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The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Parables: Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and Film

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The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Parables: Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and Film

Abstract

This is a book review of Joel Mayward, *The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Parables: Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and Film* (Routledge, 2023).

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Author Notes

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Mayward, Joel. *The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Parables: Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and Film* (Routledge, 2023).

Near the end of Palme d'Or-winning filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *The Kid with a Bike* (2011), the viewer witnesses a possible resurrection. The titular kid, having been knocked out of a tree by a rock, is found seemingly dead on the ground. His attackers make a quick getaway plan, only to find the boy, though battered and bruised, suddenly alive. It is an ambiguous moment—either the boy was never dead, or he has truly risen; or, perhaps, it is both, like the raising of Jairus's daughter, about whom Jesus says, “The child is not dead but sleeping” (Mark 5:39 [NRSV]). By focusing on these spiritual/material moments of transcendent possibility and immanent reality, Joel Mayward's new book, *The Dardenne Brothers' Cinematic Parables: Integrating Theology, Philosophy, and Film*, seeks to carve a space in which to explore both the cinema of the Dardennes as well as the broader question of how films might actually do theology.

Mayward begins by sketching out an overview of his main project. Using Paul Ricoeur's understanding of *parable* as a postsecular hermeneutic for interrogating the works of the Dardennes, Mayward aims to give “a model for understanding not film and theology, but film as theology” (6), or what he calls a *theocinematics*. It is an ambitious project that demands a solid knowledge base in the aforementioned fields: film studies, theology, and philosophy. Throughout the book, Mayward offers a compelling and comprehensive look at the Dardennes'

work through this lens, and while there are aspects that limit his work—in particular, Mayward’s overlapping definitions of theology and postsecular philosophy—they do not detract from its importance as a valuable contribution to the field of religion and film, one that does an excellent job at allowing for the kind of interdisciplinary work of which the field has always been in need.

In Chapter 1, Mayward reveals how rarely these spheres of film-philosophy and film-theology intersect. They can even appear to misunderstand one another altogether. Instead, Mayward’s methodology aims for “an egalitarian exchange of ideas marked by mutual giving and receiving from each scholarly field,” or what he calls a “perichoretic” approach (14–15), applying a social trinitarian relationship between his three areas of study in order to avoid the kind of “theological imperialism” he argues too often offers theology “both the first and final word in the so-called interchange” (22).

In Chapter 2, Mayward explores what he means by *cinematic parable*, a term he applies to the Dardennes’ cinema and to many other contexts. Although he reviews the treatment of parables within biblical scholarship, ultimately, he finds his definition in French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of parables. Key to Ricoeur’s concept is a spiritual and formal realism, Mayward writes, featuring “stories which could have actually occurred to people in everyday life, yet contain a peculiarity or eccentricity, not through fantastical or magical elements but precisely because of the parable’s realism” (75). This, Mayward points out,

aligns with André Bazin's thoughts on realism, as well as the work of other theorists such as Amédée Ayfre and Henri Agel. These thinkers, often fueled by phenomenology, personalism, and leftist Catholic theology, believed that realism was a key formal element to cinema's ability to not only re-create the world but restore it. In "The Myth of Total Cinema," for example, Bazin describes the realist style as "a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time" (21). Bazin, Ayfre, and others wished to see the world as it actually was; only then, could something transcendent be revealed.

Another key aspect for Ricoeur's parabolic form is *limit-experiences*, what Mayward describes as "those ineffable peak moments in life which include not only death, suffering, guilt, and hatred, but also creation, joy, grace, and love" (82). These moments in the parable act as further connections between the narrative and the audience, or what Mayward calls, the world *of* the film and the world *in front of* the film (87). Drawing on Robert Sinnerbrink's cinematic ethics, Mayward suggests that such limit-experiences, and the realism that enfolds them, can draw the viewer into not only ethical experience but also a divine encounter. At times, Mayward's formulation of Ricoeurian realism sounds perhaps less like a Bazinian realism, and more like what one might describe as *melodrama*, with such heightened limit-experiences and emotion being key to the viewer actually experiencing change. Mayward does not touch on melodrama, but instead uses

terms such as *spiritual realism* and, in the case of the Dardennes, *transcendent realism*. Melodrama aside, cinematic parables act as a form where the extraordinary is nestled within the ordinary, the transcendent in the immanent. By offering a realist formal space to encounter the divine, cinematic parables can teach us how to see “film as theology” (89).

Chapter 3 then brings us into Mayward’s case study: the Dardenne brothers. Mayward’s review includes explorations of the Dardennes’ early video work as well as their early filmography, which was formally very different from the gritty realism of their later work. Perhaps of most interest here, though, is Mayward’s emphasis on the Dardennes’ own philosophical and theological background, what Mayward calls the world *behind* the film. Philosophers such as Ernst Bloch and Emmanuel Levinas are noted as key figures for the brothers, in particular for Luc Dardenne, whose published journals reveal this influence. Luc is a postsecular humanist, and while he adopts Christian ideas, he is not himself a believer. Jean-Pierre, meanwhile, is more elusive, though Mayward does his best to convince us that the older Dardenne brother may harbour Christian beliefs.

Mayward highlights that much has been made of the Levinasian connection to the Dardennes; however, Mayward is suspicious of using Levinas too much in cinematic interpretation, given Levinas’s own suspicions of cinema and art in general. Preferring Bloch, Mayward highlights three themes—eschatological, cultural, and realist—of the Dardennes’ cinema that echo the German philosopher’s

work. First, Mayward argues, their oeuvre offers a “humanistic eschatology” (129): a hopeful vision of both now and the future based not in the divine, but rather in the things and people of this world. Mayward draws a parallel here to Christian eschatology. However, I would argue this works only as a loose postsecular analogy, with any comparisons between Christian eschatology and Bloch’s humanist hopes falling apart once we see that one allows for the divine and one denies it. Second, he highlights Bloch’s emphasis on the use of religion “as a cultural carrier of the anticipatory consciousness” (130). Third, Mayward returns to realism, which Bloch saw as a means of both showing the world as it is and pointing to possible things to come. Indeed, for Bloch, it is in such realism, such banality, that transcendence—albeit, not of a divine nature—enters into our daily lives. This, in turn, corresponds to Ricoeur’s parabolic realism, further emphasizing Mayward’s belief that cinematic parables might become a means for an encounter with a kind of postsecular transcendence.

The Dardennes’ work, Mayward contends, is exactly this kind of cinema: a parabolic cinema steeped in humanist hopes, Judeo-Christian archetypes, and transcendent realism (142). The fourth and fifth chapters see the cinematic parable at work. In chapter 4, Mayward covers the world *of* the film, giving theocinematic analyses of three of the Dardennes’ films—*The Son* (2002), *The Kid with a Bike*, and *Young Ahmed* (2019). This is some of Mayward’s best work in the book, as he dives into these films with relish, pointing to each of their intentionally unresolved

yet hopeful endings, their biblical archetypes, their imbuing with meaning of simple material objects, and their religious-humanist themes of redemption and forgiveness. Mayward argues that in their themes, their narrative content, and their cinematic form, the Dardennes' work "generates theological questions" in the audience, something I question below.

In chapter 5, Mayward turns to this audience, the world *in front of* the film, as he calls it, describing how we, as viewers, might be shaped by the film and our own interpretation. Here, Mayward returns to Robert Sinnerbrink's work in *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience Through Film* (2015), which he uses as a conversation partner to explore how a film can, as Sinnerbrink writes, "prompt us to question our moral assumptions, dogmatic beliefs, and ideological convictions" (9). Sinnerbrink's contention undergirds Mayward's entire theocinematic approach; however, where Sinnerbrink focuses exclusively on philosophy and ethical experience, Mayward goes further to suggest how cinema might stir theological reflection as well as the ethical. Mayward explains how Ricoeur also highlights this theological-ethical relationship, showing how "the parable-world is appropriated into the audience's life-world, potentially transforming theological imaginations and ethical praxis" (191).

Building off the work of liberation theologian Roberto Goizueta, as well as theologians Gordon Lynch and Antonio Sison, Mayward focuses in this chapter on the journey after the movie, as a viewer sees the final image in the dark theatre

before heading out into the harsh light of day. Mayward's focus here is "how the interpretive movement from film-world to life-world might occur as the parable's formal and formative aspects intentionally provoke the audience (whatever the context) into reimagined moral praxis" (194). Over three themes—work, hospitality, and youth—he offers brief analyses of six of the Dardennes' films. While these also briefly touch on the previous Blochian postsecular ideas, his focus here is more on how these films, and especially their final shots, might invite empathy for the Other while also critiquing the powers and principalities that cause suffering.

The book, which Mayward completed as his PhD dissertation while studying at the University of St. Andrews, is comprehensive, vast in detail and sourcing, and this scope is perhaps both a blessing and a curse, with its primary problems being those of definition. Mayward is trying to develop how cinema itself might practice theology, with cinematic parables being only one genre that Mayward says offers a "powerful contemporary way of cinematically 'naming' and encountering God" (240). This is at the heart of his theocinematics, or how film *does* theology. Nevertheless, throughout the book, a question arises: just what is meant by *theology*?

As Mayward recounts in his conclusion, a theologian asked him this very question during a review session of his doctoral research (233). Mayward sees the question as a vestige of an analytic, paternalistic approach to theology, arguing that

his perichoretic approach to theocinematics transcends such dynamics (234). Mayward's definition resorts less precisely to the Greek equivalent of "words about god" (234), allowing him to treat films—even those which do not explicitly name God or engage religion—as sacramental spaces for divine encounter or religious reflection. While this is a perfectly valid definition, it does not appear to be what the films themselves are inherently doing, so much as what the viewer could be bringing to the film. The Dardennes' work is an exemplar of postsecular cinema, as Mayward rightly argues, using religious themes to fuel a secular humanist story in a world where faith in the divine has disappeared. And so, certainly, the films are *doing* postsecular philosophy, but it remains unclear whether this is the same as theology. Can everything that is loosely connected to or inspired by religious narratives be considered as *doing* theology?

Even with these questions in mind, however, the book still marks a significant leap forward in film-theology and film-philosophy discourse. While I have quibbles about definition and the consistency of approach, these are minor compared to the wide-ranging work that Mayward has done here. I would heartily recommend this book for any analyses of the Dardennes' work, as well as for investigations of film and theology or film and postsecularity.

I first encountered Mayward's research while attending a 2022 lecture of his on the theocinematics of Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life* (2019). It was highly gratifying to see film theorists come up alongside both theologians and the

philosophers typically associated with Malick's work. That kind of comprehensive, interdisciplinary work is carried on in this new book, and I look forward to Mayward further developing and fleshing out his theocinematics in the future.

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