



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 6
Issue 1 April 2002

Article 7

12-14-2016

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Recommended Citation

Cardullo, Bert (2016) "Rosetta Stone: A Consideration of the Dardenne Brothers' Rosetta," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol6/iss1/7>

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Rosetta Stone: A Consideration of the Dardenne Brothers' *Rosetta*

Abstract

The Dardenne brothers' *Rosetta* has Christian overtones despite its unrelieved bleakness of tone. In fact, the titular heroine, a teenaged Belgian girl living in dire, subproletarian poverty, has much in common with Robert Bresson's protagonists Mouchette and Balthasar. Both *Mouchette* (1966) and *Au hasard Balthasar* (1966) are linked with *Rosetta* in their examination of the casual, gratuitous inhumanity to which the meek of this earth are subjected, and both films partake of a religious tradition, or spiritual style, dominated by French Catholics like Bresson, Cavalier, Pialat, and Doillon. Those who have argued that the Dardennes' film is merely a documentary-like chronicle of a depressing case choose to ignore this work's religious element, in addition to the fact that *Rosetta*, unlike *Mouchette* or *Balthasar*, is alive and in the good company of a genuine human spirit at the end.

The Dardenne brothers' *Rosetta* won the Palme d'Or at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival over David Lynch's *The Straight Story*, and I suspect that the American entry lost not only because of the increasingly virulent anti-Americanism of the French, but also because of this picture's unashamedly Christian overtones in an era unparalleled for its greedy secularism. But *Rosetta* has its Christian overtones as well, though they have been missed by every commentator I have read, probably because of the movie's seemingly unrelieved bleakness of tone. Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne themselves have not helped their cause by comparing *Rosetta* to the modernist hero of Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), a land surveyor called "K.," who tries in vain to be recognized by the very officials who supposedly have summoned him to their village (which is overlooked by a castle on a hill).

She has more in common, however, with Bresson's protagonists than with Kafka's "K" - in particular with the late, great French filmmaker's *Mouchette* and *Balthazar*. Their parables represent a departure from the Christian certitude to be found in such earlier works by Bresson as *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950), *A Man Escaped* (1956), *Pickpocket* (1959), and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962); still, a principle of redemption or a promise of transfiguration operates in *Mouchette* (1966) and *Au hasard, Balthazar* (1966) as well, even if it may be found only in a humanity or an animality redeemed from this earth. Both these pictures are linked with *Rosetta* in their examination of the casual, gratuitous inhumanity to which the

mEEK of this earth are subjected, a fourteen-year-old girl in the former case and a donkey in the latter.

Mouchette is the loveless, abused, humiliated daughter of an alcoholic father and a dying mother, living in a northern France made to seem unreal by the juxtaposition of village life from another century with the modernity of jazz and automobiles. So relentlessly oppressive is Mouchette's young existence that she finally drowns herself - to the accompaniment of Monteverdi's *Magnificat*, which is Bresson's way of indicating that death alone is victory over such a spiritually wasted life. Balthasar, by contrast, begins his life as a child's pet who is formally christened, virtually worshipped like a pagan idol, and generously adorned with flowers. But the world of hard labor brutally intrudes: Balthasar is beaten and broken in; becomes a circus attraction; gets worked almost to death grinding corn for an old miser; then is hailed as a saint and walks in a church procession after his rescue, only to be shot to death by a customs officer during a smuggling escapade. The donkey's only saving grace, in a bizarre world of leather-clad motorcyclists and roughhewn millers, is that he is allowed to die on a majestic mountainside amid a flock of peacefully grazing sheep.

I have summarized *Mouchette* and *Au hasard, Balthasar* in some detail because I believe that the Dardenne brothers know both these films as well as the religious tradition, or spiritual style, of which they partake - one dominated by

French Catholics even subsequent to Bresson, in such pictures as *Cavalier's Thérèse* (1986), Pialat's *Under the Sun of Satan* (1987), Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter* (1992), and Doillon's *Ponette* (1996). Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne happen to be Belgian, not French, and prior to *Rosetta* they spent twenty years making sociopolitical documentaries for European television before turning to fiction film in the socially realistic *La promesse* (1996). That fine and unforgettable work burrowed into a rough chunk of proletarian life in Liège today, an economically deterministic environment in which the struggle to survive leads, ravenously, to the exploitation of workers by other workers. Into this pit of money-grubbing vipers came an African family that showed a morally degraded, teenaged Belgian boy - simply through their dignity and pride - that another kind of existence is possible, even in the muck. We are in the heavily industrialized city of Liège again in *Rosetta*, and again we are dealing with a Belgian teenager, this time a girl. But in their second feature film the Dardennes (who write their own screenplays) not only forsake this world of proletarian realism for the nether one of subproletarian naturalism; at the same time, paradoxically, they seem to invoke an otherworldly realm that, unbeknownst to Rosetta (or anyone else in the picture, for that matter), runs parallel to her own.

Living in a tiny, beat-up trailer (sans toilet or running water) with her alcoholic, irresponsible, utterly dispirited mother, who mends old clothes for

peddling in second-hand shops when she is not turning tricks in exchange for drinks, eighteen-year-old Rosetta is a furiously sullen bundle of energy. This adolescent longs to have a "normal" life - which for her means having a "real" job - and to become a productive member of society, but even this modest goal appears to be beyond her grasp. (Hence her identity is as a member of the lumpenproletariat, or proles who haven't had mechanized or otherwise rote work long enough to be dehumanized by it.) As we see at the film's outset, Rosetta must be bodily removed from a factory where she's just been fired, for reasons unspecified. Subsisting in existential angst, quietly terrified that she will slide into the abyss like her bedraggled mother, the fresh-faced daughter wages a desperate, purely instinctive battle to lift herself out of her wretched, nearly feral existence and achieve a material state of grace.

Like some form of brute life force, the barely socialized Rosetta will do anything but beg to survive; like a jackal (as opposed to Balthasar, a passive pack animal), she will nip at any chance to prolong her life - including poach fish with rudimentary tackle from a pond so dank and muddy that it could be called a swamp. Indeed, this movie makes a spectacle of Rosetta's repeated dodging across a highway and ducking into the woods that adjoin her trailer park: as quick and cunning as an animal, she scrambles for her life, then covers her tracks, hides her things, and hoards her food (sometimes outside, where she'd rather compete with

the foxes for it than with her shiftless mother). Ever walking briskly when she is not actually running, Rosetta appears to compensate for the paralyzing, anomic dread of her implacable existence with a defiant, headlong tread.

Determined to find regular work after being fired from the factory job - and equally determined not to go on welfare - Rosetta applies for several menial vacancies without success before landing a position at a waffle stand. There she replaces a young woman whose sick baby caused her to miss ten days of work in one month, and there she meets Riquet, a young man from the countryside who ekes out his own pittance at the waffle stand while secretly skimming profits from his boss. (This taskmaster runs a number of such stands throughout Liège, and is played by the voracious Olivier Gourmet, the father in *La Promesse*). Delicately performed by Fabrizio Rongione, Riquet is the only person in the film to show Rosetta any kind of sympathy, and the two develop a tentative friendship - though his awkward attempts to gain her romantic interest go completely unacknowledged by the preoccupied girl. During one such poignant try at Riquet's crude apartment (which appears to be carved out of a warehouse), he treats Rosetta to a dinner of beer and fried bread, stands on his head, then plays a tape of himself amateurishly banging on a set of drums (the only "music" we hear during the movie, since the Dardennes wisely eschew the adornment of a musical soundtrack here as in *La Promesse*) and tries to teach her to dance. She remains unresponsive, however,

especially because of an attack of stomach pain, one of several such (unexplained) attacks that recur throughout the film. But she does ask to sleep at Riquet's place, just to get away from her mother for a night - which she does, in her own bedroll, untouched by her understanding host.

Before falling asleep, Rosetta utters in voice-over (even as we see her on screen) the following mantra of reassurance, words that at the same time painfully attest to the degree of her alienation from a self that she has nearly objectified in an effort to steel her humanity against the world's cruel indifference: "Your name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You've found a job. I've found a job. You have a friend. I have a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won't fall into the rut. I won't fall into the rut." To indicate the relative normality that Rosetta has achieved, the Dardennes film most of this scene at Riquet's apartment in a static, becalming long take, with the camera in medium shot. Much of the rest of *Rosetta*, by contrast, is photographed with a handheld camera that remains disorientingly close to the heroine as she dashes about, with a twofold effect. On the one hand, the restless, uneven camerawork of Alain Marcoen (who was also the director of cinematography for *La Promesse*) creates the visual equivalent of the instability and uncertainty in Rosetta's life; on the other hand, the handheld camera seems to dog Rosetta with an angry intensity that matches her own, as it were her doppelgänger-cum-guardian angel or, antithetically, the devil of destiny in disguise.

The jagged, hurtling camera immediately resumes its ways in the scene following Rosetta's sleep-over at Riquet's, where she is fired from the waffle stand after being on the job for only three days. (She is replaced by the boss's son despite her efficiency, and despite the fact that this girl has never seemed happier - and therefore more personable - than when she's been serving up waffles.) So desperate is she not to "fall into the rut" which now gapes wide-open before her, that, after she's terminated, the raging teenager pathetically clings to a heavy sack of flour as though it were simultaneously a life raft and the anchor preventing her forcible removal from a life-giving ocean of work. Rosetta possessed no such lifeline when, earlier, she and her estranged mother had become embroiled in a fight along the shore of the turbid, stagnant pond near the trailer camp (ironically named "Grand Canyon," by the way), at the end of which the older woman tossed her daughter into a moat so thick with mud that the youth could barely pull herself out of it. Down into the metaphorical abyss she went - appropriately, at her mother's hands - and down there, in the hellishness of high water, she almost suffocated.

Riquet nearly succumbs to the pond as well when, subsequent to Rosetta's dismissal from the waffle stand, he finds her fishing, tries to help, and accidentally falls in. So intent is this girl on not going down with him - literally or figuratively - that she nearly lets her only friend drown. But she relents and saves him at the last minute, only to get Riquet's treasured job through another means: by blowing the

whistle on his scam at the waffle stand (which she has long since detected and a share of which he had even offered to her, albeit unsuccessfully), after which the boss instantly installs Rosetta in the stunned boy's place. Again, however, she doesn't remain on the job for long, except that this time the working girl terminates herself: in part because Riquet's physical as well as mental harassment, in the wake of his own dismissal, has awakened her moral conscience; in part because Rosetta is tired of fending for her drunken mother in addition to herself, and for this reason has decided to quit not only work but also life. This she plans to do by turning on the propane gas in the house trailer she has made airtight - gas that will dispatch her passed-out mother along with her - but the canister runs out before the job is done. So Rosetta must go to buy another one from the seedy, opportunistic caretaker of the trailer court. As she struggles to carry the extremely heavy new canister back to the trailer - for this young woman, even committing suicide will be hard work - Riquet arrives on his scooter for one more episode of harassment. But he senses that something is terribly wrong when Rosetta drops to the ground in tears; he gets off his motorbike, goes over to the fallen girl, and compassionately lifts her up; they look silently into each other's eyes for a moment, after which the camera switches to a held shot of Rosetta's face in medium close-up; then the film abruptly ends with a quick cut to black.

That Rosetta has Christian overtones should be evident from this final scene, as well as from the titular character's one outfit of clothing, her recurrent stomach pain, and the food she eats. This pain, like the stomach cancer of Bresson's protagonist in *Diary of a Country Priest*, is meant to reflect not only the physical stress of Rosetta's impoverished life, but also its spiritual dilemma. That she can get relief from her pain only by turning a blow-dryer on her abdomen ought to tell us that human warmth, or fellow-feeling, is missing from her life as well. And that human warmth comes to this latterday Everywoman, as a miraculous godsend, in the form of Riquet, who in several scenes pursues her as inexorably with his scooter as the Dardennes do throughout with their camera; and who more than once wrestles with Rosetta as he were struggling, like a saintly figure from a medieval religious drama, for the possession or salvation of her soul.

Rosetta's habitual costume itself underscores her near-medieval existence, foraging for sustenance in the wilds of the postmodern Western European economy. Though her facial mask is expressionless, she dresses in a jumbled garb of red-and-black jacket, thick yellow tights, gray skirt, and rubber boots - in other words, in a kind of fool's motley that vividly stands out against the sparse and somber, cool and wet, winter landscape of Belgium. This is initially no wise fool, however, for all her survivalist cunning; Rosetta gets her (otherworldly wisdom, emotional lift, or spiritual resurrection from none other than the sad-eyed, drably dressed, otherwise

corporeal Riquet, who, in a reversal of gender roles, plays the Columbine to her Harlequin (or who, as a former gymnast, represents the accomplished acrobat and dancer in Harlequin to Rosetta's wily if dense servant). And that resurrection, that uplift, comes at the end of Rosetta's own *via dolorosa*, during which, like Christ carrying his wooden cross, she stumbles three times with her canister of propane gas. She has finally exchanged her material state of grace, however minimal, for grace of another kind, and the implication is that Rosetta had to forego the body before she could bare her soul--a body that we have seen her nourish only with fish (the traditional symbol of Christ), bread, waffles (whose cognate term is the [Eucharistic] wafer), and, near the very end, a revivifying hard-boiled egg.

Those who have argued that Rosetta's tone is unvaried in its grimness - that this girl is trapped throughout and the Dardenne brothers' film is merely a documentary-like chronicle of her depressing case - choose to ignore this work's spiritual element, in addition to the fact that, unlike Bresson's *Mouchette* or Balthasar, Rosetta is alive and in good company at the conclusion. Put another way, there is a mite of hope for this young heroine, and it comes from another person, from the human spirit of Riquet. That hope does not derive from the redemption of physical reality, from the uniting of Rosetta with natural elements in space as a way of creating for her a supernal warp in time, as it would if Rosetta had been shot in realistic-cum-transcendental style (like *The Straight Story*, to cite the most recent

example). Rosetta's sphere is circumscribed, as the handheld camerawork (with almost no room for establishing shots, panoramic vistas, or "dead time" spent dwelling on the phenomenal world that surrounds her) reveals, and the only way to reach her is by force, as Riquet learns.

As Rosetta, Emilie Dequenne (Best Actress at Cannes) is so thoroughly immersed in her otherwise unappealing (and most unglamorous) character's simmering fierceness - so free of the self-regard that can tinge even the best actors' work - that, by sheer force of will, she forces us to pay attention to Rosetta's appalling life in all its squalor. Hence there was an extra-aesthetic pleasure in wondering what Dequenne herself is like and was like between takes during the shooting of Rosetta, so extreme is the role into which she has plunged herself. There was another kind of pleasure, too - one as damning as it is astonishing. That is the pleasure we take in paying rapt attention to, and thinking a lot about, characters and subjects in film (in theatre and fiction as well, but especially in cinema, the most wide-reaching and therefore the most democratic of arts) to which we wouldn't normally give a large amount of consideration in real life. This, of course, is the special, intriguing power that all art holds over us: the power to engage merely by the act of isolating and framing. I bring it up in the context of Rosetta only because it is more pronounced in the naturalistic mode than in any other. And because naturalism, when combined with a spiritual or a transcendental style, has the power

to exalt like no other mode: to shift our concern, to elevate our solicitude, from self to other, from man to God and thus to other men. Outstanding among them must be counted the wretched of the earth, the Rosettas of this world who race through their time here because they mortally fear to idle.