The Social Realism of Body Language in "Rosetta"

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The Social Realism of Body Language in Rosetta

by Janice Morgan

The body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body and, indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors and successors as well. (Judith Butler)

It is frequently assumed in the visual media that there is only one universal body language. To the extent that this is increasingly true, certainly cinema is one of the primary teachers of these universal codes. There, in the darkened theatre, expert photography, enhanced by sensuous music, conspires to teach us exactly what an idealized body should look like, how it should move, how it communicates with others. Erotic, tender, professional, violent, macho, feminine—all of these types and temperaments, to the seasoned viewer, are expressed in an unquestioned cinematic body vocabulary. It is largely through this "bodily discourse" (as Susan Bordo puts it), that we learn about the "appropriate surface presentation of the self" (17).

Yet, despite this regime, we also know that each body is, in fact, uncompromisingly unique—each with its own history, its own expression, its own way of being in the world. The Dardenne brothers of Belgium are highly aware of this phenomenon and use it in their social realist filmmaking. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne began working together in the 1970s to make social documentaries, but in the 90s they turned their energies toward feature narratives, producing La Promesse in 1996, Rosetta in 1999, Le Fils in 2002. All are set in social milieux similar to the working class, industrial section of Liège where the filmmakers grew up. In the
kind of gritty, unadorned cinéma vérité style they practice, the specificity of this setting is highly important to their social vision. Here, the urban landscape of northern Europe, gray in cloud and stone, matches the mood of these somber tales about young people facing important turning points in their lives. But the Dardenne’s work is especially distinctive in that a primary focus of their realism targets a more fundamental locale—the physical body of their adolescent subjects. This is particularly true of their second feature, *Rosetta*, where the entire sociology and psychology of the narrative evolves out of the viewer’s attentive reading of the seventeen-year-old protagonist’s body language.

The Dardenne’s approach in this film subverts the standardization of cinematic body language in several respects. First, there is the issue of the physical appearance of the young actress herself, Emilie Dequenne. According to report, this young woman’s photograph was selected from over two thousand sent in as candidates for the lead role, and it is clear that Dequenne was chosen precisely because she does not look like the typical glossy magazine ingénue. Dequenne possesses, instead, other expressive qualities in her physique and in her features that fit her admirably for this role: a certain feisty strength and stockiness, a wariness in her eyes, the adolescent face conveying an intriguing mix of childlike softness with the emerging cool, indifferent mask of adulthood. Throughout the film, Rosetta wears no adornment and only two or three different outfits, all she happens to own. By featuring someone whose appearance departs from the idealized norm for young women in cinema, the film is already asking us to look at her differently, but the way she is caught and tracked by the camera will ask much more of us.

*The Body as Sensation*

In classical cinematic language, the body is always clearly situated, framed and actually centered in its physical and social setting. Nothing could be further from this model than the Dardenne’s opening sequence of *Rosetta*. Here, the body is presented less as a readable surface for our viewing pleasure than as a form of pure motion, a kinesthetic force. We don’t view Rosetta, we intercept her, like a moving target at close range. As viewers, we are carried through the film less by the rhythm of events then by the rhythm of Rosetta’s movements, her energy, even her breathing. Much of the film is shot at very close range to its principle subject, giving it a rigorous first-person point of view; we are seldom further than a foot or two from Rosetta’s head, and often closer than that. The use of extreme close-ups is coupled with the use of shoulder held camera work, which contributes to a keen sense of physicality.

The film opens with Rosetta being pursued by the camera from close behind, as if we were chasing her on foot, trying to keep up with her. After following Rosetta as she storms down corridors and forces her way
through a number of closed doors, the scene explodes in a careening sequence of shots conveying her scuffle with several employees, including the boss, who attempt to subdue her and remove her from the workplace, where she has just apparently been fired. Characteristically, there is no music to mediate our impression of events; we hear, instead, the clanging locker doors Rosetta grabs onto as she is being pulled away, or her sharp, jagged breathing as she briskly negotiates the maze of hallways. With this opening scene, the film establishes an aesthetic of immediacy; we are directly drawn into the character's experience without being allowed the luxury of orienting frames of reference or a stable, distant vantage point. Unlike most cinematic practice, which is casually voyeuristic, us distantly watching them on the screen, as if through a keyhole, this film sets up almost a violent intimacy with its subject. Rosetta sets a challenge for us: with the usual, seductive codes of representation blown apart, to what extent will we allow ourselves to be so brutally thrust into this young woman's skin, to see with her eyes, to be in her head?

Physical space in the film is defined largely in reference to Rosetta's movements between two worlds, the public world of work in the city and the private world of her home in a trailer park. Much of the narrative tension centers around the crossing and recrossing of this critical threshold each day. So strong is the division between the two for this young warrior that she has developed an elaborate series of protective rituals to negotiate the passage from one world to the other. Rosetta's repeated ritual of removing her boots and placing them in a hollowed log in the woods outside her home, for example, baffles us until we realize that this secret rite of exchanging city boots for heavy rubbers signals for her the daily passage over the frontier from "normal," urban work world to the semiferal private life she leads at the camper. Other rituals accompany this transition as well. Each day, for example, Rosetta pretends to get off the bus in one direction before waiting and crossing a busy highway to the woods in the opposite direction. Rosetta always enters the trailer park (the Grand Canyon) from the rear through a wire fence, the exact place of opening and closing only she, of all the residents, knows and uses. Gradually, we surmise that her rituals of secrecy and transition provide her with a set of keys to negotiate boundaries in a life that is always in danger of falling apart. Rosetta is clearly ashamed of living at the park (among the other excluded have-nots of society), but the encampment also serves as a place of refuge for her, a place to get away and regroup.

The Body as Social Realism

Michel Foucault has written about the body as being acted upon by forces of social control; his notion of "docile bodies" reveals the extent to which the human body must—in all cultures and in all time periods—practice and be regulated by the rules of that society's culture. But, of
course, if the body is a primary site of societal control, it can also be a primary site of resistance—often violent—to that control. The Dardenne have referred to this film as a “war film” and the analogy, though unexpected, fits. \(^3\) When Rosetta returns home and lifts the twisted wire enclosure marking the back entrance to the trailer park, she is—as we discover—entering the front line of a personal war zone. Physical combat, for Rosetta, is the primary method of defense against a hostile environment. Combat first and foremost with her mother, an unemployed alcoholic reduced to exchanging sexual favors for bottles of wine. In a role reversal that shows Rosetta’s unusual strength of character, it is the adolescent daughter who supports the mother financially and who sets the limits; it is the daughter who hides the beer and chases away undesirable men—as, for example, the mercenary landlord. The emotional bond between mother and daughter is the strongest one Rosetta has, yet the two are more likely to be locked in a total body tackle than an embrace; at least once, the mother counters Rosetta’s superior strength at knifepoint. Small wonder that the young woman’s relationship with her employers becomes equally combative when they fire her, for no apparent reason, from yet another in a succession of temporary jobs. And even Riquet, the young man who pays attention to her at the waffle stand, gets wrestled to the ground by Rosetta on her first visit to the trailer park when all he wanted to do was tell her about a possible job opening.

What is so compelling about Rosetta’s situation is that she is living precisely on the edge—not just of society but of her ability to cope. In an economic and sociological sense, Rosetta is clearly someone who is falling through the cracks of the social structure. First, she is a teenager trying to support herself and her mother on meager temporary jobs; secondly, when she applies for unemployment insurance, she is informed that she hasn’t worked long enough to qualify, yet when she seeks out another form of assistance, she’s told that she hasn’t been unemployed long enough. Her rounds of the local bureaucratic offices are starkly contrasted with scenes of her in the depths of the trailer park woods where the young woman is reduced to scavenging and hunting for food. \(^4\) Rosetta is someone accustomed to using found objects (and her own body) for survival purposes; small bits of pottery become digging devices to unearth insects for baiting fish, for example; a wire contraption attached to a bottle she throws into a creek outside the camp serves a similar purpose. The camera repeatedly shows us her eyes, clear and wary as those of a young ferret crossing the road. The wild animal analogy is far from gratuitous, for Rosetta as we come to know her is both hunted and hunter. In fact, she is barely having her most basic needs met for food, shelter, and emotional support.

The soundtrack of the film reinforces our impression of being drawn into an individual’s embodied experience from the inside. In the scenes shot in the city, no studio controls mediate the direct assault on our ears
of the traffic sounds reverberating off hard surfaces. With these sounds, we are placed into the swirl of rushing vehicles on hard pavement that Rosetta has to deal with each day; we realize that she is in constant danger. Another constant throughout the film is the sound of Rosetta’s breathing: often labored, erratic, jagged—even choking, as when she falls into the pond. On several occasions, we hear the young woman trying to steady herself by calming her breathing, an attempt that only partially counteracts the stress she is under, as evidenced by the attacks of stomach cramps she soothes with the warmth of a hand-held hair dryer. Yet, despite the abrasive aspect of the soundtrack, the narrative demands not only a close reading but a close listening as well. A scene where the faint sound of air coming through a crack in the camper window that Rosetta tries to plug with tissues ties in with a later scene where, facing these same windows, Rosetta tries to end it all. As the young woman lies waiting, we hear the faint hiss of a gas stove being left on with no flame, then almost imperceptibly tapering off as the gas supply runs dry.

As viewers, we fit together one enigmatic scene with another, like the indented edges of puzzle pieces that interlock. Take, for instance, the episode where Riquet falls into the trailer camp creek. Rosetta doesn’t rush over to fish him out as anyone would expect; after all, he has been the one person who has consistently shown her kindness. Instead, she hesitates over what to do next, running away at first, a closed look of worry on her face. It is only after Riquet has been calling out for help for some time that Rosetta finally runs to get a long branch to save him.

She later confesses to Riquet that she had actually wanted him out of the way—meaning she wanted what he had: a secure job, nice clothes, the leisure to have a hobby. What she could not bring herself to tell him though, is how, just a few days earlier, she herself had been pushed into that same creek by her own mother who was resisting being taken to the alcohol rehabilitation center. On that occasion, no one came to help her out. That earlier scene is memorable, too, in that it is the first time we see Rosetta break down, calling in despair after a mother who had long ago abandoned her daughter emotionally. As we witness the young woman’s long, slow crawl onto the bank of the creek—drenched to the skin, choking for breath, her hair plastered to her forehead—the whole scene becomes a powerful testimony to Rosetta’s will to survive. In this scene, both the metaphor of “falling into the hole” and the reality come together, with all of their connotations of losing control, losing one’s life, one’s identity. If this scene explains Rosetta’s actions (or inaction) with Riquet, it also serves as the referent in her poignant bedtime mantra: “Tu es Rosetta. Je suis Rosetta... Tu ne tomberas pas dans le trou. Je ne tomberai pas dans le trou.” In this protective prayer, it is clear that Rosetta sees herself as divided, as having to separate into two parts of a missing whole in order to give herself the comfort she has not received and is not yet able to receive from another.
The Body as Theatre

Judith Butler has asserted that the body’s project, in the phenomenological, existentialist sense, is dramatic in nature; it is to authentically perform a self (403–07). Butler’s essay argues that everybody—that is, every body—has a repertoire of expressive survival strategies, for the body itself, in the complexity of its responses, is the boundary line between the demands of the inner self and the external demands of society. Hence, the dramatic conflict, the tension, to be resolved. In this way of conceptualizing corporeal experience, “the body is always an embodying of possibilities,” ones that are “both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention” (404). To adopt Sartrean, existential language, Butler would say that we are all, thus, “condemned to perform”; we all have scripts (for gender, class, tribe) which we can either follow, reject, or modify, but deal with them we must.

This notion of performing the self’s possibilities offers us a key to understanding how a film that focuses so intently on the body is able to attain such a rare level of sociological and psychological depth. Two scenes, in particular, illustrate this well. Both are “theatrical,” in this special sense we have described; both are highly constructed. Moreover, these scenes are especially significant, for in them, we can observe Rosetta actually achieving two of her main goals: to have a friend and to have a job. In both of the these scenes, Butler’s insights into the theatrical, existential dimension of the body allow us to see Rosetta, the isolated character we have come to know, attempting to perform the “Rosetta” she desires to become—a socially-connected young woman who enjoys what she calls “a normal life.”

The first scene, one of the most highly-constructed of the entire film, concerns Rosetta’s visit to Riquet in his apartment. Riquet is the one person who threatens most Rosetta’s battle line against the world; friendship with him is a connection she very much needs but clearly does not trust and continuously tries to guard against. The psychological impact of this visit on Rosetta is heightened by the extremely close framing of the two central characters throughout the scene. Both are seated at a table for a meal, where the camera is positioned almost as a third guest, situated specifically to view Riquet’s reactions to Rosetta. Unlike previous sequences in the film that were all characterized by movement and turbulence, this uncustomary stasis jars the viewer and makes us share the discomfort the young woman obviously feels. This stasis, combined with the extremely tight framing of the shots underscores Rosetta’s fear of involvement with Riquet, equating it with a kind of physical entrapment.

If, as Butler says, every “gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted space” (410), what this scene reveals is just how limited that cultural space can be. While Butler’s remarks in this essay are primarily concerned with how gender is constructed in a particular historical setting,
the conventions pertaining to social class are also very powerful determinants of this "performance" of identity, as are the particularities of one's individual psychic history, a history that has been experienced by and inscribed on the body.

This is clearly evident in the dinner and dance sequence with Riquet. While the solicitous young man does everything to please and entertain, Rosetta stays shut down, silently eating her French toast ravenously, giving the barest of responses to his questions. We notice that though Riquet observes her every move with the greatest attention, Rosetta is unable to raise her eyes, making no contact with him. Later, when he tries to get her to dance with him, the sheer stress of being in such an unstructured, intimate situation with the young man makes this previously strong, athletic woman turn limp as a scarecrow. While much of a middle class young person's education develops the ability to master and socialize the body through dance, music, or sports, Rosetta, totally unfamiliar with any of this, is accustomed to using her body strictly to survive. Accompanying the physical discomfort of this scene is a highly discordant soundtrack featuring the only recorded music in the film, that of the band where Riquet is the novice drummer. Finally unable to meet his gaze or stand the strain any longer, Rosetta doubles up with yet another attack of stomach cramps and runs outside.

Here, Rosetta's performance of her desired self fails because she clearly lacks the repertoire. She is not someone who wants to depart from a "script" of who she should be in order to explore more creative possibilities; she is someone who never had a workable script to begin with. Yet, what is even more powerful in this sequence is the way it portrays the inner psychic barriers Rosetta needs to overcome. No doubt, the critic Jonathan Rosenbaum is right when he says that Rosetta's initial refusal of alcohol and sex in this scene is related to her need to negatively define herself as not being like her mother (4); at this point, she has no safe, affirmative model for how to express her desire for contact. With so many guards in place, how can she relax enough to be fully herself in relationship to someone who could care about her?

The second scene where we can observe this notion of the self as a possible, desired identity to be performed occurs toward the end of the film when Rosetta finally gets the coveted job at the waffle stand for herself. Here, the mobile stand becomes almost a stage where Rosetta appears before the public in a special costume, an apron with her name embroidered on it. For the first time, the young woman looks almost at ease in the world, interacting politely with customers, speaking to them in a cheery voice, making change. Here, Rosetta is framed within the tiny space of a camper wagon, but it is one where, unlike the one she shares with her mother, she feels safe, validated, even successful, her dream of a normal life finally within grasp. The problem for her, however, is that this success has come at a terrible price: she has had to betray her friend
Riquet to achieve it. Accordingly, the only time her performance falters is when Riquet comes to the stand to order something, and she is unable to speak or even look at him. In the austere world Rosetta inhabits, you might have a job or a friend, but hardly ever the luxury of both at the same time.

The Body as Instrument of Discovery and Conscious Action

For all that the Dardenne brothers are social realists who look at their subjects' lives with unflinching honesty, there is no grim determinism at work in their films, whether this be economic or psychological. What interests them is the possibility, even the necessity, for liberation against the forces that confine these young people in difficult circumstances. In both La Promesse and Rosetta, the climax of the narrative concerns a moral choice made by the protagonist, a choice that makes a break with the past and moves the character forward to an uncertain, but greatly expanded, future. In each case, this drama is expressed in corporal terms where what is happening to the body is also happening to the spirit. Young Igor in Promesse, for example, must literally chain his domineering father to his own auto garage equipment in order to definitively escape his father's control. By physically restraining his father and refusing to submit to his threats or promises, Igor chooses to override the loyalty he still feels toward the man who raised him in favor of a new commitment to his conscience and to the wider world of need he has been discovering all around him through his friendship with the widow of an immigrant worker.

A less overt but equally powerful transformation occurs at the end of Rosetta. After betraying Riquet's friendship in order to secure a job for herself at the waffle stand, Rosetta has spent the succeeding days avoiding all contact with him. In the last scene, however, as she staggers back to the trailer with a heavy fuel can in her arms, she hears Riquet's motorbike buzzing in her ears, getting closer, encircling her like a menacing insect. The fuel can finally becomes, like the weight of her life, too much to bear, and Rosetta collapses in the muddy grass. Abruptly, the engine shuts off, and all we can hear on the sound track are Rosetta's heaving sobs. A jacketed arm that could just have well been raised to strike her, instead reaches out to help her stand up, and the last shot shows only Rosetta's ravaged face meeting his gaze guardedly but steadily, not looking away, making real contact with him for the first time. This final look at Riquet (and at us) signals the hope that she is now ready to renegotiate the boundaries between herself and the rest of the world, doing so consciously and by choice, rather than standing guard over the lines that had been drawn for her by chance and circumstance.

Ultimately, the endings of both of these realist films transcend a view of the self as being bound by the strictures of a particular familial or social situation. Instead, the body performs the self—à la Butler—as a site
of becoming, that “materializing of possibilities” cited earlier (404). Here, in these films by the Dardenne, the notion of corporeal performance takes on its full, existential dimension; to perform the self is a type of praxis, taking action in the world. In this way, we are encouraged to view the body’s project not, as we so often think, to present an idealized form, but rather, to extend the unique energy of one’s desires and experiences into an active engagement with the world.

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Notes

1 Many people (occasionally including film reviewers) mistakenly believe that the cinéma vérité style requires less technical proficiency and is much more “spontaneous” (meaning unplanned) than more commercial, mainstream cinema. In actual fact, the Dardenne’s realist style has its own special repertoire of artifices used to re-create a particular vision of reality. For a technical discussion with the two principal cameramen responsible for achieving these effects in Rosetta, see Rigoulet.

2 The Dardenne purposefully chose a tight framing that would coincide with Rosetta’s line of sight and bodily awareness. This framing is designed to place the spectator in that same enclosed space, an identification technique discussed in Michel Guilloux’s interview with the filmmakers. Whether or not any given spectator chooses to accept this form of identification with the character is another story.

3 This is presented in “Rosetta, un film de guerre”, an interview with the Dardennes conducted by Borzykowski and Garcia. This central concept is also referred to by the film’s cameramen who discuss, in Rigoulet, the often difficult conditions of filming the narrative.

4 As a testimony to the film’s social impact, the Belgian government has signed into law a “Rosetta Plan” that obligates businesses with more than fifty employees to hire at least 3% of them among young, low-skilled workers. This plan was proposed by the Socialist Employment Minister, Laurette Onkelinx, in 1999 close after the film’s release. The law specifically targets low-qualified workers under the age of twenty-five. Find documentation of this in Info/Fax/INJEP, Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l’Éducation Populaire.

Works Cited


