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Niels Niessen, *Miraculous Realism: The French-Walloon Cinéma du Nord*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020. xiii + 322 pp. Acknowledgments, notes, films referenced, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781438477336; \$33.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781438477343; \$32.25 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781438477350

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“Le choc: Cannes 1959”: thus a compilation of archival images on the INA website commemorates the triumph of the French New Wave on the Croisette.[1] That year, François Truffaut presented his first feature film, *Les quatre cents coups*, for which he received a standing ovation and the award for best director. More than the birth of the French New Wave, the 1959 Cannes Film Festival marked the official consecration of a movement centered on a group of young (male) Parisian auteurs who revolutionized—and revived—postwar French cinema. Defying the production norms of the motion picture industry, New Wave directors deployed nonprofessional actors, direct sound, and location shooting, championing an aesthetic premised on inexpensive filmmaking in the streets of the French capital.

“The Miracle of Cannes 1999” (p. 1): thus Niels Niessen describes, in *Miraculous Realism: The French-Walloon Cinéma du Nord*, the double consecration of a cross-border cinema on the Croisette exactly forty years later. At Cannes, the Walloon filmmakers (and brothers) Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne won the Palme d’or for their *vérité* drama *Rosetta* whose eponymous protagonist searches for a normal life away from her alcoholic mother and financial hardship. The northern French director Bruno Dumont obtained the Grand Prix for his existentialist detective story *L’Humanité* centered on the investigation of a young girl’s murder. Needless to say, the filmmakers’ respective exploration of precarity and evil in the French-Belgian border region contrasted with the sun and glamour of Cannes and elicited from audiences both applause and boeing. With their small budgets, location shooting, and nonprofessional actors, the Dardennes and Dumont reclaimed on the Croisette the neorealist heritage of the New Wave. At the same time, the reinvented realism of *Rosetta* and *L’Humanité* displaced bourgeois life in the French capital during the *trente glorieuses* to document instead a northern region long neglected by cinema and plagued in the present day by enduring economic and social crises. For Niessen, this Cinéma du Nord approximates not a wave but an invisible wind that blows from France to Belgium and back, binding this cross-border region aesthetically and historically.

Miraculous Realism takes this “miracle of Cannes” as a point of departure to postulate the existence of—and concomitantly inscribe onto the atlas of world cinema—a new realism spanning from northern France to the predominantly Francophone south of Belgium since the 1990s. While

André Bazin famously asked in the postwar period “What is Cinema?” Niessen sets out to answer the question: “What is the Cinéma du Nord?”^[2] This ambitious book deploys a transnational and regional approach to provide several answers. The Cinéma du Nord “is not a small *national* cinema.” Rather, in encompassing Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Wallonia, the term designates “a geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural region...across a national border” (p. 11). Accordingly, for Niessen, this cinema is premised on a “short circuit” insofar as “it is tied to a region that does not exist” (p. 68). The cultural-aesthetic movement mapped in *Miraculous Realism* is bound by a shared history of coal mining, heavy industry, immigration, and, ultimately, lasting economic decline, all of which shaped the border region over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Steeped in two post-industrial societies and a global era of growing precarity, this cinema effectively “expresses and emerges from a crisis” (p. 5). As the double consecration of *Rosetta* and *L’Humanité* at Cannes in 1999 intimates, the two regional cinemas separated by the French-Belgian border have confronted this crisis in at once distinct and similar ways. Walloon filmmakers like the Dardennes have cultivated a committed cinema whereas their French northern counterparts like Dumont have privileged social caricature. Yet the fiction and documentary films of the North collectively evidence a new realism deeply rooted in the humanist tradition.

Echoing a body of work that seeks “to render visible the margins and the marginalized at the turn of the twenty-first century,” *Miraculous Realism* places at the center of the frame an overlooked cross-border region and film movement (p. 217). For Niessen, the Cinéma du Nord is at its core a missing picture. On the French side of the border, this region is indissociable in the history of cinema from, in François Baudinet’s words quoted by Niessen, “the question of the unseen, of the ‘disappearance’ of the North on the screen, of the ‘unfilmable’” (p. 107). Long ignored by filmmakers—with the exception of the features of post-New Wave director Maurice Pialat—and plagued by negative stereotypes, northern France only began to emerge as a regionalist cinema in the 1980s. On the Belgian side of the border, this invisibility has been reinforced by a national film industry underfunded in the first decades of the twentieth century (in comparison to its larger French neighbor) and regionally divided between Flanders and Wallonia, Flemish and French. This lack of national unity on the big screen has pressed film critics and historians to pose the question of “whether Belgian cinema exists in the first place” (p. 153).

Miraculous Realism counters these missing moving pictures by means of an immersive journey through the cross-border region. Divided into four informative chapters whose atlas encompasses the Cinéma du Nord, Francophone-European films, and French philosophy, the book includes an interlude titled “Excursion,” comprised of several pages of photographs of the Nord taken by Niessen. The author’s at times experimental style is itself immersive: chapter one, for instance, opens with a play button. Calling to mind the reconversion of coal mining areas into digital valleys, such as the post-industrial landscapes of the Borinage region in Wallonia where Google stores its data, this icon also invites readers to a film screening.

Titled “Hunting for Easter Eggs in *Rosetta* and *L’Humanité*,” chapter one centers exclusively on a comparative analysis of the two “miracles” of Cannes and a methodology premised on “playing, pausing, replaying” these two films (p. 23). Immediately immersing readers into the Cinéma du Nord, Niessen’s close readings of these postsecular moral tales call to mind the handheld camera of the Dardennes: characteristic of their reinvented realism, the camera follows *Rosetta* closely throughout the film, “refus[ing] to leave her alone” (p. 21). In the same way, the opening scene

of *L'Humanité* follows the police lieutenant Pharaon de Winter, moving from a longshot of the northern landscape where he is seen walking to a close-up of his face in the mud after he has fallen. Niessen's rigorous film analysis in this first chapter seeks to train the eye of the viewer in order to reveal what might be otherwise be missed—not only the Nord as an image “unseen” in the history of cinema but also the films' problematic humanism. Demonstrating that the seemingly straightforward narratives of the Dardennes and Dumont conceal passion stories inherited from the films of Robert Bresson, Niessen ultimately argues that *Rosetta* and *L'Humanité* replicate a patriarchal binary structure. In these two cross-border films, he observes, the male protagonist “operates as the humanizing agent while the female protagonist...appears as the passive agent of that humanity” (p. 63).

Chapter two, “Coal-Fired Dreams, the Cinéma du Nord,” shifts from close reading to historical context. Here, the reader embarks on a journey through the Nord across time and space—by way of maps, photographs, paintings, and film stills. After illuminating the longstanding historical, social, and economic connections between the two sides of the border, Niessen traces the distinct film histories of Wallonia and northern France. Francophone Belgium has a long history of committed cinema. In 1933, the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens and the Fleming Henri Storck made *Borinage*, a film that, documenting the depression-era strikes by factory workers, marked the birth of Walloon cinema. In 1960, Paul Meyer released the Italian-neorealist-inspired fiction film *Déjà s'envole la fleur maigre*. Also set in the Borinage, the film immortalized the iconic *terril*—or man-made mountain—of Belgium's declining industrial landscapes. As the centrality of the Borinage in these two forerunners intimates, Walloon cinema remains “a strongly *rooted* cinema” whose realist films, like the emblematic *Rosetta*, are shot on location and deploy non-professional actors from the region (p. 103). If Walloon films juxtapose regional specificity with the universal human condition, this chapter demonstrates how French northern cinema similarly, in René Pradal's words quoted by Niessen, “show[s] this region while addressing all spectators” (p. 109). In the case of France, however, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais was, until the 1980s, obscured by the centrality of Paris in the collective imagination and the history of cinema.

In Chapter three, “Cinéma du Nord, a Euregional Cinema,” Niessen further compares the two sides of the border by detailing the socio-economic contexts out which their respective filmic productions emerged. Setting aside close readings of films entirely, this chapter retraces, somewhat laboriously, funding policies since the postwar period that have shaped the Cinéma du Nord. Niessen thus moves from the creation of the Centre National de la Cinématographie in 1946 to the end of the golden age of French cinema with the rise of television in the seventies to a renewed interest in culture through the policies of French culture minister Jack Lang in the eighties. By the early 1990s, a “new New Wave” or “jeune cinéma” had arrived in France: these new auteurs (among them Dumont) born in the early years of the New Wave shared a fascination with the youth while contributing to the decentralization of French national cinema in rendering visible varied regions on the big screen. On the other side of the border, government support for Belgian auteur cinema began in the mid-sixties. In line with the contemporaneous communitarization of Belgian culture, this period firmly established an enduring cultural divide between Walloon and Flemish cinema. Francophone-Belgian auteur cinema today benefits from European funding structures and collaborations with its French neighbor, thriving as part of a transregional Cinéma du Nord rather than a national film industry.

Preceded by the photographic “Excursion” to the North, the book's final chapter leaves aside the material conditions of film production to strictly engage with French theorists and philosophers-

-from André Bazin to Alain Badiou. Titled “New Realism after the Modern Cinema,” this chapter situates the origins of the “miraculous realism” of the Dardennes and Dumont in a long tradition spanning from the early films of Jean Vigo to Italian neorealism to the New Wave. As Niessen demonstrates, the reinvented realism consecrated at Cannes in 1999 borrows as much from modern cinema as it does from classical films: while chronicling the daily lives of ordinary people, it remains fundamentally a storytelling cinema that approximates Gilles Deleuze’s “action image” or plot-driven cinema of the classical period (p. 194). Beyond revisiting and expanding theories of realism developed by Bazin, as well as by Jacques Rancière, Niessen specifically locates new realism as a missing image in Deleuze’s cinema books. As he notes, Deleuze omits Pialat’s “intimate, affective cinema,” a precursor to both the Dardennes and Dumont, entirely from *The Movement Image* (1983) and *The Time-Image* (1985) (p. 220). To remedy this absence, Niessen suggests adding to Deleuze’s typology the *acting/acted image*, a term that captures new realism’s humanist investment in its protagonists and immersive experience for moviegoers in the form of direct sound and closeups.

In the chapter’s final pages, where we would expect to return to the Dardennes and Dumont, Niessen undertakes a close reading of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Éloge de l’amour* (2001) through the lens of Badiou’s writings on grace. While echoing the themes of *Rosetta* and *L’Humanité*, the intrusion of Godard’s film in the closing pages of a book on the Cinéma du Nord evidences the legacy of the New Wave and its director-critics not only on new realism, but also on Niessen’s own theorization of a cross-border cinema first consecrated at Cannes in 1999. Ultimately missing from *Miraculous Realism* is a more critical engagement with the iconic French film movement and precursor to new realism, particularly an auteur model that aligned masculinity and creativity. While Niessen introduces a feminist critique in his close readings of *Rosetta* and *L’Humanité*, his book replicates a postwar cinephilic discourse untouched by gender studies. Omitting Geneviève Sellier’s landmark feminist deconstruction of the auteur model, *Miraculous Realism* weaves a history of the Cinéma du Nord almost exclusively comprised of male directors.[3] The handful of cross-border women filmmakers included are only mentioned in passing, never the object of a close reading or a consecration on the Croisette. The “miracle of Cannes” with which the book begins indirectly sets the stage for Niessen’s history of the Cinéma du Nord. The festival has long favored male auteurs: over the course of its seven-decade history, eighty-two female filmmakers have competed at Cannes—as opposed to 1,645 male directors, including the Dardennes, who are two-time Palme d’Or winners.[4]

Echoing back to the 1959 consecration of the New Wave, the “miracle of Cannes” intimates Niessen’s dialogue with French theorists and philosophers throughout his study. While *Miraculous Realism* builds on the transnational turn in film studies, the book engages very little with this scholarship. For instance, given the linguistic diversity of the cross-border region, could we define the films of the Nord as an “accented cinema” (to play on the title of Hamid Naficy’s canonical study of exilic filmmaking)?[5] Indeed, beyond the iconic images of the *terril*, and beyond Deleuze’s typology of images, what would it mean to further define and delimit the Cinéma du Nord through its varied acoustic landscapes? *Miraculous Realism* nevertheless remains an illuminating journey through an overlooked cross-border region, inviting scholars to continue excavating the histories of the Cinéma du Nord.

NOTES

[1] See “Le choc: Cannes 1959,” <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/video/vdd10007925/le-choc-cannes-1959>.

[2] See André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1999).

[3] Geneviève Sellier, *La nouvelle vague: Un cinéma au masculin singulier* (Paris: CNRS, 2005).

[4] To denounce this gender-based discrimination, eighty-two women—among them Agnès Varda, the sole female filmmaker of the New Wave—protested on the red carpet at Cannes in 2018.

[5] Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema. Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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