. Similarly, the chapter on food by Benjamin E. Zeller focuses much attention on mediated food – cooking shows or texts promoting particular diets – with a short section on religious food kitsch (chocolate deities), and discusses how food as a “quasi-religion” creates communities and a sense of identity and morality (243), but it does not reflect on the experience of shopping for ingredients, preparing food, its textures, tastes, smell, or colors, practices of sharing food or eating.

Nevertheless, the chapters in this section add a wealth of material to the discussion of religion and popular culture. Leonard Norman Primiano’s chapter on kitsch is particularly interesting given that often popular culture is seen as precisely somewhat kitschy and in poor taste, and shares with kitsch the association with mass-production and mass-marketing. In fact, as Primiano writes, “kitsch represents human artistry ... as an expression of popular culture” (285). Closely linked to modernity both in terms of the appearance of the term (post-1850s), its imitative aesthetics and the mass production and mass marketing of kitsch objects, kitsch can be seen as a response to the issues of modern life and a means to negotiate them. Kitsch objects are open to a variety of uses, as means of creating religious identity, objects of devotion, pleasant toys or objects of artistic re-signification. When thinking about kitsch and religion, attention to the object itself is not enough to understand its religious relevance; instead, the object’s use and the user’s investment in the object are central: “ardent religious commitment might result in the active transformation of cheap or aesthetically suspect objects into cherished instruments of authentic vernacular worship” (305).

The chapters collected in the third section focus on “the encounter of the two [religion and popular culture] in defined space, at a definite (if not always defined) time” (313). Briefer than the others, the section includes chapters on the shopping mall, electronic dance music events, the sports stadium and monuments of civil religion. Interestingly, there is no chapter on a religious space (e.g. a church, cemetery, or shrine) in which religion and popular culture encounter each other, even though the integration of popular culture in religious practices is noted elsewhere. Instead, the chapters focus on how apparently secular spaces become significant religious spaces through ritual, changes in the perception of time, or the creation of (new) communities, as Jeffrey Scholes discusses in his chapter on sports. Darryl Catherine’s chapter on monuments and

memorials, by contrast, underlines the differences between the ways in which the Puritan antecedents to civil religion established sacred space as hierarchical, rooted in an ahistorical view of time and theocratic understandings of politics and power, and how this happens in the monuments of (democratic, national, historically situated) civil religion, such as the National Mall in Washington D.C. Only gradually did the Mall (and with it, Washington D.C.) develop into the central symbol of the nation, which previously had been symbolized primarily through its vast natural spaces. Yet in the second half of the 20th century, the symbol of national unity became one of separation and protest, exposing “the violence inextricably linked to the nation’s consolidation” (390). Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982) marks the beginning of a new form of monuments to civil religion that no longer try to evoke a mythical national unity, but instead focus on individual, emotional experience through horizontal space and time, a trend that is further reinforced in the decentralization and proliferation of memorials across the nation.

The last section finally shifts attention to the “profound symbiotic relationship” between religious traditions and institutions and popular culture (397), which leaves both changed. With chapters (arranged in alphabetical order) on Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, Contemporary Paganism and Protestantism, this section comprises a range of traditions “that have been portrayed more often in popular culture, especially in the West” (3). Yet the chapters in this section are even more specifically focused on North American popular culture (occasionally including references to the United Kingdom or to the impact of Indian media on the Hindu diaspora in the United States). A similar bias toward North American media is also noticeable in chapters in the other sections, and while I – reading this *Companion* as a German living in the United States – certainly agree that it is impossible to cover everything everywhere, I am somewhat disturbed by the implicit identification of “popular culture” with “American culture”. Chapters on, for example, the representation of Judaism would have looked vastly different if they had been written with regard to German popular culture. Or how about the representation of Islam in popular culture in North Africa? While American popular culture is certainly known and “popular” beyond the United States, it is by no means the only form of popular culture that religion(s) encounter(s). Maybe it would have been more honest to call the volume “Religion and American Popular Culture”, then, adding to the chapter on “Definitions” a due reflection on what “American” means, given the heterogeneity and global distribution of its popular culture. In addition, chapters in this section seem to return to a somewhat limited understanding of popular culture as audio-visual, electronic media (as discussed in the first section), with little attention to material culture or space (sections two and three). An exception is provided in Rodger M. Payne’s chap-

ter on Roman Catholicism, with sections on the representation of Catholic figures in film, on the identity-shaping impact of the Notre Dame football team, on festivals or festivity as markers of Catholic presence in popular culture, and on the influence of the Catholic imagination on contemporary music.

Mostly using a historical approach that traces the representation of a religious tradition across time (and, sometimes, across different media), the chapters in this section offer interesting insights into the changes of representations and the ways in which traditions align with particular forms of popular culture, such as contemporary Paganism and the fantasy genre. Discussions of traditions that are “other” to the American context, such as Islam or Judaism, note how representations have shifted from simplistic good/bad schemata to more differentiated representations, with the goal described as “normalization”, that is, the representation of characters as complex, multifaceted beings, defined not exclusively by their religious identity. Lynita K. Newswander, Chad B. Newswander, and Lee Trepanier’s chapter on Mormonism traces the earlier contradictory media representation of a marginalized and often discriminated religious community as paradigmatic of American values such as family and honest and hard work. More recent media representations of Mormons, both in TV reality shows and in the Mormons’ own media campaigns, contribute to a change in the public perception of Mormons “from traditional, staid, and white to pluralistic, dynamic, and multi-ethnic” (514), representing diverse sets of values ranging from more conservative to more progressive.

With an interesting twist to this section’s overall interest, Clive Marsh’s chapter on Protestantism notes that this religious tradition is conspicuously absent from popular media, at least as far as explicit references are concerned. Mostly, Protestant identity is assumed if no other religious affiliation is stated – a move furthered by Protestant resistance to a priestly order and its self-understanding as the religion of the everyday, in addition to the influence that Protestantism has had in shaping (secular) culture. Marsh also notes that where Protestantism is made explicit, denominational differences are usually downplayed to represent a kind of “generic” Protestantism. The recent re-emergence of more specifically Protestant portrayals (for example of denominationally identified clergy) might be due, Marsh speculates, to the decline of Protestant influence on popular culture and a more positive attitude towards specific identities in postmodernity.

While the volume covers vastly different media, spaces and religious traditions, at least two issues appear as central across the different chapters, namely the blurring of boundaries between sacred and profane in encounters between religion and popular culture, and the problem of definitions and how they construct the material with which one engages. Both aspects make the study of religion and popular culture more complex, yet also, I would argue, more fruit-

ful and more relevant in the contemporary context. Most chapters also reflect the increasing awareness of cultural studies that culture is neither stable nor is its meaning inherent to its products, but instead is created in a “circuit of culture”, a dynamic meaning-making process moving back and forth between production, representation and reception. Regulation and identity, the two additional moments of the circuit of culture as developed by Paul du Gay and his colleagues, are not explicitly noted as elements in the circuit, but are implicitly treated in a number of chapters, for example, through discussion of the censorship activities of Roman Catholics in the United States or the role of the Internet in shaping religious identities.

Most chapters successfully combine a more general overview (of historical developments, trends in research, or prominent themes) with the in-depth treatment of a particular aspect, adding elements of new scholarship to the summaries of existing research. Occasionally, however, the need for overview and generality leads to an emphasis on description, rather than analysis, something that is particularly noticeable with regard to gender, race and class. While sometimes authors might note gender differences or aspects pertaining to gender – for example the association of fashion with sexuality in the case of women, but not men, in Edward Dutton’s chapter on fashion, or the perpetuation of unequal gender ideals in Hindu media in Sheila Nayar’s chapter – these observations are rarely subjected to more detailed analysis. However, I realize that we all approach a book with our specific expectations, and not all can – or should – be fulfilled even by an extensive work such as this, and thus these comments should be read as suggestions for further research rather than as criticism of a very fine volume.

In their breadth as well as their depth, the chapters collected here are of very high quality and provide fascinating insights into the many possibilities the encounters between religion and popular culture bring with them, the ways in which this field has been approached by previous research, and possible future directions. Together with detailed summaries at the beginnings of sections and an index that helps navigate the mass of material in this volume, this makes the *Companion* exciting reading material and a useful tool for research both for newcomers to the field and for those who are already engaged in the study of religion and popular culture.

Marie-Therese Mäder

Film review

IRAQI ODYSSEY (Samir, IQ/CH/DE/AE 2015)

The 3-D documentary *Iraqi Odyssey* (IQ/CH/DE/AE, 2015) by the Iraqi-Swiss filmmaker Samir Jamal Aldin tells the director's family story in light of several migration biographies and includes in its narrative the director's own immigration and adaptation to Switzerland (he arrived in Switzerland with his Iraqi family in 1963). From a personal perspective, Samir (the director's official name) tells the story of his grandfather and his struggle against British colonialism, how his aunt and uncles emigrated from Iraq to Europe, Australia, and New Zealand in the 1960s and 1970s, and finally how his family experienced Saddam Hussein's dictatorship within Iraqi territory and from abroad. Samir interviews some family members, namely his aunt Samira in Auckland (New Zealand), his uncle Sabbah in London (United Kingdom), cousin Jamal Al Tahir in Moscow (Russia), cousin Tanya Uldin in Lausanne (Switzerland), and, as the youngest member of the family, his half-sister Souhair Jamal Aldin in Baghdad (Iraq). The interviews are embedded in a rich selection of footage and material such as photographs and films from Samir's relatives' personal archives as well as press sources used to picture their stories. Some sequences, including Samir's own migration experience, are told by the director's voice-over.

The press kit clearly states the "mission" of documentary:

As a filmmaker I eventually came to the realization that my own family history stands for a whole generation and a project: the project of modernity. It captures a universal story involving my grandfather and his children – my aunts and uncles – and their children who have been scattered across the globe due to political circumstances. They are members of a well-educated middle class who, as patriots, rose up against British colonialism in their country, Iraq. Like thousands of others of their generation they fought for a secular society. They saw no contradiction between their Arabic roots, technological advances and the democratization of society. I wanted to memorialize this generation, for their efforts have been largely forgotten or discredited due to religious fanatics.¹

Secularization is thus central to the film's argument, and in this review of the documentary I will therefore focus on the depiction of religion. The film criticizes the process of radicalization and instrumentalization of religion in Iraq from

¹ Press Kit 2015, 5.

the late 1970s. The narrative considers religion on two levels: one focuses on Iraqi history in general and serves as the context for Jamal Aldin family history, which represents the second level. Religion is introduced for the first time, after almost half an hour, with the intertitle “Sectarianism”. Souhair, the filmmaker’s half-sister, tells that between 2003 and 2007, after the downfall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Shiite and Sunni splinter groups were fighting each other, and the government was unable to take control of the situation. Later in the film, after two hours, radicalized Islam is discussed in the context of Saddam Hussein’s takeover. The intertitle “Religion” with a mosque in the background announces the topic.

In the next sequence the voice-over explains how Saddam Hussein exploited religion: “During his war against Iran, Saddam started to build more and more mosques. Before that the dictator showed no interest in religion, but now he discovered it for his own political purposes. And he started to cut women’s rights and to spy on his people”² (figs. 1 and 2).

In the interview that follows, Samira, the director’s aunt, recounts how the dictatorship succeeded and how it influenced her life. Photographs depicting terror, torture, and military parades are inserted. At the end of the film, Samira em-



Fig. 1: IRAQI ODYSSEY
(Samir, IQ/CH/DE/
AE, 2015), 2:03:12.

phasizes that she will never go back to Iraq: “Now from what I see and hear, I would never go back. The situation is unbelievable. We’ve gone back 500 years! You were there: Religious fanatics! All the women in Abayas and underneath a headscarf, too! And the arms covered to here... I don’t know how the women can bear the heat. [laughs] I don’t know how they do it” (fig. 3).

After this statement, Samir’s aunt is shown walking down a street in Auckland, New Zealand, wearing a pink sweatshirt, before the interview resumes: “Now in

2 The English translation of the Arabic original follows the subtitles.



Fig. 2: IRAQI ODYSSEY (Samir, IQ/CH/DE/AE, 2015), 02:03:18.

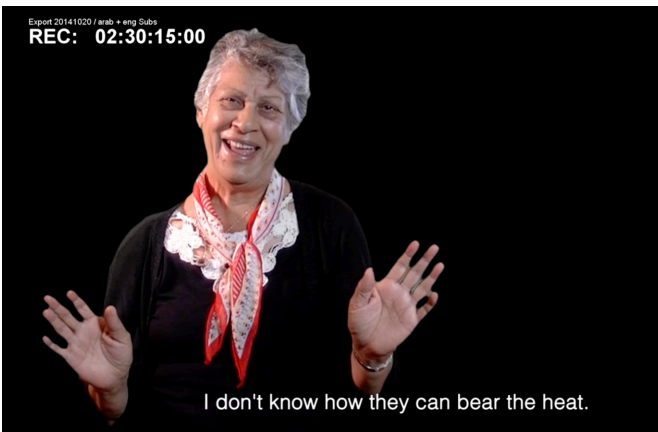


Fig. 3: IRAQI ODYSSEY (Samir, IQ/CH/DE/AE, 2015), 02:30:15.

the Arab world, Islamic parties come to power. And the people welcome them. And you say you want democracy? Go ahead! Enjoy your meal!"

Thematically situated between the two poles of secularization and the radicalization of Islam, the story of Samir's grandfather Jamal Aldin tells how he broke with the religious tradition of his family. The sequence is introduced with the intertitle "Family Legend". The grandfather used to be a religious scholar and belonged to the Achbāriya, a controversial Shiite group. One day on his daily commute by ferry, he threw his turban, the sign of his religious identity, into the river, as he had realized that more and more men were wearing turbans because religious scholars were offered free transport. His descendants offer different interpretations of the grandfather's story. They agree that their father and grandfather broke with family tradition in order to renounce religious privilege. Uncle Sabbah underlines that his father strictly forbade his children from wearing either a turban or a military uniform, in order that they not be subjected to either slavery or ideology.

On the one hand, the film depicts religion as the legitimization of power, violence, and oppression. On the other hand, the example of the family Jamal Aldin offers a secularization narrative that starts with the grandfather, a Shiite religious scholar, turning away from his religious activity. His decision influences the next generation, who favor politics and education over religion. After Saddam Hussein comes to power most of the family members leave Iraq and live as secularized and highly educated Iraqi migrants in Auckland, London, Moscow, and Zurich.

IRAQI ODYSSEY (2015) is not only a documentary but also a broader media project that provides a platform for the performance of collective memory of the Iraqi diaspora. For this purpose the film production established an interactive Web project that enables Iraqi migration to be mediatized through an online timeline.³ Visitors to the site are invited to upload their own Iraqi histories to the timeline covered by the documentary, where they join clips, unused archival material, and footage from the film provided by the production company. In a video message on the Web page, Samir encourages participation: “Share your family histories with us, your photographs and your film footage, and with your own mosaic piece join us in creating a fuller picture of this country. Join the conversation, discover and share the stories of other contributors. Be part of an Iraqi story – written by individuals for individuals.”⁴

Over 160 minutes the documentary tells impressively how not so long ago Iraq was a secularized Muslim society, a part of the country’s history often ignored by western mass media eager to associate Islamic faith with terrorism. But IRAQI ODYSSEY (2015) is not only a documentary but also an audio-visual source of history. It seeks to participate in the documentation of Iraqi history by Iraqi people themselves who live in diaspora around the globe. The film and the homepage are useful examples of how audio-visual media and the Internet can provide platforms for the collective memory of a group, in this instance for one in which Samir’s personal family story occupies a prominent place. His occasionally sentimental undertone tells of better times, when religion was not a protagonist in public life and Iraqi society was cultivated, educated, and modern. The film voices an impressively differentiated critic of fundamentalism in favor of Islamic secularization.

Due to its length the film has been shown mainly at film festivals. The DVD (Impulse Home Entertainment, 2016) was released in May 2016 as a shortened version (98 minutes), the director’s cut. The film offers a fruitful case study for contemplation, in the classroom and in other venues that foster in-depth dis-

3 Homepage 2016.

4 Timeline 2016.

cussion, of the interface of religion and politics, the mediated history of religion, and narratives of secularization.

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Sofia Sjö

Book review

Crystal Downing, *Salvation from Cinema. The Medium is the Message*

London/New York: Routledge 2016, 196 pp.,

ISBN 978-1-138-91394-3

A common process in many areas of research is that a flood of interest and general exploration is followed by an intense debate around methods and theory. Though the field of religion and film can trace parts of its history back to the early years of the film medium, the field did not seriously start expanding and developing until the late 1990s. Consequently, discussions of theory and method have been particularly called for and have taken place over the last ten years. A general, and not very surprising, agreement seems to be that any study of religion and film must combine knowledge of both religion and film. So far, though, the film element has caused particular problems for many researchers, not least for those who come to the subject from theology or religious studies. This is where Crystal Downing's *Salvation from Cinema* comes in, offering a helping hand to those struggling with film theory and film language and how these can be related to religion.

That Routledge has chosen to publish Downing's *Salvation from Cinema* is not a surprise considering their record of publications related to media and religion. As anyone involved in media and religion research knows, the subject area has strong support at Routledge and this academic publisher has lately brought us many noteworthy volumes, such as *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, *Digital Religion* and *Religion, Media and Social Change*.¹ *Salvation from Cinema* is a significant addition to that list.

Downing's main point in *Salvation from Cinema* can be found in the subtitle of her book: *The Medium is the Message*. Downing launches with Marshall McLuhan, arguing that in order to understand the salvation that film can offer, we need to understand the medium and how it can open up for religious reflection through its forms and language and specifically through what Downing calls "the techniques that constitute the medium" (4). Like many before her (Melanie J. Wright and Bill Nichols among others), Downing is critical of the over-

1 Lyden 2009; Campbell 2012; Granholm/Moberg/Sjö 2014.

abundance of studies that focus on story and forget about the materiality of the medium and its specific visual aspects that affect what we see and how we see. Too many studies, she argues, claim to take the medium into consideration, but still leave it out when they actually come to the religious dimension. Downing's study underlines that if their field is to be able to move forward, religion and film scholars need to take the film medium seriously and truly include it in their reflections on religion and film. Religion and film is about not just religious narratives on screen, but also all the things film tells us that cannot be boiled down to story.

But what exactly is meant with "religion" in this combination of religion and film? For Downing, as well as, I am sure, for many others, religion seems to be tied to questions of transcendence and of immanence, of film pointing to something beyond and sometimes allowing the divine to shine through. It is therefore not that surprising that the first part of the book focuses particular attention on the so-called "breaking the fourth wall", a cinematic technique that, as Downing argues, shows "how creativity in the cinematic medium can generate religious messages that far exceed the significance of story" (11). When the fourth wall is broken, the medium makes us aware of its existence, but also turns the focus on us, the viewers, and our own presence, forcing us to think of the medium and our relationship to it. This is often done by characters on screen speaking directly to the camera and, in a sense, to the audience. The first example Downing discusses is suitably ANNIE HALL (Woody Allen, US 1977), a film in which Marshall McLuhan makes an appearance as himself. All the examples discussed by Downing highlight in different ways the ability of the film medium to take us out of our hidden location as viewers and emphasize something more and beyond, something that can be seen as transcendent and as connecting to a more profound message in the story. Examples of breaking the fourth wall are thus aspects of the film experience that can help researchers capture an important element of films that at least sometimes, writes Downing, "gestures toward an interdependence of medium and message that mimics ... the interplay of transcendence and immanence found in multiple religions" (91).

The first part of *Salvation from Cinema* focuses on the film medium and film language and on how film viewers are used to seeing films but can also be made aware of what they see and how the medium shapes viewing experiences. According to Downing many film viewers are often only aware of their act of seeing, and not really of *what* they see, but they can learn to see differently and find new insights in what they see. A focus on framing, editing, graphic matches and other techniques of filmmaking allows the complex layers of a film to be grasped and can help lift our analyses of the religious potential of film. Downing's expertise in film theory shines through in this part of the book, but it is brought into even greater focus in the second part of the book. Here Downing

brings the reader into close conversation with a long list of well-known theorists and philosophers, among them Derrida, Peirce and Deleuze, and helps both clarify their ideas and illustrate how they can be used in the exploration of religion and film when attention is paid to the film medium. This part of the book also works as an introduction to film theory in general, highlighting many debates of the past and of the present. In many ways this is the strongest part of the book and a part that is bound to help many religion and film scholars find and develop connections with film theory worth exploring in their field.

For anyone seriously contemplating questions of theory and method in the study of religion and film, *Salvation from Cinema* is sure to inspire reflection. However, this is not to say that this is an unproblematic study that does not raise any questions. Downing clearly illustrates her knowledge of how film works and of film theory, and also introduces this knowledge to readers in a way that should help clarify issues for those unfamiliar with film theory and highlight new perspectives for those with a keener knowledge, but her understanding of religion seems somewhat more wanting. The book is full of theological reflections and references to the Bible, and some aspects that can be related to different religious traditions are brought up, but her religious perspective feels very specific and very much focused on the aspect of the existence of and relationship with something “beyond” expressed in religion or, more specifically, on what Downing refers to as transcendence. Downing touches on certain non-Christian theological traditions and questions, such as the Buddhist tradition with Bodhisattvas, but often only briefly, bringing the focus back to the film medium in the next sentence. Since her aim is to teach viewers more about how to understand what one sees in film, her choice is comprehensible, but it sometimes leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Looking at Downing’s earlier publications, there is no doubt that she has more knowledge of religion than is expressed in the book, but here her interest in highlighting film language sometimes takes over, at the expense of a thorough theological reflection.

An example of a subject of which I would personally have liked a deeper analysis is nudity on screen, to which Downing dedicates an entire chapter, but a chapter without any serious grounding in religious/theological traditions. The chapter starts by highlighting the problems devout people have had with sexualized bodies on screen and then discusses the artistic potential of nudity in film. However, it neglects to reflect on the complex role of the body and sexuality in religion and possible connections between material religion and the film experience. In Downing’s defense, one might argue that she touches on these issues later in the book, specifically in her discussion of a couple of Jesus films, among them *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* (Mel Gibson, US 2004), but the chapter,

nevertheless, leaves the reader, or at least this reader, looking for a deeper argument that does not seem to be there.

Religion and film scholars have sometimes been accused of telling audiences what they will see in films, particularly which religious readings they will make of a film. Lately, more and more scholars have realized that films can be viewed and understood in many different ways and what viewers see will depend on what they bring to the viewing experience. Downing is not interested in reception and it would be a misrepresentation to say that she claims that viewers will always see what she herself notes in a film. Yet, like many theologians before her, she also sometimes takes on the role of preacher, not of the theological message, but of the filmic and material message of films. This does not undermine her main points, but it does open her up for some of the same critique many religion and film scholars have been confronted with before her. The fact that Downing highlights the need to understand the medium in order to be able to understand what we see and how we can see differently should make it clear that there are many ways of seeing a film. Statements about what a viewer will necessarily see are therefore problematic.

Despite these partial flaws in tone and focus, Downing's study *Salvation from Cinema* is still very much called for and urgently needed in today's religion and film research. I believe it can work as inspiration for scholars who are teaching religion and film and are writing in that field, showing possible ways of becoming more aware of how film functions. Together with an introductory book on film language and theory, it can help young scholars in the fields of theology and religious studies begin with a religion and film analysis that gives room for more than just story. Focusing on narrative, as Downing and many before her have argued, only brings us so far when studying film, an audio-visual medium. By paying attention to the complexity of the film medium and how this medium works, new doors can be opened for research in this field. This is not to say that we have to accept McLuhan's, in many ways reductionist, argument that the medium is the message, but it does mean that we cannot ignore his point either. The medium is never the entire message, but if we do not understand the medium, we are likely to misunderstand or miss some of the message.

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Calls for Papers

JRFM 2017, 3/2 CALL FOR PAPERS

Using Media in Religious Studies

Strategies of Representing Religion in Scholarly Approaches

Studying media in religions and cultures is a common practice within disciplines focusing on religion. The deconstruction of media is multifaceted and performed by analyzing texts, by focussing on material and visual cultures, by dealing with traditional and popular media or with film and mass media like the Internet. Compared to the broad and well-established field of research on media within religions, the usage of media for representing religion in scholarly work is a rather neglected topic. This is astonishing, since media have different effects and are perceived with different impacts even within the scientific community.

The use of media has a strong influence on the academic culture and habitus. Looking at the media we use, allows us to gain insight into the scholarly work: the main means of scientific discourse is still the text, sometimes supported by illustrations.

The use of text and images as the main media of scholarly work is rarely the object of a specific reflection on their effects and possibilities. Theoretical and methodological criticism of media within academia is still lacking sufficient attention. Scholars evoke emotions and mediate their ideas through the materials they present and in the way of they represent religion.

A lecture for students and a conference paper will differ in the style, presentation, and technique used. One might use his/her own rhetoric, show a film or allow the audience to hear sounds from original contexts. It makes a difference if a presenter only speaks about material objects or if s/he allows the audience to actually see them – like in a university collection – or even touch or smell them.

The November 2017 issue of **JRFM** explores the possibilities of using media in representing religions. David Morgan estimates that our usual scientific usage of media aims at suggesting objectivity. For example, charts can be used

to display empirical “truth” or a photograph to “demonstrate” an argument: these figures and pictures are often introduced without an explanation of their own perspective or an analysis of the production and the context in which they are embedded. This issue will explore the possibilities of analysing media as a crucial part of research and as a means for both producing and representing scholarly results.

In this issue, contributors with different perspectives are invited to participate to an interdisciplinary debate about the significance and the impact of media within academic work on religion. This self-reflection about producing and transmitting data in analysing, deconstructing and representing religion through media considers also the emotional impact of media upon scientific research as well as the different genres used in academic work. Furthermore, a specific reflection on our perspectives and a good knowledge about recipients’ possible perceptions are necessary, if our aim is to inform and make our own methods transparent and suitable to what we want to express.

Therefore this issue collects articles on:

- theoretical approaches on religion(s) and the media,
- methodological reflections on the specific options of texts, illustrations, films or objects for re-presenting religions,
- perceptions of different media and multimedia in science,
- aesthetic effects of different media on scholars, dealing with the tension between objectivity and subjectivity,
- interdisciplinary debates on religions connected with emic and etic positions represented by media,
- international or regional cultures of media in studying religions: preferring traditional texts or new media, favouring oral or written cultures etc.
- social contexts – like gender – connected with media dealing with religions
- other topics related to the overall theme of this issue.

Articles of 25,000-30,000 characters (including spaces) should be posted online for peer review by February 28, 2017 on the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register. The publication is scheduled for November 2017. For any questions regarding the call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler (beinhaue@staff.uni-marburg.de).

JRFM 2018, 4/1 CALL FOR PAPERS

Trauma, Memory and Religion

Representing Memories of Killing in Film

In the last few years, two influential films were released that dealt with the memories of men who had killed people a very long time ago. Although *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* (DE/AU Stefan Ruzowitzky, D 2013) and *THE ACT OF KILLING* (Joshua Oppenheimer, NO/DK/GB 2012) re-enact massacres performed in countries distant from each other, the works show astonishing similarities. In both films the killers were haunted by images popping up in their nightmares, depicting the angst and despair of their victims. Is this kind of reaction by the killers a universal human phenomenon when faced with such horrible events? Or is it a cinematic device to express the sense of guilt? How is the memory of the traumatic experience of killing represented in film?

DAS RADIKAL BÖSE, which won an award at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 2014, focuses on the question how ordinary German soldiers could become the murderers of Jewish civilians, including men, women and children. During their military campaigns in Eastern Europe in 1941 and 1942 they killed two millions people with rifles and pistols.

THE ACT OF KILLING received the BAFTA Film Award for the best documentary in 2014. It uses the technique of role-playing to allow the feelings of the murderers to come to the surface. Two years later, Joshua Oppenheimer made a second film, *THE LOOK OF SILENCE* (NO/DK/GB 2014), in which he recaptures the same killings but from the perspective of the victims.

Both in *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE* and in *THE ACT OF KILLING* a religious dimension is discernable, in which apparently a certain difference comes to light: depending on the religion tradition, different strategies to express the responsibility of the killers are presented. In *DAS RADIKAL BÖSE*, which is embedded in the Protestant Lutheran tradition, the actors speak about feeling guilty, while in *THE ACT OF KILLING* the actors, mostly Muslim Indonesians who also have some roots in local indigenous religions, relate to God's inevitable punishment. Which role does

religion play in this context? Is it religion that introduces differences between the ways of coping with massacres?

This issue of **JRFM** is devoted to films in which trauma, memory and religion are interwoven and encourages interdisciplinary approaches to this topic with particular consideration for psychology, film studies and comparative religion. We are inviting articles that

- analyse the religious dimension in the above mentioned films or in other productions from all over the world,
- address intercultural dimensions and/or gender differences in films dealing with the topic of trauma, memory and religion, and / or
- focus on the role of sound in this kind of films and its religious significance.

The issue has also an open section for articles on other topics linked to the profile of JRFM.

Contributions of 25,000-30,000 characters (including spaces) should be submitted online for peer review by November 28, 2017 through the journal homepage www.jrfm.eu. We kindly ask authors to register. Publication is scheduled for May 2018.

For any questions regarding the call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the office manager of JRFM (gerda.weinzerl@uni-graz.at).



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