

Hunting for Easter Eggs in the Dardennes' *Rosetta*

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A door slams. A young woman agitatedly walks down a corridor, the handheld camera on her heels. She's wearing a white overcoat and a hair net. We don't see her face. She turns right, right, left. A second door. *Slam!* She moves down the stairs into a factory hall, which remains blurry as the camera maintains focus on her back. We hear the noise of machines. "Entrez dans mon bureau!" [Come back to my office!] calls a man, in shirt and tie, as he obstructs her way, "Entrez dans mon bureau, je vous dis!" She evades him and slides underneath the assembly line, while the camera struggles to keep up with her and to keep her in focus. "C'est vrai que t'as dit que je suis souvent en retard!?" [Is it true you've said I'm often late?], she asks angrily, out of breath, to a female coworker. She has been fired, we realize.

Inevitably, this transcription of the opening scene of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *Rosetta* (France/Belgium, 1999) remains insufficiently expressive of the film's texture, of its color, and of its rapid pace. Figure 2 captures the close range at which the camera follows Rosetta (Émilie Dequenne), the film's seventeen-year-old protagonist. The scene is characteristic of the Dardennes's

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Figure 2. *Rosetta's* opening scene

realism as suggested by the protagonist's obstinacy, the close-up shots of the back of her head, the direct sound, the elliptical editing, and the camera's refusal to leave her alone. The camera is determined to follow Rosetta and to make felt her struggle for a human life.

This essay shares in the film's own obsession with its title character. The essay is a very close reading of *Rosetta* that reenacts my own decoding of the affective mind game the film casts its spectator into. Over the course of this analysis, I discover a few "Easter eggs," including the very hard-boiled egg Rosetta eats before she attempts suicide in the final scene. In computing, an Easter egg is a program's coded response to an undocumented user command, like a secret level in a computer game or the tilted interface upon Googling the word *askew*. In cinema, an Easter egg is an element easily missed by the first-time spectator but that may aid in unlocking the narrative code. Consider, for instance, Alfred Hitchcock's cameos, the shadow of Michael Haneke's camera in *Caché* (France, Austria, Germany, and Italy, 2005) (which proves it's the filmmaker himself whodunit), the mirroring scars in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (UK, France, and Italy, 2004) (which confirm that Isabelle and Théo are really two sides of the same fantasy), or the password that appears at the end of the final credits in *The Matrix* (dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, US, 1999) (which allows the spectator to "hack" into whatisthematrix.com, until Warner Brothers suspended the website in 2011). In Christianity, the originally pagan association of the egg with fertility was baptized into a symbol of Christ's resurrection. Ultimately, this essay reveals the Easter eggs hidden in *Rosetta* to be the key that grants access to the Passion story—with a small *p*—which the film hides in its deceptively realist texture like an Easter egg painted in the colors of the field. Browsing ahead to find out "whodunit" would spoil the analysis. But my analysis does not simply play along with *Rosetta*; it is also a critique. However self-reflexive *Rosetta* may appear in its flirtations with Christian tropes, the film models its narrative on a classical quest structure in which the male protagonist operates as the humanizing agent, while the female protagonist functions as the passive recipient of what remains a rather vague notion of humanity.

“Your Name Is Rosetta”

Let’s press PLAY again. Following the opening scene, which ends with the police dragging Rosetta out of the factory, we see her eating a waffle. The camera then follows Rosetta—on the bus, through a wooden gate she’s not supposed to use, across a busy road, down the shoulder of a road, through the forest, underneath a fence—to her home at the “Grand Canyon,” the trailer park where she lives with her alcoholic mother (Anne Yernaux). By trailing Rosetta’s trespasses and shortcuts, the camera maps her small world at the margins of society. As Luc Dardenne observes, Rosetta “is in a state of war.”¹ Her radius of action is small: other than the forest and the trailer park, the main hubs in her life are the thrift store to which she sells the clothes mended by her and her mother, the apartment of her new friend Riquet (Fabrizio Rongione), and the waffle stand where Riquet works until Rosetta denounces him to get his job. As she travels between these places (in scenes that are very similar to one another in terms of framing and editing), the film familiarizes the viewer with her habitat and habits, including the forest drain pipe in which she hides her rubber boots. Having exchanged her shoes for her boots, Rosetta, carrying a large plastic bag and with the camera in close pursuit, once again finds her way through the woods, changes into her shoes, and disappears underneath the fence enclosing the trailer park (fig. 3).

The Dardennes shot *Rosetta* in Seraing near Liège, their hometown. Liège is the largest metropolitan area in Wallonia, which at the turn of the millennium had unemployment rates among the highest in Europe. The film engages this crisis through Rosetta’s desperate quest for a job. Rosetta expresses her desire to become a member of the working class, and to belong, in a more general sense, at the end of the day after her painstaking efforts have finally paid off and she has found a job. Lying in bed in Riquet’s apartment, she assures herself of her normalcy:

Tu t’appelles Rosetta. Je m’appelle Rosetta. Tu as trouvé un travail. J’ai trouvé un travail. Tu as trouvé un ami. J’ai trouvé un ami. T’as une vie normale. J’ai une vie normale. Tu ne tomberas pas dans le trou. Je ne tomberai pas dans le trou. Bonne nuit. Bonne nuit.



Figure 3. Rosetta, carrying a large plastic bag, once again finds her way through the woods.

[Your name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You've found a job. I've found a job. You've found a friend. I've found a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won't fall in a rut. I won't fall in a rut. Good night. Good night.]

The day following this self-subjectifying prayer, however, Rosetta is laid off again and finds herself back at square one of her flight forward.

Like all of the Dardennes's films, *Rosetta* is a moral tale that tests its protagonist's humanity. Its universe appears strictly immanent, and yet the film disallows an understanding of Rosetta's actions as being fully determined by her precarious material conditions. The film also connects her quest to a moral struggle, leaving space for a minimum of agency on the young woman's part to do the right thing despite everything. How far will she go to pursue her modest dreams? Is she willing to sacrifice her humanity? This testing of her moral character becomes most explicit in the scene in which Rosetta stands by passively for forty seconds after Riquet, the waffle maker, falls into a muddy stream. Only after a sustained inner debate does Rosetta grab a stick to pull her friend out of the water, even though she wants his job.

What are we to make of this spark of compassion that interrupts Rosetta's painfully long moral struggle? Does it demonstrate "the possibility of human agency in a time when we have lost faith in that possibility," as Thom Andersen argues in relation to the Dardennes's *Le silence de Lorna* (Belgium/France, 2008)?² Andersen distinguishes Lorna (Arta Dobroschi) from the wandering protagonists of Italian neorealist cinema. "[Lorna's] perceptions," he writes, "lead immediately to actions, there is no dissociation between them. Against the tide of neorealism, the Dardennes continue to insist that action is character."³ Like nearly all of their protagonists, Lorna and Rosetta are always moving. They are always acting, and in that respect they differ from the neorealist wanderer. But when perceptions immediately lead to actions and are thus inseparable from the actions they trigger, what is the role of agency, if agency is understood as the locus of indeterminacy between perception and action? If Rosetta acts, it is because she is acted *upon*—she is acted upon by a society that chases, confines, excludes, exploits, and dehumanizes her. Most of the time, she's depicted as acting out of instinct, the near elimination of the interval between perception and action, rather than agency. The forest Rosetta cuts through and where she fishes, for food rather than fun, is an urban wilderness where she needs to be continuously on her guard, especially with the park manager. If she does not wander, it is not because she is less desperate than her neorealist predecessors. She simply does not have time to wander.

To understand the temporal structure of Rosetta's subjectivity, it is instructive to compare her to another of the Dardennes's characters, Bruno (Jérémy Renier) from *L'Enfant* (France/Belgium, 2005). Slightly older than Rosetta, Bruno is the leader of a small gang of petty thieves. Assuring himself that he will always find money, he's only interested in the current rate at which things are going, from a stolen camera and the hat that looks so good on him to his own child, which he sells to a black market adoption ring for some quick cash. He lives strictly in the present, which makes him seem somewhat psychotic. Rosetta, in contrast, refuses any reality that would force her to live strictly in the present. She struggles to survive, but she also has her pride and persistence, her humanity.

Whereas Bruno seems to have accepted his life at the margins and survives day to day until reality decides otherwise, Rosetta wants a normal life, starting with a job. Unlike Bruno, she's obsessed with her future—with making a quantum leap into normalcy—a desire for which she's willing to sacrifice the present. She rejects Riquet's offer to assist him in swindling his boss by selling his own homemade waffles at the stand because she wants “un vrai travail” [a real job]. Rosetta refuses to dehumanize herself in the face of a dehumanizing society. That's why she throws out the salmon her mother has been given for free: “On n'est pas des mendiants” [We're not beggars]. Rosetta catches her own fish with her own homemade traps. And that's also why she pulls out the plants her mother has planted near the trailer because she refuses to accept the trailer as her home: “Pourquoi tu plantes tous ces trucs? On va pas quand-même rester ici hein” [Why are you planting all these? We will not stay here anyway]. But Rosetta is also ashamed of her current situation, which leads her to lie about living at a “manège” [a horse-riding school] to a social security officer. She wants a job, but, more than that, she wants to be normal and human, in her own eyes and those of society whose gaze she ventriloquizes before going to sleep: “Tu t'appelles Rosetta” [Your name is Rosetta].

A Normal Life

Rosetta's fight to integrate herself into a fraying postindustrial social tissue attests to the waning of parochial power structures—including the nuclear family, the church, trade unions, and the welfare state—that seek to define a “normal,” “human” life, attaching people to a stable set of subject positions from cradle to grave. In his late essay “The Subject and Power,” Michel Foucault describes parochial power as a form of power, or a “power technique,” that originated in Christian institutions and subsequently became integrated into the modern Western state.⁴ Christianity, Foucault explains, introduced a code of ethics that spread new power relations throughout the ancient world. By organizing itself as a church, Christianity postulated “in principle that certain individuals can, by their religious quality, serve others not as princes,

magistrates, prophets, fortune-tellers, benefactors, educationalists, and so on, but as pastors.”⁵ Foucault outlines four characteristics of pastoral power: first, pastoral power is salvation oriented in that it aims to assure the individual’s place in heaven; second, it’s an oblativ power willing to sacrifice itself for the well-being of the flock (this in difference with sovereign power); third, it is a life-shaping power at once invested in the community as a whole and in individual life in particular; and fourth, pastoral power produces truth, the truth of the individual. With the spread of early-modern capitalism, pastoral power lost its vitality. At the same time, the pastoral function was redistributed beyond the church and became incorporated by the modern state in a secular form. Foucault writes:

I don’t think that we should consider the “modern state” as an entity which was developed above individuals, ignoring what they are and even their very existence, but on the contrary, as a very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns.

In a way, we can see the state as a modern matrix of individualization, or a new form of pastoral power. (214–15)

This modern pastoral power is no longer salvation-oriented but instead seeks to protect people in this world through, for instance, public health care, social security, and a police system (which, Foucault emphasizes, not only was invented to maintain law and order but also operated in the eighteenth century as a distributive infrastructure for urban supplies). Modern pastoral power *subjects* the individual considered human. It disciplines the subject with carrot and stick, and, in the same movement, creates the subject as an agent capable of speech, action, and participation in discursive and material exchange.

Moreover—and this is the crux of Foucault’s argument—modern pastoral power creates the individual as a potentially resistant subject who can challenge, individually and collectively, those very subjectifying structures. In her essay “Bodies and Power

Revisited,” Judith Butler refers to this line of argument in order to defend Foucault against the critique that he did not sufficiently theorize resistance. She argues that Foucault develops, in “The Subject and Power” and the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, a dialectical understanding of subjectivity that defines the subject as both the product of power and a form of resistance against the ways power attaches the subject to its own identity. Butler observes in Foucault an “implicit theorization of passion,” with “passion” understood as the attachment to the norms through which the subject relates to themselves.⁶ But Butler also signals in the late Foucault a tendency to think of passion as a persistence in being that seeks to detach itself from the norms that bind it, which brings this passion close to Freud’s notion of the drive or Baruch Spinoza’s concept of *conatus* (inclination). Combining these two lines of thought at work in Foucault, Butler writes:

Perhaps we can speculate that the moment of resistance, of opposition, emerges precisely when we find ourselves attached to our constraint, and so constrained in our very attachment. To the extent that we question the promise of those norms that constrain our recognizability, we open the way for attachment itself to live in some less constrained way. But for attachment to live in a less constrained way is for it to risk unrecognizability and the various punishments that await those who do not conform to the social order.⁷

To detach oneself from social norms, and to detach oneself from oneself, is to risk one’s life discursively and materially. To do so is dangerous, but it is also potentially transformative. I fully agree with this reading of Foucault. However, and to return to *Rosetta*, what happens at the state’s margins, where pastoral-disciplinary power disintegrates and the social tissue frays, leaving life more formless and precarious, less “human”? What resistance remains when there is no “normal life” for the subject to relate to? Such is Rosetta’s dilemma. She is all resistance, but instead of detaching herself from a norm, her struggle for recognition is driven by precisely her attachment to the idea of a normal, working-class life. As Lauren Berlant argues, what matters most for Rosetta is

the *feeling* of normativity, of being confirmed in her existence by reality. “The ongoing prospect of low-waged and uninteresting labor,” Berlant writes, “is for Rosetta nearly utopian, and it makes possible imagining living the *proper* life that capitalism offers as a route to the *good* life.”⁸

However, Rosetta is thwarted time and again in her feeling of belonging. Her character testifies to a postindustrial precariat who scrape by through their underpaid labor or who find themselves excluded from the work process altogether. They are deemed by that process as “unexploitable” and typically lack the social mobility to escape their small worlds. Because where would Rosetta go, without much of an education or transferable labor skills and with her mother to take care of? Rosetta lacks a support system. Her family is broken, if she ever really had a traditional family situation at all. (We never hear about her father, but the film leads us to infer that she and her mother lived elsewhere before moving to the trailer park.) And with the exception of the repressive police intervention in the opening scene, the state is only present in its absence. As a young person lacking job security, Rosetta is fired twice for no good reason, and her application for unemployment benefits is rejected because she hasn’t worked “long enough.” Rosetta is highly aware of the position that a society with few unskilled labor opportunities has cast her into, and she resists her less-than-human nonsubjectivity with all her life force.

The Acting/Acted Body

Rosetta does not merely narrate this struggle for humanity; it also makes it felt. The film stays literally close to its protagonist, mimicking her movements and revealing the corporeality of her struggle—her sweat, her breath, her pain. Such elements of what Joseph Mai identifies as the “sensuous realm” of the Dardennes’s aesthetic include the extreme close-ups, the sheer absence of establishing shots, the fast-paced editing, the direct sound, and, above all, the haptic cinematography.⁹ Like all of the Dardennes’s early works, *Rosetta* was shot with a lightweight 16-mm handheld camera, allowing camera operator Benoît Dervaux to follow



Figure 4. *Mouchette* (dir. Robert Bresson, 1967)

actress Émilie Dequenne from a very close range. For most of the film, Rosetta's body, most often her back or the back of her head, fills the entire frame. Shots are often bouncy and out of focus, as when she suddenly turns and surprises both camera and viewer. As Mai writes, "Sensuous realism demands a good amount of effort on the part of viewers. Objects and bodies become more important but less coded, and we tend to look at them as we do to real objects and bodies, as shapes, textures, weights, smells, and relations we investigate."¹⁰

Rosetta, as Mai also points out, is an inverted citation of Robert Bresson's *Mouchette* (France, 1967), a film based on a story Bresson himself adapted from Georges Bernanos's novel *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette* (1937). *Rosetta* contains many references to *Mouchette*: the shortcuts through the woods (fig. 4, compare to fig. 3), the mother-daughter relationship, the absent father, the male friend who involves the heroine in his illicit affairs, the lost footwear, the alcohol, the mud, the fighting, and the two suicide attempts. (Even the *s* and *t* sounds in "Rosetta" echo "Mouchette.") Equally crucial are the ways the Dardennes deviate from Bresson (and from Bernanos). First, *Mouchette*'s struggle is one of sexual awakening, whereas *Rosetta* is explicitly desexualized. Second, whereas the Dardennes's camera is almost glued to its protagonist, Bresson

maintains much more distance—literally, in terms of shot length, and figuratively, in terms of emotional investment. Third, while Mouchette dies, *Rosetta* ends on an open, hopeful note.

In terms of acting, *Rosetta* at once cites—and, in that citation, deviates from—*Mouchette* and from Bresson's approach to acting in general. As Bresson did with his models, the Dardennes require their actors to repeat gestures and dialogues until all semblance of performance is eliminated. However, whereas Bresson saw his models as “all face,” as “two mobile eyes in a mobile head, the latter itself on a mobile body,” the Dardennes are concerned with bringing out their actors' humanity.¹¹ How does this dialectic between the profilmic acting body and the fictional acted body play out in *Rosetta*? The Dardennes selected Dequenne out of a group of two thousand young women who had responded to a call printed in the Walloon press and aired on the Walloon radio. From this group, the Dardennes invited three hundred young women for a screen test. Because Rosetta's accent was crucial for the brothers, they did not cast in France. As Luc Dardenne explains, Rosetta “had to speak French without a Parisian accent, given the fact that in the script—and even more in the script than in the film—there are ‘belgicisms.’ We also looked for a way of speaking, for [a young woman] which had the same accent as we, because we do not really speak like you [the interviewers].”¹²

Having been offered the part, Dequenne still had to become Rosetta. The brothers asked Dequenne to dye her hair and let her plucked eyebrows grow back, and during a period of two months they practiced gestures and actions, such as fishing, waffle making, and fighting, with her. Dequenne also had to “unlearn” certain traits, like dancing, because Rosetta does not know how to dance.¹³ On the set, the Dardennes continued to challenge Dequenne's physique. The film was shot in late fall and early winter, but Rosetta wears only a skirt and thin red jacket. So when Rosetta's cheeks look rosy and her fingers numb, and when she shivers all over after her mother has thrown her into the stream, this is because Dequenne herself—who was not wearing any makeup—was actually cold. Similarly, the scenes in which Rosetta becomes exhausted by dragging her drunk mother up a flight of stairs or carrying heavy

bags of flour owe their poignancy to Dequenne's actual fatigue. Luc Dardenne describes the shooting of the final scene, in which Rosetta struggles with a gas canister: "We did maybe ten takes and chose the last one, because the more the actress did it, the more tired she got. And the moment when she falls is the moment where we improvised in the frame."¹⁴

As much as *Rosetta* exploits Dequenne's physique, the film refrains from sexualizing her, even if Rosetta frequently appears in positions and situations that, were they framed slightly differently, would likely obtain an erotic charge. Consider the scene in which she and Riquet are fighting in the grass when the camera reveals her underwear and stockings. Like Rosetta herself, who expresses no sexual interest in the sympathetic Riquet (even though he is clearly attracted to her), the camera is sexually uninterested in Rosetta. She is too closed off to enter into an intimate relationship, caught up as she is in her survival mode. "Je peux avoir les bottes?" [Can I have the boots?], she asks Riquet only minutes after arriving at his place for what he presumes is their first date. But love is not on Rosetta's mind, even though she gradually loosens up, and even smiles, when Riquet demonstrates his poor gymnastic skills. After their supper of Jupiler beer (like waffles, another Liège specialty) and *pain perdu* ("lost bread," better known as French toast), Riquet asks her to dance. But Riquet is moving too fast: Rosetta cannot dance, she tells him, and when he insists she dance with him anyway, Rosetta is struck with stomach cramps.

A North Wind

At one point, however, the camera catches Rosetta masturbating, perhaps because the scene, in a deliberate play with the viewer's attentiveness, seeks to go unnoticed. Let's REWIND to the conversation Rosetta has with her mother inside their cramped trailer. It's a key scene, "key" in the sense that this triptych of shots contains crucial information about Rosetta's cramps and, directly related, her relationship with her mother.

This triptych occurs about fifteen minutes into the film, when Rosetta has just arrived home: Close-up of Rosetta sitting on

the edge of her bed. She's in pain and presses her knee into her chest. The shot feels cramped because of the thick curtain that covers almost half the frame. "Give me a glass of water," she asks her mother. Her mother tries to help:

MOTHER: When that happened to me . . .

ROSETTA (interrupting): I don't care. [Je m'en fous.]

MOTHER: I can at least tell you.

ROSETTA (annoyed): You tell me each time. I'm not you. [Moi c'est pas toi.]

Rosetta swallows a painkiller. She's still on the bed, her clothes disheveled. With her hand, she applies pressure to her lower belly and pelvic area to relieve her pain. Meanwhile, her mother reaches for the bag with beers Rosetta has bought at the waffle stand. Rosetta, as if bitten by a snake, jumps up, too fast for the camera:

ROSETTA: It's not yet six!

MOTHER: So what, you're here.

ROSETTA: I'm here because I got fired, not so that you can drink.

Rosetta is getting really angry now and pulls the bag from her mother's hands. "You only think of drinking and fucking!," she yells as she disappears behind the curtain she draws in front of the frame. *Cut.* In the next shot, the camera is with Rosetta behind the curtain. She's sitting on the bed, her body still contorted from pain. She lies down. While we get a close-up of her face, she presumably comforts either her lower belly or pelvic area, outside the camera's field of vision. She closes her eyes. Her facial muscles relax a little, and for an instant her mouth curls up in such a way that suggests pain relief has yielded to sexual pleasure (fig. 5). Almost immediately, though, Rosetta is distracted by a cold north wind creeping underneath the trailer window (fig. 5). She gets up

and, somewhat neurotically, stuffs the window frame with toilet paper to shut out the draft. (As we learn in an earlier scene on the city bus in which she sneezes and then decisively shuts the window, Rosetta has an intolerance for drafts.) We hear her mother's off-screen voice: "Let me drink one." "Leave!" Rosetta responds. *Cut.* Rosetta grabs a hair dryer from underneath her bed, lies down, and turns it on. From a close-up of the side of her face, the camera pans right—down her body, to her uncovered belly—as she comforts herself with the hot air. Rosetta moves the hair dryer back and forth just above her navel, holding the tool very close to her skin in a fashion that calls to mind the gestures of a medic performing an ultrasound scan (fig. 5). The camera pans back up her body, but the scene ends before the camera reaches her face.

Rosetta/o

The exact cause of Rosetta's cramps remains ambiguous. They could be menstrual cramps; they could also be symptoms of psychosomatic stress. Or is Rosetta expecting? No, that last scenario seems unlikely, given the conversation she has with her mother, who tells her daughter "each time" how she used to deal with the cramps when she was Rosetta's age. What becomes clear from this conversation, though, is that Rosetta's cramps are part of the film's depiction of her femininity because she has inherited the cramps from her mother.

This last observation is crucial. Rosetta is female, a fact that contrasts ironically with Luc Dardenne's confession that "on the set [he and his brother] called Rosetta 'Rosetto,'" doubtful as they were about their ability to create a convincing female protagonist.¹⁵ But Rosetta needs to be Rosetta, not necessarily because of her struggle but because of the film's depiction of that struggle, for a number of reasons. First of all, whereas now sexual repression—if that's the right term—is an important part of Rosetta's survival mode, had she been a young man, the film's depiction of that repression would have been much less explicit. Second, the mother-daughter relationship is essential to the narrative: Rosetta



refuses to inherit her mother's position, and she expresses that refusal, in part, by denying the fact that she is, in many respects, like her mother: "Moi c'est pas toi" [I'm not you]. Third, the film's depiction of Rosetta's fighting and her carrying of heavy objects relies heavily on the stereotypically "unwomanly" nature of such actions, as well as the fact that these actions stretch the limits of what both Rosetta and Dequenne are physically capable of. Had she been a young man of the same age, this physical struggle would have seemed much more traditional. Fourth, had Rosetta been male, we would not have been able to speculate whether she's pregnant. To these reflections about Rosetta's gender identity I would add the fact that the film leaves Rosetta's ethnic descent somewhat ambiguous. Her name invites us to wonder, though, whether her father was—or is, if he's still alive—part of Wallonia's large Italian immigrant community. And here it does not really matter that Dequenne is not Italian-Walloon, if only because the Dardennes also cast the Italian-Walloon Patrizio Rongione for the role of the non-Italian-Walloon Riquet—for *Le silence de Lorna*, the Dardennes cast Rongione more stereotypically as the gangster Fabio, while in *Deux jours, une nuit* (Belgium, France, and Italy, 2014), Rongione stars as Manu, short for either Manuel or Manuelo.

To return to gender: however complex Rosetta may be as a character, there is also an uncomfortable, moralistic side about the film's depiction of her female identity. The film suggests a connection between Rosetta's sexual and emotional repression, on the one hand, and her struggle for a "normal life," on the other (a connection also found in *Deux jours, une nuit*). In a Catholic spirit, the film associates "a normal life" with the holy Oedipal triangle of "mommy-daddy-me" (per Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), restricting female sexuality to the confines of romantic, heterosexual union.¹⁶ Moreover, Rosetta's explicitly desexualized sur-

Figure 5. One time, though, the camera catches Rosetta masturbating, *perhaps*. Almost immediately, though, she is distracted by a north wind, entering the trailer as if it were the holy spirit, upon which Rosetta comforts her aching tummy with a hairdryer in a fashion that calls to mind a medic performing an ultrasound scan.

vival mode contrasts with the reality that many young women who find themselves in a precarious position similar to Rosetta's end up working in the sex industry, whether or not of their own consent. Even though *Rosetta* never explicitly identifies its protagonist's sexual orientation, the film does not allow for a reading in which she's lesbian or bisexual: as the final scene reveals, Rosetta's journey down her own Via Dolorosa turns out to have been structured as a male quest motif all along. Moreover, Rosetta and Riquet ultimately do end up together, not in a kiss or in romantic union (as would have been the case in traditional melodrama) but face to face before the image cuts to black.

The narrative thus follows a heteronormative logic in which "the male protagonist is free to command the stage" while female sexuality is represented as a mystery.¹⁷ As Teresa de Lauretis writes, in the case of melodrama, this logic usually entails an inward or outward journey of the female protagonist that ends with her reaching the place where "a modern Oedipus will find her and fulfill the promise of his (off-screen) journey."¹⁸ This is exactly what happens in *Rosetta*: at the last minute she is saved by Riquet. As the credits start to roll, we still don't know what will become of her or whether something will happen between her and Riquet. Yet despite this open ending, the film provides some sense of closure by suggesting that Riquet's intervention will lead Rosetta to drop her emotional shield.

The Acting/Acted Body (Continued)

In the preceding hour and a half, the film makes felt that emotional shield through the many times Rosetta appears out of focus or slips out of the frame—aesthetic choices that contribute to the film's frayed, documentary texture. Despite this documentary feel, *Rosetta* is a very dense, highly coded narrative. Almost everything Rosetta says or does has an ambiguous significance within the film's narrative structure. That significance, and even the fact that a plot element is a coded sign in the first place, is not always immediately clear, like Rosetta's sneezing in the bus (which

implies her intolerance for drafts) or her chugging of a bottle of beer (which suggests that she might have inherited her mother's alcohol issues). And even if we can situate such seemingly insignificant details within a larger web of meaning, they retain a contingent quality that the Dardennes construct very deliberately. "In a documentary," Luc Dardenne remarks, "if the person makes an unexpected movement, you try to follow them but you don't always succeed. The person goes in and out of shot. What takes a lot of time in our rehearsals is constructing scenes or shots as if we couldn't manage to be in the right spot with our camera."¹⁹

When we try to forget for a moment what we've learned about *Rosetta* through behind-the-scenes sources like interviews or Luc Dardenne's journal—and instead concentrate strictly on Rosetta's two-dimensional acting/acted presence flickering over the screen—how can we distinguish between what is "acted" and what is not? How can we isolate those aspects of the on-screen body that are not actively acted but are "real," so to speak, in that they are gestures acting through the body of the actor hiding herself in the act? Giorgio Agamben discusses this nonacted excess, or remainder, perceptible in the screen actor's performance as "cinema's essence," which, he argues, lies not in the image but in the gesture. For Agamben, "what characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens the sphere of *ethos* as the more proper sphere of that which is human."²⁰ Gesture is where acting breaks down. It is the action in a person's acting that happens inadvertently, that accompanies acting but also happens despite it: a nervous tic, a way of doing, an unfeigned blush. Gesture escapes meaning and reminds us of the fact that we're human only insofar as we exist in discourse. Agamben writes: "Cinema's essential 'silence' is, just like the silence of philosophy, exposure of the being-in-language of human beings, pure gesturality."²¹

Is Agamben's concept of gesture useful for our analysis of *Rosetta*? Yes and no, because now the question becomes: how can the viewer determine when and where acting yields to gesture, especially when a film integrates an actor's real-life presence into their

on-screen performance? We know that the Dardennes extensively practiced gestures with their actors, like Dequenne selling waffles, in order for those activities to look natural. At the same time, they cast Dequenne in the first place because “she made the stand exist.” “We went to buy waffles,” Luc Dardenne recalls, “and we really felt it was her stand.”²² Based on this anecdotal evidence, we can speculate that, especially in those few moments when Rosetta appears most “human” and “normal,” like Rosetta in the waffle-selling scene or last supper with Riquet, the gestures are essentially Dequenne’s own. Had the Dardennes practiced them with a different actress, Rosetta’s on-screen presence would feel very different. *Rosetta* thus encourages the viewer to conflate character and actor, transferring, through the screen as it were, the tension internal to the acting/acted body. This tension is not a fine line separating the performing real from the performed nonreal. Rather, it is immanent to the on-screen presence of a performing/performed life.

The Holy Spirit

Rosetta’s affective screen presence is at once allegorical and non-allegorical. Rosetta is on her own in her struggle, but she is not alone *in it*, as the film subtly reminds us by having her bump into the young woman whose job she’s just been given (fig. 6). As I have argued, Rosetta’s struggle testifies to a heterogeneous, precarious class in an era in which traditional class categories have become blurry and which is difficult (if not impossible) to represent both politically and aesthetically. This precariat figure emerges from the crisis of parochial power structures, a crisis that has left it unclear for many what a normal life looks like. We shouldn’t feel too nostalgic about those structures, however, at least not insofar as their ideal of a normal, human life was—and continues to be—modeled on a male, white, heterosexual, able-bodied European subject. Moreover, we should be equally wary of the inclusive and diverse, “mindful” faces with which the poststate life-shaping platforms of Google, Facebook, Airbnb, and the like challenge and supersede the old modern structures. This disruptive movement is used, after all, to enhance corporations’ profit-driven



Figure 6. Rosetta bumps into the young woman whose job she has just been given.

activities that contribute to socioeconomic segregation within and between societies, often along lines of gender and race.

To return to Rosetta: her cramps are not just instances of “brute presence, her animality,” as Jacques Rancière argues.²³ They’re also an allegorical device that positions Rosetta in a relation of inheritance with her mother. Rosetta is emphatically not like her mother, yet in her refusal to inherit her mother’s social position, she attempts to deny the fact that in many respects she *is* like her mother. Rosetta refuses to dehumanize herself in the face of a dehumanizing society, but this desperate obstinacy to affirm her humanity, her refusal to inherit, leads her to lose her humanity and bring out her *bêtise*, or what the film presents as her animality and stupidity. Rosetta simultaneously does and does not know what makes or would make her human. That’s why she almost lets Riquet drown, and why she betrays him to get his job. The following day, however, Rosetta realizes that, having exchanged a friend for a job, she has stripped the latter of its normalizing quality. “Laisse-moi passer” [Let me through], she says while evading Riquet when he tries to hold her accountable for her betrayal. Rosetta’s only answer to the world is her flight forward—across the road, back to the trailer park, where she finds her mother drunk again. She drags



Figure 7. The only thing Rosetta symbolically gives birth to is the hard-boiled egg.

her mother into the trailer, boils an egg, walks to the outside pay phone, quits her job, returns, cools the egg in a bowl of water (fig. 7), turns on the gas, shuts the curtain in front of her bed, lies down, and eats the overboiled egg—all in one interrupted movement. Over a long take, the gas fills up the screen until the soundtrack swells and dies out. Rosetta gets up again, disconnects the gas canister, and goes to buy a new one. While she's on her way back to the trailer, struggling with the canister like Christ with his cross, we are reminded of Mouchette, who did succeed in her second suicide attempt, and whose tragedy Rosetta is about to cite. Then Riquet arrives on his moped, aggressively circling around her, the camera, and the viewer, until Rosetta stumbles and breaks into tears, her head on the canister. Riquet helps her up, and Rosetta, in a rare close-up of her face, just looks, not at the camera—which rests momentarily, panting from exhaustion as she does—but at her savior (fig. 8, the closing image of this article). At the end of this long close-up, the film cuts to black.

Rosetta is a twisted variation of the Passion narrative, as I have made already more or less explicit throughout this essay: the sacramental waffles, Rosetta's bedtime prayer ("Your name is Rosetta"), the last supper with beer and "lost bread," the fish,

the betrayal, her stumbling with the gas canister, the “revivifying hard-boiled egg,”²⁴ the baptisms of both Rosetta and Riquet in the stream, and, hidden in plain sight in the trailer and occurring fifteen minutes into the film, the triptych of shots that is the Rosetta stone that cracks the mystery of her impregnation. First, we have Rosetta’s split second of sexual self-pleasure (which is not so ambiguous after all); second, her inspiration by the holy spirit in the guise of a “cold north wind creeping underneath the trailer window”; and third, the close-up of Rosetta using the hair dryer to perform an ultrasound scan of her empty womb (fig. 5). Now, we finally understand her cramps, which Luc Dardenne describes as “birthing pains that deliver no child.”²⁵ The only thing Rosetta symbolically gives birth to is the hard-boiled egg, which she baptizes in the bowl before knocking it against her head. In sum, Rosetta is all at once the unholy Virgin Mother of her own resurrection and the daughter of an absent father, a female christ in a world without God.

Game Over; or, The Moral of the Story

This subverted Passion story will presumably be lost on many first-time viewers (and even those who have seen the film multiple times). *Rosetta* demands an active, pensive, and probably obsessive spectator who “return[s] to and repeat[s] certain moments and break[s] down the linearity of narrative continuity” (as Laura Mulvey defines the pensive spectator).²⁶ *Rosetta* is a “mind-game film” that implies and implicates “spectators in a manner not covered by the classical theories of identification,” as Thomas Elsaesser defines this category of narrative-driven cinema especially popular in the 1990s and 2000s.²⁷ Think of *Donnie Darko* (dir. Richard Kelly, US, 2001), *Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan, US, 2000), *The Matrix*, and also *Caché*. As is the case with these films, *Rosetta* reveals its complete diegesis only to the spectator willing to search for and piece together fragmentary plot elements, thus integrating the act of watching into its plot (and hence its diegesis). On first viewing, however, *Rosetta* doesn’t appear to be a mind-game film at all but a goal-oriented narrative that seeks to touch the

spectator, playing on their emotions and senses in a way that demonstrates that, as Laura Marks writes, “vision itself can be tactile,” as when Rosetta runs out of focus, dragging the camera with her through the woods.²⁸ Finally and fundamentally, *Rosetta* teases the viewer into its excavated Christian audiovisual vocabulary. The film signals a bleak world lacking in humanity—whether in terms of parochial care, working-class solidarity, or compassion—and responds to this lack with a critical fairy tale, a fairy tale made of crisis in which the normal and the miraculous are two sides of the same self-referential coin. When we study the after-image of the film’s concluding close-up, we observe simultaneously the affective presence of both a particular acting/acted human face and a universal notion of a human face. This multilayered face is simultaneously both what it is (the face of a young woman) and, through the film’s evangelical subtext, what it is associated with, namely christ (with a small *c*).

The question is how comfortable we are with this association. *Rosetta* is not an explicitly humanist film, in that it refrains from reinvesting the word *human* with inherent meaning. Nor does its fairy tale convey an outspoken moral about friendship or forgiveness. The Dardennes’s flirtations with the word-become-flesh are too self-conscious and smart for that. Instead, *Rosetta*’s humanist moral lies in its narrative structures. The film only implicitly defines *human* by integrating its perverted Passion story into the overarching, binary confines of a heteronormative narrative structure. *Rosetta* does not end with a romantic union as male quest narratives classically do, but it does end with a miraculous twist brought about by the male protagonist who operates as the humanizing agent, while the female protagonist, face to face with her compassionate savior, appears as the passive recipient of that humanity. *Rosetta* thus ultimately affirms the patriarchal binaries its secular Passion story challenges elsewhere. It affirms Rosetta as human at the expense of her femininity, eliminating its earlier ambiguity regarding what drives Rosetta by fully integrating her character into its normative code. As it turns out, even God’s absence cannot change the fact that the spirit chasing the film’s postsecular plot space—sneaking underneath Rosetta’s window and onto our

screens—is modeled on a conventional patriarchal logic on a quest for narrative closure.

This longing for a minimum of grace—which defines *Rosetta* and all of the Dardennes's fiction films from *La promesse* (France/Belgium, 1996) to *La fille inconnue* (France/Belgium, 2016)—emerges from a decreased faith in collective action, the communist utopia-to-come, and the social-democratic ideals of solidarity and emancipation. To redeem what Deleuze refers to as these “missing people,” the Dardennes's miraculous realism takes recourse to the vocabulary and imagery of Bresson's minimal Catholicism, according to which God may or may not exist (what does it all matter?, to paraphrase Bresson's curé) with the main difference that, unlike Bresson, the Dardennes are unable to kill their protagonists.²⁹ The love and rejection of reality (to paraphrase André Bazin³⁰) that drives their films doesn't turn the actors into models but affirms them—self-reflexively, but also somewhat problematically—as humans, while their humanist Catholicism is of a more secular, milder, and optimistic nature than Bresson's.

In conclusion, I agree with Lauren Berlant that *Rosetta* is a privileged example of a new-realist “cinema of precarity” that witnesses the global fraying of socioeconomic structures.³¹ But there is more to be said about new realism beyond that it is a witnessing mode of a global precariat, or what autonomous Marxism refers to as “multitude.” New realism is also often explicitly humanist. *Humanism*, in this context, refers to a belief system according to which people have an innate moral drive toward community. Such humanism has been rightfully critiqued for its male, heteronormative, white, and Eurocentric gaze.³² For these same reasons, we need to be critical, even vigilant, about new realism's flirtations with humanist understandings of life. Nonetheless, in its most self-conscious forms, new realism also urges the critical posthumanist viewer to reflect on the vestiges of humanism in their outlook on the contemporary world. Take the example of *Rosetta*. Berlant writes that “the Dardennes represent consciousness under present systemic economic, political, and intimate conditions . . . where if you're lucky you *get* to be exploited.”³³ True, *Rosetta* gives us the title character's precarious struggle for a normal life. But it also

plays a game with its viewer. More than Rosetta's precarity itself, the film's real subject is the emotional response it teases from the viewer while secretly telling a Passion story in which Rosetta is the holy virgin and christ at once. The film is a testing ground that, despite its own morality, compels the critical viewer to analyze to what extent their worldview holds on to the uncritical desire for a "human" face amid a reality in which people are defined by work despite the fact that many are denied access to it. The question of posthumanist thought—or at least one of its questions—is whether it is possible to redefine *human* without reaffirming, however minimally, the asymmetrical binary of male-female.

Notes

This essay is an excerpt from the first chapter of *The Miraculous Realism of the French-Walloon Cinéma du Nord* (forthcoming). The icon at the start of this essay is a design by Daniele de Santis, downloaded from www.iconarchive.com/show/audio-video-outline-icons-by-danieledesantis.html.

1. Luc Dardenne, *Au dos de nos images (1991–2005), suivi de "Le Fils" et "L'Enfant" par Jean-Pierre et Luc Dardenne* [The backside of our images (1991–2005), followed by *The Son* and *The Child* by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne] (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2005), 66.
2. Thom Andersen, "Against the Grain: Lorna's Silence," *Film Comment* 45, no. 5 (2009), www.filmcomment.com/article/lornas-silence-review/.
3. Andersen, "Against the Grain."
4. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208–26.
5. Foucault, "Subject and Power," 214.
6. Judith Butler, "Bodies and Power Revisited," in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, ed. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintage (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 190.
7. Butler, "Bodies and Power Revisited," 191–92.

8. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 163–64.
9. Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 53.
10. Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*, 57.
11. Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe* [Notes on cinematography] (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 37, 39.
12. Bernard Benoliel and Serge Toubiana, “Il faut être dans le cul des choses”: Entretien avec Luc et Jean-Pierre Dardenne” [In the heart of the matter: An interview with Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne], *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 539 (1999): 49.
13. Benoliel and Toubiana, “Il faut être,” 50.
14. Bert Cardullo, “The Cinema of Resistance: An Interview with Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne (June 2009),” in *Committed Cinema: The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*, ed. Bert Cardullo (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 190.
15. Dardenne, *Au dos de nos images*, 137.
16. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 23.
17. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 6, no. 18 (1975): 13.
18. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 140.
19. Margaret Pomeranz, “Interview: The Dardenne Brothers' *Child*,” in Cardullo, *Committed Cinema*, 172.
20. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57.
21. Agamben, *Means without End*, 59–60.
22. Benoliel and Toubiana, “Il faut être,” 49.

23. Jacques Rancière, "Le bruit du peuple, l'image de l'art: À propos de *Rosetta* et de *L'humanité*," *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 540 (1999): 111, my translation.
24. Bert Cardullo, "Rosetta Stone: A Consideration of the Dardenne Brothers' *Rosetta*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 1 (2002), www.unomaha.edu/jrf/rosetta.htm.
25. Dardenne, *Au dos de nos images*, 91. Here I cite Dardenne as a critic of his own work rather than as its author.
26. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 183.
27. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 30.
28. Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), xi.
29. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), 208.
30. André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* [What is cinema?] (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1975), 263, my translation.
31. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 201.
32. See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 17.
33. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 171.

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Figure 8. Rosetta looks offscreen at her savior.