Toronto International Film Festival 2008—Part 5

The Dardenne brothers: but what about the “extenuating circumstances”?

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This is the fifth and final part of a series devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-13).

The unfolding economic crisis, with its vast social and political implications, will propel film writers and directors to think about all sorts of questions that they considered settled or hadn’t considered at all. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 was a defining moment in modern American culture, as well as its political life, and the present widespread discrediting of the “free market” system will have a similarly radicalizing effect globally.

We can only add: it’s about time.

You could understand the objective difficulties, lodged in decades of political reaction and the social qualities and experiences (or lack thereof) of the film artists, and still protest against the all-too weak and pallid representations of life generated by most filmmakers in the last 15 years or so in particular. Patience with the historical process is not the same thing as a passive “reconciliation with reality.”

Even now, some writers and directors, who identify themselves with the establishment, will no doubt try to pretend that nothing has happened, but the most thoughtful and sensitive will make the new situation the starting point for important work. Complications and difficulties will arise, but they will be healthy ones.

Certain concepts will inevitably return to the discussion in artistic circles: social class, capitalist crisis, objective forces, socialism. A great many stupid ideas, taken for granted only a few years or even months ago, about the inadvisability or even impossibility of grasping social life and history in art, will dissipate.

This change in the artists’ thinking will itself validate the materialist conception that the development of the world shapes the development of art. “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (*The German Ideology*).

None of this, of course, will take place easily or overnight. A great many vested interests have been built up over the last period, and not all of them “spiritual,” by any means. Reputations, careers and incomes will be at stake.

A period of political reaction or stagnation saps the confidence of artists in the ability of masses of people to oppose attacks on their basic rights and conditions, much less their capacity to challenge fundamentally the existing order. All sorts of retrograde notions crop up, and oppositional views, unless guided by longer-term and more substantial perspectives, are eroded.

Many former political “radicals” make their peace, in one fashion or another, with the status quo. For artists of “left” views, the situation is not always so clear-cut. They are not politicians and, therefore, not immediately under the same pressures or obligations. Moreover, the artists often “learn” their politics in the form of sentiments and feelings bound up with the concrete imagery they create. Those ideological views are somehow embedded in the artistic products and not so easily detached from them.

It will be found that honest artists generally “lag behind” social reality and their political and philosophical views tend to be cloudy, but those views, once absorbed, are liable to endure. Of course, much depends on the concrete conditions, the relations between the intellectuals and the working class in a given country, and so on.

It should be noted that the most “political” filmmakers may be more susceptible to changes in popular mood and social climate.

The Dardenne brothers, Jean-Pierre (born 1951) and Luc (born 1954), from Belgium, have been making feature films since 1996, and directed documentary films for some years before that, of a generally left-wing character (including one on the Belgian general strike of 1960). In recent years, critics and admirers have made considerable claims for them—for example, that they are “reinventing realism”—and the Dardennes have developed a substantial following, especially among young people.

This is understandable. During one of the worst decades in the history of the movies, where trivial and self-involved work largely held sway, the brothers continued to make relatively low-budget films in working class areas, with non-professionals or, at any rate, without glamorous performers. Each of their films (*La Promesse* [*The Promise*], *Rosetta*, *Le Fils* [*The Son*], *L’Enfant* [*The Child*] and now, *Lorna’s Silence*), as I noted in 2006, “has treated working class life or particular details of that life—the impact of work or lack of work, relationships between generations—with undoubted seriousness and concern.” (See “The Dardenne brothers' *L'Enfant*: an argument for a far more critical appraisal”)

This “seriousness” is accentuated, in many minds, by the Dardennes’s frequent use of hand-held cameras and available light, the absence of musical scores or soundtracks, subdued acting and cinematography. They’ve also produced and presumably assisted with a number of films by newer directors.

We spoke to Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne in Toronto, and they were personable and sincere. (See interview)

All that being said, there is still the matter of the artistic quality of their films. The fact remains, in my view, that their dramas are rather uninspired and, ultimately, contrived. Moreover, their chilly, matter-of-fact “realism” expresses an ambiguous attitude toward the working class characters that borders on the unsympathetic.

This is bound up, in my opinion, in large measure with the social and political problems referred to above. In the case at hand, these problems find reflection in the semi-erosion of the Dardenne brothers’ leftist views over the last quarter-century and their partial, probably unconscious reconciliation with various ideological positions that have come to the fore.

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Like many somewhat (or more than that) discouraged radicals, while they are no doubt prepared to accept in principle the existence of class society, the necessity of a social struggle, and the importance of historical issues, what they see as determinant are the "real concerns" that people face in their daily lives and the moral choices they make; existence, in other words, as it is "genuinely lived."

Although the general conditions of modern life are presented, those tend to recede from the Dardennes's films, and we are left with an examination of those moral choices, and inevitably, with the impression that the individuals are primarily responsible for the outcome. (A more profound approach would start out "from the real premises and...not abandon them for a moment" [*Ibid*].)

In *Lorna's Silence*, the title character is a young Albanian woman living in Liège, a city in French-speaking southern Belgium (and one of the oldest industrial centers in the world).

Lorna (Arta Dobroshi) wants to open a snack bar with her boyfriend, Sokol (Alban Ukaj), who is away working. To raise the funds, she has agreed to the plan of a local mafia boss, Fabio (Fabrizio Rongone), and married a drug addict—Claudy (Jérémie Renier)—for money so she can obtain Belgian citizenship. She's then supposed to end that marriage and marry a Russian mobster in order that he, in turn, can be naturalized. Fabrizio wants to speed up the process, and save a good deal of money, by arranging for Claudy to die from an overdose. Lorna, to begin with, is not disturbed by this prospect, nor is Sokol.

When we first see her, Lorna is as cold and impersonal as she can be in her relations with Claudy. When he makes efforts to clean himself up, relying on her in the process, she develops feelings for him. She makes efforts to obtain a speedy divorce, and promises to take the money Claudy will have to be paid (at the time of the divorce) out of her share of the eventual earnings from the Russians, but the criminals have other, more ruthless plans. The discovery later that she's pregnant deepens her moral crisis.

This film is superior, in my view, to *L'Enfant*, the Dardennes's previous work, because of a somewhat more plausible narrative and the presence of Dobroshi, a talented actress from Kosovo. At several moments, Lorna's desperate situation is presented in a moving and convincing manner.

Nonetheless, in the end, *Lorna's Silence* suffers from some of the same defects as the Dardennes's earlier films. Again, in the first place, the filmmakers tend to confuse flatness with realism. For the most part, the characters are unappealing and the brothers treat them coldly. Even Lorna is only extended affection at certain moments. In the most remarkable films, novels and plays, the creators both love and criticize their creations deeply.

The drama is contrived. As in *L'Enfant*, the Dardennes offer up a character capable of the most brutal act, in this case, murder, and have her undergo a transformation that is not genuinely credible. We raised some of these issues in our conversation in Toronto.

Class society damages some people so much they are capable of anything. Someone prepared to kill another human being to open a snack bar is quite far-gone. Do such people exist? Of course. Are they likely to be moved by elemental human concerns as Lorna is, to be transformed because of the plight of another? This is a gross underestimation of the difficulties, it seems to me.

Luc Dardenne explained to us that he and his brother had heard a story about a drug addict in Brussels who was approached by the Albanian mafia to marry an Albanian prostitute in return for a large sum of money, so she could become a citizen. But this is not an insignificant difference. Lorna is not a prostitute—she's as modest and faithful as one can imagine, until she's driven to take desperate measures.

There is an unresolved dualism in the Dardennes's films that weaken them artistically. The filmmakers create hardened or bitter characters and then present their startling metamorphoses outside of any objectively driven process, simply as the result of certain cumulative internal psychological processes. The films are not convincing, one feels, because the brothers have to introduce minor miracles to overcome their own essential skepticism.

In another interview, Luc Dardenne said about Lorna, "How can a woman who doesn't believe in God believe everything is possible? Where does this crazy hope come from? She is strange, out of the ordinary. A fictional character always swims against the tide."

Yes, in the world the Dardennes have created in their new film, where does this "crazy hope come from"? And what does this reference to a fictional character swimming "against the tide" signify if not a tacit admission that theirs is a contrivance?

A political problem may very well lie at the heart of the artificial character of the Dardennes's stories. Undoubtedly, the filmmakers are disturbed by the dog-eat-dog mentality in the decaying industrial areas of Wallonia, the loss of solidarity and community. And so they should be. Now, added to that, there is the ruthless individualism of sections of the immigrant population, from eastern Europe in this case.

However, a concrete investigation of the processes that have led to a cultural and moral decline and the rise of anti-social behavior would inevitably direct the Dardennes toward the parties, left tendencies and labor bureaucracies that have abandoned the Belgian working class to the tender mercies of globalized capital. In eastern Europe, the same issues would be posed in regard to the Stalinist regimes. But such an investigation is intellectually demanding and would also perhaps hit too close to home; the Dardennes come out of the left-radical milieu themselves.

They take the line of least resistance and concentrate on the failings of the population, which is portrayed largely as an inert, backward mass. However, still disturbed by the state of society, the Dardennes look to find a way of making change possible, but they now locate that possibility artificially, in largely mysterious ("crazy") individual psychological transformations.

When I asked about the plausibility of Lorna's turnabout, Jean-Pierre Dardenne suggested, "That's the power of fiction. That's what interested us, to see how in our story we could give Lorna the ability to change." But fiction of this kind, to be convincing, needs to bear a close relation to a reality external to itself.

Mass psychology is not individual psychology extended to the whole of society; it is a qualitatively specific system, with its own laws. The moral transformation of a society is not the sum total of individual changes. In the final analysis, as Marxists have long understood, the growing sense that something is terribly wrong and unjust with a society is a reflection of the fact that economic and social processes have undermined the existing order and that a solution, in the form of the reorganization of life on a higher social principle, now exists.

The effort to work out a social psychology from the individual "outward" is doomed to failure. As is the effort to give people "the ability to change" based on such an approach. In the final analysis, only the movement of great social forces, relatively independent of the individual's consciousness, can explain sharp shifts in the moral and political climate of a society.

The artist is not obliged to paint all that on his or her canvas, but even the accurate representation of a detail of life, or a fleeting moment, requires that the artist have some sense of the relationship between the individual and the social whole.

The Dardennes essentially argue in our interview that, "of course," big social problems require big social movements and big struggles, but that's not their concern in this film. That's another story. And, they assert, they don't let "extenuating circumstances" interfere with their artistic efforts. But what sort of humane approach leaves those out? What is Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, if not an extended account of the socially rooted

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extenuating circumstances that make Clyde Griffiths's actions comprehensible?

Lorna may be a poor immigrant, the Dardennes argue, but that doesn't absolve her of her anti-social behavior. Who would suggest that it does? Her situation doesn't excuse anything, nor does it explain her conduct fully. Human beings are responsible for what they do in the narrow sense, but if her conditions of emigration, exploitation and poverty (and the social order as a whole) are not, in the larger scheme of things, responsible for her actions, then what connection exists between the macro- and microcosmic spheres? Why portray the social conditions at all, if they are not an active element?

Social contradictions and iniquities exist, the reasoning goes, but they are over there in the distance somewhere and they can't really explain why people act as they do. This helps account for the artistically unsatisfying character of the film. It is not an integral, whole piece. It falls into two parts that are never harmoniously brought together: in the background, the state of life in Liège, for immigrants in particular; in the foreground, Lorna's ethical dilemma. There is no necessary and inevitable connection between the two. The Dardennes themselves, in our conversation, rule that out ("extenuating circumstances" must not play a role).

In the end, the filmmakers are reduced to moralizing about what individuals do and wagering on their capacity to listen to their better selves, especially if they are helped out by more enlightened souls, in this case, the filmmakers, offering the character "the ability to change."

The emphasis is seriously wrong. Even the title indicates the difficulty. "*Lorna's Silence*," as though it were all up to her. *Her* silence, *her* fault. This comes perilously close to middle class sermonizing, preaching virtue to the downtrodden.

In any event, the Dardennes's films provoke debate and thought, and that is certainly worth something.

Other films, other problems

Other problems about social life had problems too. Some were simply overwrought like *Khamsa*, about a half-Roma, half-Algerian French kid living in Marseille. The film (directed by Karim Dridi) is sincere, but social horrors piled on social horrors, with little or no perspective, tend to inure an audience. The youth who plays the lead, Marc Cortes, is quite good. He deserved a more sober and thoughtful scenario.

Katia's Sister, from Dutch director Mijke de Jong, is a peculiar film about a young girl who lives entirely in the shadow of her gorgeous sister, Katia. Katia, her sister and mother are immigrants from Russia. The mother turns to prostitution, Katia to stripping; the younger sister watches everything with a combination of naiveté and astonishment. The director says it is her intent to establish compassion for her characters. The film is rather passive, ultimately, and conveys no strong feelings. Why is there no protest here, no outrage? The characters, says the director, are represented "with equal love, without judgment." And the social order?

Ramin Bahrani made *Chop Shop*, which appeared at the film festival last year. His *Goodbye Solo* is also intelligently and sensitively made, but it is a less interesting film. Set in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the film is the story of a Senegalese-born taxi driver, Solo, who befriends an older white southerner, William. Solo is endlessly compassionate and understanding. Too much so. The picture is not big enough, and the "humanism" is somewhat self-conscious and facile. A step backward.

Samira Makhmalbaf from Iran once made a beautiful film, *The Apple*, in 1998. Her father is Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who also once made interesting films. If *Two-Legged Horse* is anything to go by, written by the father and directed by the daughter, the pair are deeply disoriented. The events in the Middle East, in Central Asia are terrible: war, poverty, repression. But this story, of a semi-legless boy who makes another boy into his slave, *literally his horse*, sheds no light on anything. The Makhmalbafs appear to blame the population for its misery.

They seem to be illustrating Yeats's philistine argument:

"Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!
A beggar on horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on."

In an interview, Samira Makhmalbaf approvingly cites Freud to the effect that "the whole history of human civilization is as thin as ice on an ocean of ignorance and savagery." There is nothing concrete here, nothing valuable for human beings, just lectures about how rotten people are.

Cloud 9 is a German film about an older woman who begins an affair with an equally elderly man, resulting in the break-up of her long-term relationship. The director, Andreas Dresen, says he wanted "to tell this love story as if they were young people." Old people, he explains, "are not granted any great emotions, and no sexuality whatsoever."

This is not very profound, and neither is the film. Old people are not simply young people with a few years added on. Qualitative changes take place. People have the right to break up and realign themselves whenever they want, but the central figure, Inge (Ursula Werner), strikes one as rather selfish. What's the point here? To see how far German filmmaking has fallen, compare this film with R. W. Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), which is far more compassionate and objective look at these problems.

We have a long way to go.

Concluded

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