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H-France Review Vol. 11 (January 2011), No. 14

Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010. Photographs, bibliography and images. xvii and 156 pp. \$65 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0252-03528-9; \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-0252-07111-1.

Review by Martin O'Shaughnessy, Nottingham Trent University.

The Belgian Dardenne brothers are some of the most important film-makers working in Europe at the current time. They rose to prominence with *La Promesse* in 1996, and followed this up with *Rosetta* (1999), *Le Fils* (2002), *L'Enfant* (2005) and, most recently, *Le Silence de Lorna* (2008). These acclaimed films were not, however, the beginning of their career: they worked in radical video in the 1970s, made a series of documentaries about the workers' movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and directed two early fictions, *Falsch* (1986) and *Je pense à vous* (1992). In sharp contrast to an itinerant film-maker like Haneke, they have stayed resolutely attached to their region of Belgium throughout their career, focussing especially on Seraing, once a steel-making bastion, now a hollowed out industrial shell. If their work is thus characterised by fidelity to a region, it is also marked by a desire to remain contemporary of its time: while their documentaries tracked the progressive demobilisation of the organised working class, their fictions now inhabit the ruins of the same social group with a clear-sightedness that is never allowed to lapse into pessimism. Surprisingly for such important film-makers, there has been relatively little written up to now on their work.[1] Joseph Mai's new book thus meets a real need and is to be warmly welcomed. Mai does a service to those who follow by the tremendous thoroughness with which he investigates the brothers' work, even the much less well known parts of it such as the early videos or the relatively little known short films. Subsequent scholars will owe him a debt for this meticulous research. They will also inevitably be impressed by the fine attention to detail and the great sensitivity that marks his readings of all the films, not just the celebrated recent ones but also the lesser known works.

As Mai rightly notes, a turning point in the Dardennes' career came with *Je pense à vous*, a work that marked the passage from the politically mediated, epic narratives of the documentaries to the raw, fragmentary stories of the mature fictions but was unable to find a form adequate to its content. The film, as Mai also notes, remained too trapped in cinematic clichés and conventions to give adequate expression to the raw reality with which it sought to engage (pp. 33-40). It was the discovery of a suitable form in *La Promesse* that would finally bring the brothers to international attention. Mai describes this form as a 'sensuous realism' (p. 53-63). Rejecting conventional narrative organisation and the type of framing of action that is knowingly staged for the camera, the brothers instead plunged their 'body camera' (p. 56) into the world of the film in such a way that, denied visual mastery, it ran behind the action, forcing the spectator to decode bodies and objects as they passed in front of him or her. This newly raw style was not only entirely adequate to the harshness of the content of the films, it was also fully consistent with the brothers' deliberate preference for lower budget film-making, something that helps them hold the pressures of the mainstream industry at bay while still allowing them the time and space for the intense work with actors and technicians that their style demands (pp. 63-65).

The brothers are no mere formalists. What they have developed is a style suitable to the exploration of the violence of the current socio-economic order. Given that the leftist oppositional project whose fading fortune they tracked in their documentaries is no longer available, the brothers have instead turned to the ethical as a route to the restoration of a sense of how to live in a fallen world. Mai's own adoption of an ethical approach to the films is therefore entirely fitting. Mai turns to the great

ethical philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas as his main theoretical reference point, something justified not least by the brothers' own clear acknowledgement of Levinas as a major inspiration for their work.[2] Mai aptly sums up the core of Levinas's thought thus:

According to Levinas, we are not cogs in a 'totality' that we can somehow master or even perceive from the outside. Instead we are always already involved in an 'infinite' and noncircumscribable web of encounters. This requires us to respond (or refuse to respond, a response in itself) to the others whose faces and demands ceaselessly confront or beseech us (p. xiii).

Thereafter, he will very profitably put key Levinasian concepts to work to elucidate the films. Thus, for example, when discussing *La Promesse*, he mobilises a Levinasian understanding of the face and of the role of language to explore the hero, Igor's encounter with Assita, the wife of the man he has failed to save from an effective murder. He shows how, if the face embodies how the other presents him or herself to us in their radical and irreducible difference, language provides a way to bridge the divide between individuals (p. 51). More broadly, the films are read in terms of the characters' ability to develop non-destructive ways to engage others and to take their place as part of a group.

The readings are always nuanced and sensitive. Indeed, the films are read as "empathy producing machines" (p. xv) that are notable not for their capacity to show characters' emotions but for the ability to take the spectator on an emotional journey. There is perhaps a tendency here to underplay the way in which the films also find ways to push us back and force us to reflect by blocking the kind of fusional identification with characters that mainstream cinema so routinely seeks. If we are constantly close to the protagonists, we also run behind them, fail to penetrate their exteriority and are repelled by them, notably when, imitating systemic murderousness, their behaviour tends towards the monstrous. Mai's empathetic approach also makes him reluctant to develop potential criticisms of the brothers' works.

While it is true that they film the ruins of the old industrial working class with unblinking honesty, one could ask whether the kind of ethical vision they deploy can ever provide an ultimately satisfactory response to the systemic violences that they explore and that ultimately call for a politics rather than an ethics. One might also take issue with how Mai interprets the physicality of the later films, their attention to bodies and objects. Drawing on Laura Marks's notion of the haptic, Mai suggests that the brothers' films force us to pay attention to shapes, textures, weights and smells.[3] I think there may be a danger here of paying too much attention to surfaces. I suspect that what the brothers are really interested in is the way in which the seen elements of bodies and surfaces point to those things which we cannot see and which the characters, deprived of any overarching language to express their situation, cannot speak.

These disagreements with some elements of the book should be seen as differences of opinion or approach rather than as major criticisms. Overall, Mai's book is to be warmly welcomed. Meticulously researched and fluently written, it makes a very substantial and important contribution to the literature on two enormously important film-makers.

## NOTES

[1] There has been one other book-length study of the Dardenne brothers' work. This is *Committed Cinema: The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne; Essays and Interviews*, edited by Bert Cardullo (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). A collection of already published critical articles, the book provides a valuable insight into the different ways British and American critics have responded to the Dardenne brothers' works. However, because most of the pieces in it are relatively short, it cannot develop the kind of sustained analysis that Mai does in his book. A chapter length study of the brothers' work by the author of this review, 'Ethics in the ruins of politics: the Dardenne brothers,' is to be found in Kate Ince, ed. *Five directors: Auteurism from Assayas to Ozon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) pp. 59-83.

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[2] see Luc Dardenne, *Au Dos de nos images, 1991-2005* (Paris : Seuil, 2005). Luc Dardenne's book is required reading for anyone interested in the brothers' work.

[3] Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

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ISSN 1553-9172