

## Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*

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Two nearly utopian moments mark the heart of the films *La Promesse* (1996) and *Rosetta* (1999), written and directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. In the first, we find Rosetta at the end of a very long day. She has made a friend, Riquet, and through that friendship found an off-the-books job at a waffle maker, escaped her alcoholic and sexually profligate mother, and, with Riquet, spent the evening imitating what it might be like sometime to have fun with a friend or in a couple. She is awkward at this thing called relaxing, but she is game; she'll take the risk of submitting to someone else's pleasure economy in order to get that *thing* she wants, whose qualities she describes as she goes to sleep: "Your name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You found a job. I found a job. You have a friend. I've got a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won't fall through the cracks. I won't fall through the cracks. Good night. Good night."

Many reviews of *Rosetta* call this catechistic quasi-prayer the film's most heart-breaking moment: for Rosetta, all the world of possible desires has been paired down to a friend and a job, a state of attaining some bare minimum of social recognition. Moreover, this is an episode of intimacy, belonging, and sociability that, ultimately, Rosetta can have only with herself, in a private, hoarded space that's usually occupied by the pain of her ulcer, a condition of attrition that the film suggests is a symbol and consequence of the intensity of aching life-making activity

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she otherwise goes through every day merely to survive. Even the measured tone of Rosetta's repetitions expresses the wish to be able to use the French *rester*, which means not to rest, exactly, but to stay somewhere, over time, in a place to which one can return: *I rest here*.

When some Belgians saw *Rosetta*, they understood this scene to exemplify a national crisis, and the government promptly sponsored and passed a law called the "Rosetta Plan" that forced businesses to hire the young Belgians who, like Rosetta, were desperately struggling to gain a foothold of any sort in the increasingly global economy.<sup>1</sup> Much contemporary theory defines citizenship as an amalgam of the legal and commercial activity of states and business and individual acts of participation and consumption, but Rosetta's speech about falling though the cracks reminds that citizenship, in its formal and informal senses of social belonging, is also an affective state, where attachments take shape.

Here, the affects of belonging are all tied up with what happens at the point of production. When the Dardennes describe *Rosetta* as a "war film," it is these aspects of the politics of everyday life and contemporary struggle to which they point.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the film opens amidst the chaos that ensues when the diminutive girl is fired and physically fights two enormous men to keep from being ejected from another low-skill, low-paying, and repetitive job. She finally leaves that workplace to continue the circle she runs in every day, tracking a pattern from her home, to the town, to the bus, across a field, where she hides her precious "good shoes"—the ones that make her presentable to employers in the service economy—and into a trailer park where she lives, badly, with her mother.

Thus, by the time Rosetta makes this whispered affirmation, we know the emotional costs of her contentment: the impersonal pulses of capitalist exchange have had devastating personal, including physical, effects, and now, momentarily secure, she has optimism about the prospect of becoming what she pridefully calls "a good worker." This matters so desperately that she rejects state welfare, because she wants to feel that she has earned her value the way "normal" people

1. "Rosetta Plan Launched to Boost Youth Employment," European Industrial Relations Observatory On-line, [www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/1999/11/feature/be9911307f.html](http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/1999/11/feature/be9911307f.html) (accessed September 5, 2005). A bill called the "Rosetta Plan" was initiated in Belgium shortly after the film appeared, to try to develop more jobs for chronically underemployed youth within the first six months of leaving school. Reviews suggest that the film was seen as barely fictive in its dramatization of generally contingent economic conditions as well as those among youth, but *Rosetta* was read as strongly exemplary of a generation of the willing, able, and economically unacknowledged.

2. Leslie Camhi, "Soldiers' Stories: A New Kind of War Film: Work as a Matter of Life and Death," *Village Voice*, November 3–9, 1999, [www.villagevoice.com/film/9944.camhi,9632,20.html](http://www.villagevoice.com/film/9944.camhi,9632,20.html).

do, who produce something of value to others. Without membership in the army of laborers, she had no space for even a little cramped fantasy about spaces of the good life or good times ahead; now, with a job, Rosetta's fantasy is not at a grandiose scale but evokes a scene of an entirely imaginable normalcy whose simplicity enables her to rest unanxiously and, for the first and only time in the film, to have a good night. It matters not that she is unofficial, off the books in all the bureaucratic senses; even in an extremely informal economy, the goodness of the good life *feels* possible to her and thus *feels* already like a confirming reality, calming her even before she lives it as an ongoing practice. The ongoing prospect of low-waged and uninteresting labor is for Rosetta nearly utopian, and it makes possible imagining living the *proper* life that capitalism offers as a route to the *good* life. That the route is a rut matters not to Rosetta; what operates here are the affects of aspirational normativity, understanding the persistence of which in the project of life-building on the bottom of contemporary class society is the descriptive project of this essay.

Likewise, in *La Promesse*, our protagonist, Igor, finds optimism for being in the world at the scene of hyperexploited, off-the-books labor, and as in *Rosetta*, the benefits of bad work are soul-making, not soul-killing. Like the sidekick in the horror movies from which his name comes, Igor works for a bad mastermind — his father, Roger, who runs a racket for illegal immigrant workers, providing for them false papers and substandard, shit-reeking housing in exchange for a never-ending series of exorbitant fees. When, inevitably, they become indebted to Roger, they are employed to work it off by building a big white house for him and his son. Meanwhile, Roger conscripts Igor to work on the white house, as well. He also doctors the migrants' papers, collects their rent, and executes ordinary upkeep tasks. At the same time, Igor is apprenticed to an auto mechanic, who is not only teaching him a trade but also enabling him to build a go-cart in which to tool around with his buddies. But as the film begins, Roger's insistence that the son be available to do his bidding gets Igor fired.<sup>3</sup> Roger forces this situation because, in his view, the child's labor obligations begin at home.

One day on the construction site, Amidou, an illegal African immigrant who works to pay off his gambling debts, takes a hard fall on the job. While the fall is not fatal, Amidou soon dies from it because Roger, afraid of being exposed as a smuggler, refuses to take him to the hospital. Roger and Igor bury the black Amidou in the foundation of the white house on which he died laboring and lie

3. The utopian potentials of the impersonality of an apprentice relationship are followed through, complexly, in the Dardennes' next film, *Le Fils* (2002).

to Amidou's wife, Assita, that her husband has fled town to avoid paying off his gambling debts.

But before Amidou dies, he extracts from Igor the titular "promise" to take care of Assita and their newly born child. Igor is haunted by this promise, and his filial commitment is slowly displaced by his turn toward the obligation he incurred toward his father's worker. Meanwhile, Assita is suspicious of Roger, who eventually contracts to sell her into prostitution to get her out of his hair.<sup>4</sup> At this point, Igor steps in to hide her from Roger and save her from this fate, yet he does not tell her that Amidou is dead. Like Rosetta, he does not exactly know what he is doing when he enters a plot, if not a life, with Assita. He works out of a headstrong, aggressive incoherence: he abandons an affect he doesn't want to have to risk having one he can barely imagine.

For shelter, Igor takes Assita to the garage he used to work in that opens the film—he's kept the keys to his former home away from home. But Assita refuses to play displaced house with Igor, and it frustrates him, for he cannot bear that Assita does not want to give him gratitude or any other sign of love. As they improvise their new relationship, he is shocked to see that she does not want reciprocity with him, or trust him to have her interests at heart. Indeed, Assita puts a knife to his throat—for she can tell there's still a secret somewhere. They bicker and scream, but ultimately he forces her to shut up and submit to giving him what he wants: a hug.

What does the hug he forces her to bear stand for? We know that he has softly stalked Assita, peering in the pinhole in their family door, seeing her care for her husband and child in her underwear. The hug is enigmatic like Igor's face in those scenes, neither infantile nor sexual, or maybe both, a muddy mess; and when Assita breaks from the clench, she just looks at Igor, uncomprehending as he is, I think. Having experienced a moment of relieving bodily simplicity, he leaves for a smoke and weeps in the dark. In the clench, he had conjured the unadorned affect

4. This essay focuses on labor, kinship, and the children as the scene of the *event* in the Dardennes' films; but that *La Promesse* specifically articulates the global traffic in manual labor and sex traffic must not go unnoticed, as the kinds of ambivalence raised by the global market for subproletarian migrant labor do not apply to the outrage around sexual traffic, which seems to provoke more moral clarity against indentured servitude, bodily exploitation, and actual or virtual slavery. See, e.g., the magazine *Migration*, produced by the Geneva-based nongovernmental organization International Organization for Migration. *Migration* covers many crises of survival, including defining migration as trauma, but its moments of greatest clarity are in the essays on the sexual trafficking of children and young women (including an announcement of a new organization by the entertainer Ricky Martin called People for Children, which arose from his experience of meeting former sex slaves in India). See [www.iom.int/](http://www.iom.int/) (accessed March 16, 2006).

of reciprocity or being-with that he has longed for and, without much realizing it, dedicates himself to securing the conditions of its repetition.

In these nearly peaceful episodic eruptions, the productive instabilities of the contemporary capitalist economy engender new affective practices, in which children scavenge toward a sense of authentic social belonging by breaking from their parents' way of attaining the good life. At the same time, the will to attach that the children manifest is not shared, really, by anyone, certainly not the people who make it possible. Happiness exists in the children's heads, in their commitment to bring life in line with the affect they want to continue experiencing, and above all, in the triumph of their will to engender a silence in the enabling other that can seem like consent, thereby ensuring the continued affective experience of solidity and importance that should have been provided by parents and the family form.<sup>5</sup> I say "affect" rather than "emotion" here to emphasize that the children do not know fully what they're doing, flinging themselves at life in order to be in proximity to a feeling of *something* that is strangely both enigmatic and simplifying. Their objects of desire are really scenes they orchestrate in order to experience absorption, a sense of being held in a scene, of having reciprocity, and being unanxious somewhere. Yet their optimistic gestures also show how much aggression is involved in lining up life with fantasy, and the films track what it means to make hard bargains under duress to attain proximity to even the most vaguely, inarticulately defined pleasure.

These quiet moments in the middle of the films are also high points in these children's stories. They perform not the achieved materiality of a better life but the approximate feeling of belonging to a world that doesn't yet exist reliably. Both children are impulsive: they act urgently to calibrate life in an affective economy and then make emotional sense of it later. Yet this way of describing the cultivation of a world through recourse to impulse, gesture, and episodic improvisation does not take into account what we also see, that the creativity of the children keeps being rerouted to repeating some version of their parents' perverse approximations of the normative good life. It is as though the child, knowing nothing but that index of projected-out happiness, is almost compelled

5. Dave Kehr, "Their Method Is to Push toward Moments of Truth," *New York Times*, January 5, 2003. Kehr interviews the Dardenne brothers in this article, suggesting that "though the Dardennes' films are scrupulously naturalistic, they all belong to the suspense genre, though it is a suspense of character, not of plot. It is not so much a question of what will happen next, as of how the characters arrive, or fail to arrive, at a decision to act." The "suspense of character" is played out, in their films, intergenerationally: the suspense is how the children will act, not the adults, who are bullied about by chaotic appetites.

to repeat attachment to the very forms whose failure to secure the basic dignities of ordinary existence is a central part of the reproduction of the difficulty of their singular lives and lived struggle on the bottom of class society in the first place. This is an essay most broadly about the political and affective economies of normativity at the present time, the production as desire of a collective will to imagine oneself as a solitary agent who can and must live the good life promised by capitalist culture. It tells a story from the perspective of the economic bottom, about the fantasy of meritocracy, a fantasy of being deserving, and its relation to practices of intimacy, at home, at work, and in consumer worlds. It is a story about plenitude and scarcity — so many bad jobs contingently available to so many contingent workers and never enough money, never enough love, and barely any rest, with ruthless fantasy abounding. It is a story about the calibrations of reciprocity and how proximity to the fantasy life of normativity might be what remains to animate living on for some on the contemporary economic bottom. Finally, it is an account of normativity that sees it as something other than a congealed space of aspiration toward privilege. Rather, in my view, to understand collective attachments to fundamentally stressful conventional lives, we need to think about normativity as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging that can be entered into in a number of ways, and that can best be tracked in terms of affective transactions that take place alongside the more instrumental ones.

I want to tell a story from this perspective about post-Fordist affect as a scene of constant bargaining with normalcy in the face of conditions that can barely support even the memory of the fantasy. How do fantasy-practice clusters such as those we've seen become the grounds for political and social conservatism? How can we understand the singular tragedies of Rosetta and Igor in light of the recent uprisings in Paris, where students marched to maintain the same state-secured labor protections enjoyed by their parents, who benefited from the post-war Western European promise of social democracy? What happens when the economic and social promise of a state becomes privatized like everything else, redistributed through emerging nonstate institutions and formal and informal economies? In these films, what might have been political agency is diffused tragically throughout the social, reformulating in proximity to the tattered family, the only institution of reciprocity *remaining* for fantasy to attach itself to. But this does not mean that all tragedies are alike: the Dardennes focus on the destinies of white working-class and subproletarian citizens in the context of global migration. For them, all sorts of normative emotions stand in for affective urges for a better social world that leak beyond what the conventional forms deliver and

stand in for. At the same time, labor makes available alternative, non-kinship-organized spaces of improvisation, and beyond that, kids engage in their own lateral modes of world-making. Any of these scenes might generate new forms of positive reciprocity, but at the moment of these films, they all amount to pleasures seized in the folds of productive urgency. There, there is no room to make a distinction among political, economic, and affective forms of existence, because the institutions of intimacy that constitute the everyday environments of the social are only viscerally distinct but actually, as we know, intricately and dynamically related to all sorts of institutional, economic, historical, and symbolic dynamics. What follows includes an investigation of some psychoanalytic and materialist explanations of social attachment in the context of structural inequality, to see if we might find better ways of understanding how it is that forms associated with ordinary violence remain desirable — perhaps because of a kind of narcotic and/or utopian pleasure in their very familiarity. Using the Dardennes' films plus the work of Judith Butler and Lillian Rubin, I focus on some stories about the conscription of children to the worlds of their parents, the worlds of their parents' desires, and the gaps of disappointment and failure that the children see, because the articulation of children and neoliberalism is so crucial now in the academy, the middlebrow public, and the social policy and human rights communities, as an image of the contemporary ethical, political, and economic conundra of structural subordination and social betrayal. This scene also enables us to consider the vertical attachments — say, of parents and children, bosses and workers — along with the horizontal, much less reliable ones of friends, coworkers, and couples. That the vertical and horizontal keep getting mixed up here — the daughter acts as the mother's mother, the father tells his son to call him Roger and gives him a ring to bind their fraternity — signifies the immediate crisis that the children try to fight their way out of.

*La Promesse* and *Rosetta* are organized around the solicitation of children to the reproduction of what we should call not the good life, but the “bad life” — that is, a life dedicated to moving toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water, *not-stopping*. This is a way of describing the specificity of the experience of ordinariness — of, as Tom Dumm writes, “ordinary life, the life-world, the everyday, the quotidian, the low, the common, the private, the personal” — in its visceral temporality today.<sup>6</sup> I have suggested

6. Thomas L. Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 1.

that an all too present cause of the effects these films track is the volatile here-and-now of that porous domain of hyperexploitive entrepreneurial atomism that has been variously dubbed globalization, liberal sovereignty, late capitalism, post-Fordism, or neoliberalism. It is a scene of mass but not collective activity. It is a scene in which the lower you are on economic scales, and the less formal your relation to the economy, the more alone you are in the project of maintaining and reproducing life. Communities, when they exist, are at best fragile and contingent.

The Dardennes draw Belgium of the 1990s as a colony of globalization with its legal citizens trying to maintain a grip on the waning shards of liberty, sovereignty, and economic hegemony<sup>7</sup>: it's a world of intensified economic and social volatility, a mainly deindustrialized, small business economy where impersonality and intimacy are enmeshed in a renewed regime of sweatshops and domestic labor.<sup>8</sup> This world is visually and physically crowded, both overwhelming and underwhelming in its assault, allowing little time to luxuriate in its sounds, tastes, and smells. As Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman put it about the African context, this "suggests that it is in everyday life that the crisis as a limitless experience and a field dramatizing particular forms of subjectivity is authored, receives its translations, is institutionalized, loses its exceptional character and in the end, [appears] as a 'normal,' ordinary and banal phenomenon."<sup>9</sup>

Mbembe and Roitman see the ordinariness of crisis as the condition for the production of revolutionary consciousness. But the Dardennes' scenario puts

7. Catherine Labio argues that the structural and subjective effects on contemporary Belgium of the changes wrought by the European Union and neoliberal economics are quite different than those felt in France or Germany. She attributes this shift to historical factors such as Belgium's long colonial history in Africa but relatively short national history as a federalized state. It is only in the last few decades that a project of building a national metaculture has commenced; at the same time, class breaches between the rich and poor are becoming more accentuated there as everywhere. See "Editor's Preface: The Federalization of Memory," *Yale French Studies* 102 (2002): 1–8; and Alexander B. Murphy, "Landscapes for Whom? The Twentieth Century Remaking of Brussels," *Yale French Studies* 102 (2002): 190–206.

8. See "Uncertainties of the Informal Economy: A Belgian Perspective," European Industrial Relations Observatory On-line, [www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/1998/08/feature/be9808240f.html](http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/1998/08/feature/be9808240f.html) (accessed September 5, 2005). See also, for a fantastic synthesis of the transnational problematic of economic precariousness and "precarity" among youth across Europe, Angela Mitropoulos, "Precari-us?" in *Mute*, January 9, 2006, [www.metamute.org/en/node/7057](http://www.metamute.org/en/node/7057). It is also worth saying here that the Dardenne output of the 2000s, *L'Enfant* and *Le Fils*, draws the same "econo-mo-affective" picture as that of the 1990s.

9. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," in *The Geography of Identity*, ed. Patricia Yaeger (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 155.



forth no hint of that, or of potentiality or revolutionary possibility that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri attribute to the activity of immaterial labor in their analysis of the contemporary global mode of production.<sup>10</sup> Here, dissatisfaction leads to reinvestment in the normative promises of capital and intimacy under capital. The quality of that reinvestment is not political in any of the normative senses, though—it's a feeling of aspirational normalcy, the desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life, a life that does not have to keep being reinvented. The feeling for that feeling does not require any particular forms of living to stimulate it; nor does it depend on the forms of living it attaches to, advancing play, risk, and above all, self-repetition in proximity to whatever objects/scenes are available or convenient, the will to feel that feeling again becomes the first order object of desire.

A nearly comic, silent movie-style example from *La Promesse* plays out this activity beautifully, pointing additionally to what's singular about globalization's sensual flesh. It is Igor's job to white out the immigrant passports, making their bearers seem already legal. Yet when he arrives at Assita's papers and sees the contrast of her dark skin and her white teeth, Igor immediately moves to a mirror and paints "white out" on his own teeth, erasing working-class staining and emphasizing his racial whiteness as a homage to her smile and also to her blotted out identity. Nothing happens as a result of this moment of play; it is ordinary, forgettable, forgotten. In fact, in these films, play itself is a momentary privilege constantly crowded out by the pressures of contemporary labor, with its demands for survival without a scaffold, a net, a retreat. Play is what a *sense* of normalcy allows; it is the promise of an interruption. Thus, how to talk about ordinariness in the context of crisis is a theoretical and political problem of more than consciousness: the Dardennes are less sure that consciousness transforms its object than, say, bargains with what it knows about the movement of the slow train wreck that is always coming in the catastrophic time of capitalism, where if you're lucky you *get* to be exploited, in a scene that hails and ejects you when it is your time to again become worthless. Indeed, it is not exploitation that the children cast as the enemy—they want to be exploited, to enter the proletarian economy in the crummy service sector jobs it is all too easy to disdain as the proof of someone's loserdom, or tragedy.

10. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 290–94. See also Nick Dyer-Whitford, "Empire, Immaterial Labor, the New Combinations, and the Global Worker," *Rethinking Marxism* 13, no. 3/4 (Winter 2001): 70–80.

The history of sentimentality around children that sees them as the reason to have optimism—for, if nothing else, their lives are not already ruined—thus takes on an ethical, political, and aesthetic purchase in these films. The audience is obligated to side with the child's will not to be defeated, even if the difference between defeat and all its others is the capacity to attach optimism for a less bad future to a blighted field of possibility. We are incited to have compassion for fruitless and even self-undermining desires. One does not necessarily require families or nations to secure this feeling; any reciprocal form will do—friendship, collegiality, a project, the state, a union, whatever has the capacity to deliver an affective, transpersonal experience of unconflictedness, belonging, and worth. In *La Promesse*, the promise of post-Fordist citizenship marks out agency not as that which changes the world, but as that which bargains with it by developing affective bonds or “promise” within the regime of production. In *Rosetta*, belonging isn't an a priori, but something that must be purchased by participation in the everyday economy. Community and civil society from this class perspective are not seen as resources for building anything, neither fantasy nor an ordinary life. Attachments are as brittle as the economic system that hails and bails on its reserve army of workers. Moreover, it matters that these films are organized around not migrants whose migration is animated by hope of a better good life, but citizens who thought that the traditional forms of social reciprocity would provide scenes for life-building, not the attrition of being. For legal citizens (here, of Europe), the difference between having papers and not determines which economies you can participate in, yet the ease of attaining the paper identity that performs a simulacrum of social ballast puts into question the legal/illegal distinction. In the economic lifeworld of these films, citizens without capital and migrants are *almost* in the same boat, and all might as well be called survivalists, scavengers bargaining against defeat by the capitalist destruction of life.<sup>11</sup>

In this fraying context, it matters, then, that sometimes the children encounter private individuals who ameliorate the reproduction of inequality and injustice in the folds of the modes of production—nice employers, for example. Sometimes they are even nice employers themselves: in *Rosetta*, the daughter who sews and markets the clothing they make compliments her mother on her creative sewing; in *La Promesse*, Igor freely dispenses cigarettes and advice to the deracinated employees who work for him. Some government workers act compassionately, too, making it possible to imagine political institutions of a less bad

11. On the capitalist destruction of life in the project of making value, see David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

life. Sometimes, of course, there is leisure, especially where music and drink and unproductive randomness can be folded in. Meanwhile, though, when the camera pulls back, we see the ordinary experience of post-Fordist practice not in the occasional moments of connection but in the constant movement of people and things, through national boundaries, temporary homes, small and big business, and above all an informal economy of secrets, stashes, bargaining, and bribes that link women to small men, and small men to bigger ones.

Once anywhere in the chain, they can imagine their place in the big picture, at least in their fantasy worlds. For instance, when Rosetta screams at and beats up her mother, she is refusing the bargains her mother makes to be able to maintain her fantasy of normalcy. The mother's state of falling apart has brought them down to live at a trailer park ironically named Grand Canyon, a space of American wonder and leisure, but when the mother plants flowers or tries to make a middle-class dinner there, Rosetta destroys them, because the simulacrum of normalcy is a perversion in their context. She wants the real thing, the promise, a relation of care that produces the ballast of a normal life.<sup>12</sup> Together, they sew and sell clothes trying to get enough money to live. But when Rosetta is out making the profits, the mother accepts food and booze from the owner of the trailer park in exchange for sex; she also performs fellatio in lieu of parting with the money her daughter gives her to buy water, so that later she can buy drink. Brutal, that informal economy. Rosetta tells her to go to a state-run drying out facility, and the mother says she doesn't want to sober up, to which Rosetta replies, bargaining, that she'll buy a sewing machine for the mother if she goes and dries out, an offer to which the mother responds by pushing Rosetta into a pond of muddy water, which nearly drowns her. But Rosetta knows how to tread water, that's what she knows.

In *La Promesse*, too, there's lots of bargaining in the gray economy: it's a

12. Rosetta's rejection of her mother's faux gentility taps into a long tradition of talking about working-class "decency" or "respectability." The locus classicus of academic discussion of this phenomenon is Peter Bailey, "Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up? Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability," *Journal of Social History* 12 (1978): 336–53. For recent analyses of and contribution to this literature, see Simon J. Charlesworth, *A Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Margie L. Kiter Edwards, "'We're Decent People': Constructing and Managing Family Identity in Rural Working-Class Communities," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66 (May 2004): 515–29; Daniel Siegel, "The Failure of Condescension," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33 (2005): 395–414; and Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

coerced relation that can feel like agency, in the face of a demand for worker flexibility. Roger's workers want to become illegals, migrate to benefit from the gray economy, and do not complain much when they are forced to appear and disappear at will, and what money they do acquire, we note, is often gambled away. When Amidou loses at gambling and complains that he's been cheated, Igor says, "It's not my problem you always lose. You should just stop playing." But in the informal economy where you may or may not get paid for what you do, where you don't exist on the identification papers the state recognizes, where you are always paid under the table if at all, you're always playing for the possibility of achieving, through the repetition of fraud, the ballast of capital, or just presence that will provide the social density of citizenship at the scale of a legitimate linkage to the reciprocal social world. The question is not *whether* citizenship as a guarantee of social reciprocity is fantasmatic, but how, and in what fantasmatic registers, it operates as such.

Even the category "children" is as volatile as the categories of citizen and worker. I call these protagonists "children," but actually that's an open question whose openness is an index of how hard it is to describe anyone in the flux of improvised survival habits that constitute existence in the contemporary economy. It is appropriate to call Rosetta and Igor children in that their stories are organized by intimacy with a parent with whom they live. At the same time, though, they are adolescents on the verge of seeking out sexual attachments and experience while also being adults economically, in that their days are organized mainly around the material reproduction of their lives. This regime of survival and low expectation is what childhood "means" now, for an increasing number: adulthood. Jody Heymann's *Forgotten Families* documents the astronomical global expansion of the number of families in which the parents and older children work long hours daily in order to maintain inadequate housing and malnourishment, optimistically hoping that the sacrifice of their health will add up to something else, something better for the younger children.<sup>13</sup> In the family struggling to survive on the bottom, the ordinary splintering effects of exploitation or state violence continue to shape proximate norms of imaginary belonging whose theoretical availability comes to occupy the bottom line *and* the utopian horizon in the scene of survival, failure, and disappointment with which globalization impresses.

So even if, in these two films, the promise of familial love is the conveyance for the incitement to misrecognize the bad life as a good one, this is also a story

13. Jody Heymann, *Forgotten Families: Ending the Growing Crisis Confronting Children and Working Parents in the Global Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

about the conditions under which fantasy takes the most conservative shape on the bottom of so many class structures. The adults want to pass on the promise of the promise to their children.<sup>14</sup> That may be the children's only sure inheritance—fantasy as the only capital assuredly passable from one contingent space to another. And of course here, as everywhere, the gendered division of labor mediates the attritions of capital and the intimate spaces in which the labor of living is imagined beyond the urgencies of necessity. As Gayatri Spivak writes of another example, “This is not the old particularism/universalism debate. It is the emergence of the generalized value form, global commensurability in the field of gender. All the diversity of daily life escapes this, yet it is inescapable.”<sup>15</sup> *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* are training differently gendered children to take up a position not within normative institutions of intimacy but something proximate to them. The hypervigilance required to maintain this proximity is the main register of post-Fordist affect. The fantasy of intimacy that will make one feel normal (as opposed to securing the conditions of dependable reciprocal life) provides a logic of false commensurateness and continuity between everyday appearance and a whole set of abstract value-generating relations: the aesthetic of the potentially good enough love enables crisis to feel ordinary, not as much of a threat as the affective bounty that makes it worth risking being amidst capitalist social life.

But in the Dardennes' *mise en scène*, normative intimacy has been worn down to the nub of the formal and the gestural. The emotions associated with intimacy, like tenderness, are most easily assumed as scavenging strategies that the children are compelled to develop to get by. Igor acts genuinely sweet to the old woman whose wallet he steals in the opening scene; Rosetta acts in loving and protective ways toward her mother, whom she also beats for manifesting nonnormative appetites. Roger appeals to Igor for loyalty, although he has also lied to him, beat him, and destroyed his opportunity to be a kid and to cultivate a different life (also involving building things, but cars that move, not houses that require property). Yet Roger can still say, “The House, this whole thing, it's all for you!” To which Igor can only say, “Shut up! Shut up!” because there is no story to counter

14. This desire to pass on a desire for a better good life that looks like the present unhampered by individual failures or defeats, and unsupported by the economic, social, and political positions of an historical moment, is documented by all of the major class analyses of familial reproduction from Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) to David Shieler's *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York: Vintage, 2004). See also nn. 34 and 39.

15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Other Things Are Never Equal: A Speech,” *Rethinking Marxism* 12, no. 4 (2000): 37–45.

Roger with, no proof that it wasn't love, or that love was a bad idea. Apparently, the register of love is what else there is to work with, when you are managing belonging to worlds that have no obligation to you.

But this is why optimism for belonging in a scene of potential reciprocity amidst tragic impediments is, in these films, not quite farce, even in its repetitions. The endings of these films tie the audience in identificatory knots of vicarious reciprocity that extends in affective and formal ways beyond the actual episode. Rosetta approaches her final shots just having had to quit her hard-won job to take care of her degenerating mother; she is miserable and defeated by her daughterly love and her commitment to not living outside of the loop of a reciprocity whose feeling feels legitimate to her. At the end, she is dragging a big canister of gas. It is unclear whether she's about to commit suicide via asphyxiation, or to make a go of things the way she always does, and it doesn't matter: her body collapses in exhaustion as Riquet arrives. Riquet—a man whom she has previously beaten up, left to drown, turned in as a thief, and had a strange, unsteady, asexual night with, a night that ends with her sleeping not alone, but whispering intimately with herself.<sup>16</sup> Riquet—who is stalking her in revenge for taking his job. He is the only resource for potential reciprocity she has. As the film closes, Rosetta weeps, looking off-screen toward he who is only a proximate friend, in the hope of stimulating his compassionate impulse to rescue her, and the film cuts to darkness.

Likewise, the close of *La Promesse* involves a scene of wishful gallantry. In the train station, just as Assita is about to escape Belgium, Igor's father, Igor, and the whole shoddy mess, Igor confesses one part of his secret. Perversely fulfilling and breaking "the promise" after which the picture is named, he gambles that revealing Amidou's death will keep Assita there, and indeed it binds her and her child to him and to the scene of danger, violence, and poverty for the indefinite future. In the final shot, they walk away from the camera together and not together, and as they become smaller the film cuts sharply to black. Both works thus end engendering in the audience a kind of normativity hangover, a residue of the optimism of their advocacy for achieving whatever it was for which the protagonists were scavenging: because Rosetta and Igor are cut off from the normal, the spectators become holders of the promise.

In classic Hollywood cinema and much of queer theory, such expectant "families we choose" endings would make these films, generically, comedies, and the

16. Bert Cardullo considers this final moment a redemptive one in which a Christian relation of mercy is articulated. See "Rosetta Stone: A Consideration of the Dardenne Brothers' *Rosetta*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 1 (April 2002), [www.unomaha.edu/jrf/rosetta.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/rosetta.htm).

anxieties we feel on the way would be just the effects of the conventional obstacles genres put out there that threaten the genre's failure before it fulfills its contract with emotional satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> In Foucault's rendering, such scenes of communicative tears and confession would mark the children's ascension into sexuality, that is, into the place where desiring acts evince the youths' subjugation to the clarifying taxonomic machinery of familial and social discipline. In *La Promesse* and *Rosetta* it is where they become sexual. But such evocations of the two clarifying institutions of social intelligibility, genre and gender, would mishear the tonalities of these particular episodes. In these scenarios, sexuality is not only an accession to being intelligible but also a performance of affective avarice, a demand for a feeling fix that would inject a *sense* of normality.

What does it mean to want a sense of something rather than something? In the emergent regime of privatization that provokes aggressive fantasies of affective social confirmation in proximity to the political often without being in its register, genre shifts can point to new ways of apprehending improvisations within the ordinary. In the Dardennes' films, the formal achievement of genre and gender suggests not success but survival, a survival reeking of something that partakes of the new generic hybrid, *situation tragedy*, the marriage between tragedy and situation comedy where people are fated to express their flaws episodically, over and over, without learning, changing, being relieved, becoming better, or dying.<sup>18</sup>

17. "Families we choose" is Kath Weston's term for improvised institutions of queer intimacy, in *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

18. Now in somewhat spreading usage to describe genres of aesthetic embarrassment such as the BBC's *The Office* or *Blackadder*, the genre phrase "situation tragedy" describes episodes of personality caught up in a form of despair not existential or heroic but shaped within the stresses of ordinary life under capitalism. (Not "everyday life" in the classic sense, where subjects are busy making do, but ordinary life, where projects of affect management provide registers for experiencing the structural contingencies of survival.) "Situation tragedy" emerged in the anti-Thatcherite critique of the "This Vicious Cabaret" insert in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 1982–1985). The genre links the effects of draconian economic and erotophobic politics on a stunned body politic that now lives in catastrophic time, an experience of a paralyzed but aware spectatorship of its own demise as a public; because nothing is ever worked through, and the public is stuck in repeated viewings of its own annihilation, it is *situation* tragedy and not, say, melodrama. Moore and Lloyd's not unfamiliar countercultural imaginary enmeshes cuttingly ironic Weimar-style kitch-decadence with a love of pop culture, both of which are seen to house the exuberance, longing for intimate and social reciprocity, and anarchic *joie de vivre* that, they argue, can never be entirely defeated by creeping or accelerated fascism or constitutional crisis. The immediate context for the phrase is "At last the 1998 show!/The situation tragedy!/Grand opera slick with soap!/Cliff-hangers with no hope!/The water-colour in the flooded gallery. . . ." In the "grand opera slick with soap" that is the BBC's *The Office*, when David Brent is finally ejected from his phantasmatic place as the funniest good boss imaginable, he spends all of his time in cars, in waiting rooms, and



In the situation comedy, personality is figured as a limited set of repetitions that will inevitably manifest in new situations—but what makes them comic and not tragic is that in this genre's imaginary, *the world has the kind of room for us that enables us to endure*. In contrast, in the situation tragedy, one moves between having a little and ejection from the social, where life is lived on the outside of value, in terrifying nonplaces where one's a squatter, trying to make an event in which one will matter to something or someone, even as a familiar joke (in the situation tragedy, protagonists often try heart-wrenchingly to live as though they're in a situation comedy).<sup>19</sup> In reinventing some version of the couple, the family, or the love link, at the end, Rosetta and Igor are repeating a desire they have fancied and longed for throughout: a desire simply and minimally to be in the game. Not controlling the conditions of labor, they take up positions within sexuality that at least enable a feeling of vague normalcy that can be derived on the fly, in a DIY fashion. They do this in gestures that try to force a sense of obligation in someone, which will just have to stand in as the achievement of their desire for acknowledgment and a way of life.

Thus, if it is submission to necessity in the guise of desire we see forming here, if it is a passionate attachment to a world in which they have no controlling share, if it is aggression, an insistence on being proximate to the thing that stands as the promise of the scene that will provide them that holding feeling they want, the proof is not too demanding—there's a very low evidentiary bar. The key here is *proximity*: ownership has been relinquished as the children's fantasy. The geopolitical space of fantasy is not a nation or a plot of land secured by a deed, but a neighborhood. And just as both films feature careers involving soldering

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on benches, trying to make something happen. When he haunts his old “haunt” compulsively, he becomes the figure of embarrassment, the person who cannot *not* be exposed in his thwarted desires and therefore the figure for *everyone's* potential ejection into the social death of no work and no love, the nearness of which it becomes harder and harder to protect oneself from knowing.

19. Using the periodizing language of supermodernity to mark the ascent of neoliberalism, Mark Augé argues that the emerging centrality of the “nonplace” (malls, terminals, hospitals) as a zone of episodic experience exemplary of the displacements that contemporary Europeans manage complicates everyday life theory's conception of the dynamic relation of ordinary space to the production of subjective life. He focuses especially on the need to consider the impact of life lived among social spaces that interrupt grounding logics of value and norms of intelligibility and self-identity. My claim is on the affective side of things, that supermodernity/neoliberalism produces the situation tragedy as a way of expressing the costs of what's ordinary now, the potential within any grounding space to become a nonplace for anyone whose inconvenience to the reproduction of value becomes suddenly, once again, apparent. Mark Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).



and sewing, techniques that bind parts to bigger wholes, they restage at the close our protagonists' coercive appeal to a relative stranger for rescue and reciprocity, and all the stranger has to do is to be near, stick around. That this is an appeal to a proximate normativity is signified by their spatial placement outside the home (in a terminal, on the ground) but not very far afield at all; they are all in proximity to the natal and phantasmatic home, in the end. And, affectively speaking, is not Riquet a man on whom the silent Rosetta must depend; and is not Assita a mother/sister/lover/friend forced by Igor, with his sweet downturned eyes and aphonia, to submit?

Since "at all costs" is no metaphor from this perch on the bottom of the class structure, here fantasy and survival are indistinguishable effects of the affects' own informal economy: in the context of material and parental deprivation, Rosetta and Igor crowd the cramped space of any potentially transitional moment to maintain, for one more minute, their optimism about having a thing, a life, a scene of practices of belonging and dignity that can be iterated and repeated, looked forward to.

Normalcy's embrace can only flicker, therefore, in the Dardennes' rendering of the contemporary historical moment. Each time it looks as though a reciprocal relation has been forged, the temporal and monetary economy in which the experience of belonging can be enjoyed is interrupted by other needs, the needs of others that seem always to take priority. So, what does it mean that the endings of these films solicit audience desire one more time for the protagonists to receive, finally, the help they seek because it feels like their last chance to experience, through openness to another, a good change amidst the violence and numbing everywhere present? To be made to *desire* a normativity hangover undoes the conflation of survival with happiness in these near-comic closures that are, in another sense, tragic openings.

Thus, there is more to the story of the affect the children display than the tragedy of particular individual attachments to the feeling of optimism that some day they might rest in a sense of belonging; at stake is measuring the subjective accommodation to the political economy of dependable reciprocity, what we might have called belonging, if a secure feeling of such a thing were genuinely possible. Belgium, an exemplary hub of immigrant labor from Africa, other French post-colonies, Korea, and the generic European countryside, was a scene of expanding informal economies and welfare state shrinkage in the 1990s; from this perspective, *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* are fiercely, deliberately actuarial in their depiction of the emotional effects of globalization. So much creativity and effort go into attempts to rescue oneself and sometimes others from drowning in scenes of per-

**Nearly Utopian,  
Nearly Normal**

sonal and impersonal violence; and if here appeasement of the family constitutes the absorbing work of ordinariness as it usually does for children, this situation is intensified because now, again, urban families on the bottom are also sites of production. In *Rosetta*, the drama is activated locally by the daughter's resentful and loving desire to support her mother and herself, to have a job that will enable the mother to cease her pathetic gestures of optimism and disappointment—"All you do is fuck and drink!" she repeatedly says; in *La Promesse*, the drama is activated by the father's desire to repeat himself in his son, and the son's ambivalence about reproducing the multitude of exploitations this vision of the patriarchal good life involves. The women run a sweatshop for themselves, making clothing; Rosetta looks for other jobs in every other public zone of exchange she enters, such as food shops and clothing stores. The men import illegals, make money off them, and get them in debt to be paid off by forced labor on the house that is the father's entailment to his son. This gives the Belgian family that occupies the reserve army of labor a paradoxical social location, as evinced in the children themselves. It participates in the informal economy, often acting as part of an informal petit bourgeoisie, with an informal chamber of commerce composed of like-minded gray-economy profiteers, and at the same time engenders new social locations, shapeless spaces defined by who moves through them and how, marked by practices and modes of being so evanescent that they're hard to describe, to speak in, and to confront. Relative to other films, everyday communication in *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* is as convoluted as identity is now, wandering in the "economoaffective" lag time of transition, negotiation, untruth, and anxiety. Its voiceover would sound something like "Be next to me, don't overwhelm me, don't say anything, don't interfere with my desire to imagine how it would feel to have my needs recognized by you, say something, give me something, let's try, be quiet."

Given these convolutions, it is hard to imagine revolution, or indeed any future, if you're an informal or unofficial worker, though it happens,<sup>20</sup> but in these films the everyday is a zone of constant labor explicitly oriented toward upward class

20. Recent worker revolts in Paris and Dubai, for example, forced concessions by exposing and exploiting the economy's dependence on docile workers. But for many, strikes threaten the already too tight margin of survival for the marginal worker, and the more common response to exploitation, as documented in Shipler's *The Working Poor* and Heymann's *Forgotten Families*, is to grit it out just in case a life can be built in the process of it being worn out by poverty. See Hassan M. Fattah, "In Dubai, an Outcry from Asians for Workplace Rights," *New York Times*, March 26, 2006; and Elaine Sciolino, Thomas Crampton, and Maria de la Baume, "Not '68, but French Youths Hear Similar Cry to Rise Up," *New York Times*, Section A, March 17, 2006, 6; and Craig S. Smith, "Four Ways to Fire a Frenchman," *New York Times*, March 26, 2006.

mobility but actually toward something else. What's striking in the temporal imaginary of both the citizen and the migrant workers is the ways they look forward to a condition of stasis, of being able to *be somewhere* and make a life, exercising existence as a fact, not a project.<sup>21</sup> In other words, in this version of transnational class fantasy, mobility is a nightmare, not a dream, and property and propriety signify *having something* and keeping it, and being able to return to it. The end of mobility as a fantasy of upwardness, and the shift to the fantasy of stop-loss is itself a subtle redirection of the fantasy bribes transacted to effect the reproduction of life under the present economic conditions.<sup>22</sup> Under these pressures, it is easy to see how post-Fordist subjectivity can shrink the imaginary social field to a repetition of a remembered and yet unrealized fantasy whose ballast, whose reproductively animating spark, insists motivatingly that it's a dream that can be lived.

The desire for a less bad bad life involves finding resting places; the reproduction of normativity occurs when rest is imagined nostalgically—that is, in the places where rest is supposed to have happened, a fantasy masquerading as screen memory or paramnesia. One might read these repetitions as nostalgia for nostalgia, a kind of desperate regression toward the desire to soon experience an imaginary security one *knows* without having ever had, and fair enough; but normativity where there is no foundation for the expectation of it beyond a perduring fantasy can also be read as a form of bargaining with what is overwhelming about the present, a bargaining against the fall between the cracks, the living death of

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21. "This 'life world' is not only the field where individuals' existence unfolds in practice; it is where they exercise existence—that is, live their lives out and confront the very forms of their death." Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 15. We might also address here the alternative temporalities to a counter-human rights conception of living on, as in Alain Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2002), 14–15, where the person's capacity to take up subjectivity requires a conception of the Good beyond that reality which is presented to him as the ground of experience; or Giorgio Agamben's flattened temporality of the Aristotelian lifeworld, where the prevarications and temporizations of the law/*bios* in the zone of indistinction that constitutes official understandings of belonging in the social is contrasted to *zoë*, the fact of living that connects live matter and that doesn't require historicizing to justify a world organized around sustaining its existence. This view extends to that put forth as a radicalized rights consciousness in Patricia Williams's visionary *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 165. What's important here is to enumerate, in any case, what it means, historically and politically, to "exercise existence." Agamben returns to this in his advocacy of *zoë* over *bios* in all the work including and after *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

22. "Fantasy bribe" is Fredric Jameson's term for what capitalism, and commodity genres particularly, hold out as a kind of affective profit for its participants. See his "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 144.

repetition that's just one step above the fall into death by drowning or by hitting the concrete at full speed. It's a mode of living on with the dread of an eternal present that gets drowned out by the noise of promised normativity's soothing bustle. This is an empirical question as well as a theoretical one, but one of the empirical questions is about the transmission, content, form, and force of fantasy. For in order for normative conservatism to take hold in fantasy, or in order for fantasy to join ideology, somewhere in there the children learn to fantasize that the bad life that threatens impossibility or death *could* be a good life that must materialize from all this labor. The intensity of the need to *feel* normal is created by economic conditions of nonreciprocity that are mimetically reproduced in households that try to maintain the affective forms of middle-class exchange while having an entirely different context of anxiety and economy to manage. What is it in the relation of fantasy to the everyday that enjambs the children in shaky fidelity to a practice of intimacy whose manifestation in their own lives could easily have produced their rejection of it?

### Psychoanalysis, Ethics, and the Infantile

So far I have suggested that neoliberal economic and social conditions of reproducing everyday life shape the affective horizon of normativity in the Dardennes' films in a way that illuminates some more general questions about why the bad life is not repudiated by those whom it has failed. Mothers make dinner, fathers build houses and businesses: a certain familiar tenderness is transacted transgenerationally. All of these gestures are not themselves objects of desire but a tightly proximate cluster of placeholders for what everyone seems to want, a space of a collective relief from the ongoing present in which living on is an activity of treading water and stopping loss amidst unreliable dependencies. The parental gestures would work, would lubricate thriving, if only they could drown out or distract the scavenging hypervigilance toward survival and acknowledgment that constitutes the subjective practice of the children. But the dramatic action of the films emerges because the children come to cast parental gestures of life-building, reciprocity, and acknowledgment in the light of suspicion, as zombie forms through which normativity reproduces itself as an unlivable animating desire. But this does not mean that the children detach from the fantasy forms they associate with parental love, however badly practiced. How to explain why the children protect their attachments to such fantasy, the lived version of which is, at best, anxious and, at worst, tragic?

From a certain political perspective, a feminist one, it has long been argued

that love is a bargaining tool for convincing others to join in making a life that also provides a loophole through which people can view themselves nonetheless as fundamentally noninstrumental — selfless, sacrificial, magnanimous — in their intimacies.<sup>23</sup> The code phrase for this loophole is the distinction between the public and the private. This structure is what Habermas points to, as well, when he distinguishes the modern bourgeois as someone who shifts between his identity as a calculating man of the market and his identity as an *homme* who locates his true self in the performance of intimacy in the theater of domestic space.<sup>24</sup> The displaced relation within the capitalist subject between his instrumental and loving personae enables him to disidentify with what's aggressive in his pursuit of desire and interest in all spaces, and to see himself as fundamentally ethical because he means to have solidarity with some humans he knows. This perspective would suggest that the Dardenne children are caught in the contradictory knot of their parents' economo-affective practices, which similarly cast intimate well-intentioned activity as importantly life-affirming and only situationally aggressive, coercive, or disappointing.

Judith Butler's formidable work on "grievable life" produces a quite different account of attachments to the "bad life." From *The Psychic Life of Power* through *Precarious Life*, Butler also develops an account of social inequality that grows from the intricate and contradictory bindings of power within the family. She pursues a *developmental* model of political subjectivity that sees infantile dependency as the seed of a kind of sadistic normativity in adults that can be interrupted by an ethical commitment to compassionate emotion. In recognizing the previously ungrieved "grievable life" or lives, the Butlerian progressive subject dismantles her pathological sense of defensive sovereignty or sovereign indifference on behalf of a healthy, nonsovereign identification with those populations that need to be included in communities of compassion in order to gain access to the machineries of justice.

Since many people, including Belgian policy-makers, responded to the Dardennes' films as though already trained in making ungrieved lives subjects of their transformative compassion, it would seem that these films would enact the emotion-work that Butler proposes. Yet, as we will see, in translating the psycho-analytic to the ethical by way of normativity, Butler writes the unconscious out

23. For the history of this argument, see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).

24. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Berger (London: Blackwell, 1992), esp. 47–56.

of the story, producing subjects as ethical intentionalists who can make cognitive decisions to short-circuit foundational affective attachments in order to gain a better good life. One might note the political problems with this circuit of displacement: as I and others have argued, projects of compassionate recognition have enabled a habit of political obfuscation of the differences between emotional and material (legal, economic, and institutional) kinds of social reciprocity.<sup>25</sup> Self-transforming compassionate recognition and its cognate forms of solidarity *are* necessary for making political movements thrive contentiously against all sorts of privilege, but they have also provided a means for making minor structural adjustments seem like major events, because the theater of compassion is emotionally intense. Recognition all too often becomes an experiential end in itself, an emotional event that protects what is unconscious, impersonal, and unrelated to anyone's intentions about maintaining political privilege.

However, my focus here is not on Butler's argument about empathic capacities as central to justice, but on the developmental aspect of the account, which argues that the experience of sovereignty is a reaction formation against infantile dependency. Claiming that "to desire the conditions of one's own subordination is . . . required to persist as oneself [such that we] embrace the very form of power—regulation, prohibition, suppression—that threatens one with dissolution in an effort, precisely, to persist in one's own existence," she enmeshes all sorts of unlike phenomena, conflating dependence with subordination, psychic self-dispossession with political injustice, and personal with political subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> This enmeshment is not an accident or unconscious in Butler's work—it is an explicit project of explanation about how "this condition of my formation" is expressed in "the sphere of politics."<sup>27</sup> More important for our purposes, the

25. Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, ed. Janet Halley and Wendy Brown (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 105–133; Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); and Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003). Much of this work emerged from discussions of the Late Liberalism project of the University of Chicago. None of the above claims that affective recognition has *never* been part of the significant political, economic, and social empowerment of minoritized or negated communities—it *always* is. But more often, the intensities of affective performance are not matched in scale by transformations in the law, the distribution of wealth, the administrations of institutions, or the normative collective practices of communities.

26. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1977), 9.

27. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 27.

work equates infantile dependency with normative attachments and normative attachments with attachments to power and privilege. Is the infantile structure of dependency sublimated into love really the origin of all patience with injustice? Let me briefly open up some problems that such enmeshing generates for a concept of political subjectivity generally and particularly of post-Fordist affect from the perspective of the economic bottom.

Here is the most developed version of the argument:

The task is doubtless to think through this primary impressionability and vulnerability with a theory of power and recognition. To do this would no doubt be one way a politically informed psychoanalytic feminism could proceed. The “I” who cannot come into being without a “you” is also fundamentally dependent on a set of norms of recognition that originated neither with the “I” nor with the “you.” What is prematurely, or belatedly, called the “I” is, at the outset, enthralled, even if it is to a violence, an abandonment, a mechanism; doubtless it seems better at that point to be enthralled with what is impoverished or abusive than not to be enthralled at all and so to lose the condition of one’s being and becoming. . . . So the question of primary support for primary vulnerability is an ethical one for the infant and for the child. But there are broader ethical consequences from this situation, ones that pertain not only to the adult world but to the sphere of politics and its implicit ethical dimension.<sup>28</sup>

Neither Butler nor I are clinicians, so what matters here are arguments about how to understand passionate or irrational attachments to normative authority and normative worlds. To Butler, answering this means characterizing desires for autonomy as adult symptoms of a wounded narcissism of the dependent child. She insists that when adults imagine autonomy or sovereignty as synonymous with freedom, they are manifesting a humiliated reaction formation to having been duped, as an infant, into idealizing a love that was always self-dispossessing and never not disappointing.<sup>29</sup> As a result, Butler argues, the adult repudiates interdependency and becomes deeply authoritarian. She deems ethno-racisms, homophobia, and misogyny to be expressions of this compensation.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, she suggests that there is enough ambivalence in the subject’s love of subjection that opportunities exist to choose to not reproduce attachments to subordination; the way to do this is to make ethical interventions into unconscious

28. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 46.

29. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26–27.

30. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 37–41.



attachments, to produce a new vulnerability that will undo the humiliation of the original one.

As I argue in the next section, it is not at all clear that infantile dependency provides a bad education in the phenomenology of justice. But for the moment let's accept the claim that children organize their optimism for living through attachments they never consented to making, that they make do with what's around that might respond adequately to their needs. They may even come to be in love with the promise of the promise that there will be a moment of reciprocal *something* between themselves and the world, if they're good, that is, *if they become a good subject of the promise*, and they may mistake love for subjection to the will of others who have promised to care for/love them. W. R. D. Fairbairn provides a different angle on this: not that the child becomes attached to subordinated dependency, but that the child becomes attached to the scene of the opportunity for imagining the optimistic overcoming of what's disempowering about it.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Christopher Bollas has adapted Donald Winnicott to argue in favor of thinking of the object of desire not as an object but as an environment, a transformational environment.<sup>32</sup> An environment is a scene to which you can return. It is loose, porous, an atmosphere that you can enter in a number of ways and change within without violating the fundamental attachment. I add to this a concept of the object as itself a scene, a scene that magnetizes a noncoherent cluster of desires for reciprocity, acknowledgment, or recognition, converging into a mirage of solidity—it's a vitalist, pointilist notion of the object of desire. From this theoretical perspective on what love does to reproduce normativity, infantile dependency would not really be an experience of attaching to domination, but a scene where the subject negotiates an overdetermined set of promises and potentials for recognition and even thriving. It might be more like an environment where the subject is trained to cathect to optimism, a relational affect whose practices and objects are themselves normatively mediated.

What we are talking about here is the hardest problem, of understanding the difficulty of unlearning attachments to regimes of injustice. Justice itself is a technology of deferral or patience that keeps people engrossed politically, when they are, in the ongoing drama of optimism and disappointment.<sup>33</sup> Yet Butler's

31. W. R. D. Fairbairn, *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, intro. David E. Scharff and Ellinor Fairbairn Birtles (1952; London: Routledge, 1990), esp. 59–151.

32. Christopher Bollas, "The Transformational Object," in *The Shadow of the Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 13–29.

33. On "technologies of patience," see Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 222.



theoretical stance about “power” in relation to the law, normative authority, values normativity, and structural privilege underdescribes the number of internally contradictory promises (of acknowledgment, amelioration, protection, retribution, balancing, delegation, discipline, and enabling to thrive) that its activity represents. It also forgets what *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* show intricately, that recognition and reciprocity can take many forms, some of which mime equality as collaboration, some of which produce contexts of trust in interdependency, some of which are coerced or tactical, and all of which are deeply ambiguous, compromised, and unstable.

Indeed, one analysis of the crisis scripted by the Dardennes would focus on the increasingly impossible task of recognizing what counts as reciprocity at any scale of sociality. In the scene of economic, national, and transnational life that has provided this essay’s case, love is only slightly less contingent than work. During the last twenty years of state shrinkage and temp culture both at work and in the institutions of intimacy, the work of (re)production has been shaped by the increasing demand for flexibility and the increasing expectation that, in love as at work, one might well be only a temporary employee, without affective or material benefits reliably in the present or the future. At moments like this, the fantasy of an unconflicted, normative lifeworld can provide the affective preexperience of a potential site of rest, even if one has known it only as, at best, a mirage of solidity and stability. This is why whatever account of attachment to normative fantasy we make needs a more complicated notion of object choice and of what it means to desire to have a cluster of *feelings* in lieu of having a *world*.

Comfort in proximity to a vague object or scene that promises to deliver some ballast in sociality is not the same as enjoying supremacist pleasure, just as, psychoanalytically speaking, misrecognizing is not the same as being mistaken. The hegemonic is, after all, not merely domination dressed more becomingly—it is a metastructure of consent. To see hegemony as domination and subordination is to disavow how much of dependable life relies on the sheerly optimistic formalism of attachment. As citizens of the promise of hegemonic sociability, we have consented to consent to a story about the potentialities of the good life around which people execute all sorts of collateral agreements. This is why the people who enforce the reality effect of this commitment to imminent generality are not just “the hegemons” like CEOs, heteros, Anglos, and U.S. Americans. Commitments to a society of the general will are enforced by people who have varying access to power, both economic and intimate. From this point of view, instead of embracing ethics as a kind of emotional orthopedics of the political, we might also attend to the convolutions of attachment that involve a desire to stay proximate, no matter

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what, to the potential openings marked out by fantasies of the good life, self-continuity, or unconflictedness.

### Worlds of Pain

I've suggested that the psychoanalytic attempts to explain the subject's love of subordination read normativity too narrowly as an authoritarian desire: trying to understand the confusion of bargaining with reciprocity and participation in the economy with social belonging, this epistemology sees ambivalence as coming after object choice, which is fundamentally abject. What would happen if we saw subjectivization as happening historically, as training in affective sense perception? Beginning in the 1960s, Lillian Rubin did a series of ethnographies of working-class U.S. families in the hope of understanding the ties that bind working-class U.S. families to the scenes of deprivation in which they'd become literate as members of the social. Rubin's take on working-class attachment connects it to the cramped temporality of the everyday, twenty-five years before speedup had spread from the two-income working-class household to the professional-managerial class itself.<sup>34</sup>

But with so little time for normal family life, there's little room for anyone or anything outside. Friendships founder, and adult social activities are put on hold as parents try to do in two days a week what usually takes seven—that is, to establish a sense of family life for themselves and their children. For those whose days off don't match, the problems of sustaining both the couple relationship and family life are magnified enormously.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, the children watch the parents' worlds shrink inwardly to the scale of getting through the day—and the stress is so palpable that the kids learn to try

34. Lillian B. Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), and Stack, *All Our Kin*, provide the classic analyses of this phenomenon; the ensuing bibliography is extensive. For a great literature review, which focuses on parental pain rather than childhood experiences of class, see Thomas J. Gorman, "Reconsidering *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class(es)*," *Sociological Review* 15, no. 4 (2000): 693–717. With variations on styles of survival, their findings about defensive affective binding as a condition for the reproduction of normative fantasy are supported entirely by ethnographies of working-class children and youth from each of the following decades. High points of different kinds include Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Accardo, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, and Susan Emanuel, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Societies* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Jason Parle, *American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare* (New York: Viking, 2004); Heymann, *Forgotten Families*.

35. Rubin, *Worlds of Pain*, xxv.

to take up as little space as possible. They grow up feeling guilty about taking up space, seeing their parents as doing their best, but being powerless as well.

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However imperfectly articulated or understood, children in such families sense the adults' frustration and helplessness. Their own hurt notwithstanding, assigning blame to parents makes little sense to these children. Their anger either is turned inward and directed against self . . . or projected outward and directed against other, less threatening objects. . . . For all children, life often feels fearful and uncontrollable. When a child's experience suggests that the adults on whom he must depend for survival have little control as well, his fears of being unprotected and overwhelmed are so great that he must either deny and repress his experience or succumb to his terror.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the working-class child is directed away from critique or complaint. "Children in all families frequently are 'lonely or scared,' or both," she writes. "But the child in the working class family understands that often there's nothing his parents can do about it. They're stuck just as he is — stuck with a life over which they have relatively little control."<sup>37</sup> Rubin here does not describe children's consent to their or anyone's subordination, or love of familial compensations for social powerlessness in the mode of exaggerated patriarchalism and maternity. Instead, the children appear to her to be depressive realists, not idealizing, for the most part, their parents' struggles or modes of survival while at the same time feeling protective of them for the ordinariness of their social humiliation.<sup>38</sup> Another way to say this is that even before the children's lives can be let in as transformatively grievable, the parents' lives must be taken seriously as something other than already wasted. It is the function of the children to do that. How that happens, the transmission of fantasy as an inheritance of an impossible life, is most beautifully described by Loïc Wacquant in his ethnography of Chicago's south side. His informant, Kenny, is a man on the make: he scavenges to live, he builds some skills and lets them lapse, but never gives up his dreams. His dreams, though, are vague: to be a vet, to have a life, to be a star boxer, to make a family. Wacquant says that Kenny has little sense of how these ends might be achieved — the enabling fantasy lives in a disavowed disconnect from the pressures of getting through the day:

36. Rubin, *Worlds of Pain*, 27.

37. Rubin, *Worlds of Pain*, 29.

38. Steedman performs a like congeries of ambivalence, silence, and secrecy entailed in her experience of the transactions of parental love in her working-class household in *Landscape for a Good Woman*.

Under such conditions of relentless and all-pervading social and economic insecurity, where existence becomes reduced to the craft of day-to-day survival and where one must continually do one's best with whatever is at hand, that is, precious little, the present becomes so uncertain that it devours the future and prohibits thinking about it except as fantasy . . . in its own way, a *labor of social mourning* that does not say its name.<sup>39</sup>

Homosexuality, the love that dares not speak its name, echoes within this phrasing of the labor of social mourning: both phrases are about what must remain veiled in order that a scene of social belonging may still be endured. Such euphemisms protect the vulnerable subjects and the social order that ejects them from appropriateness. In Kenny's case, social mourning amidst poverty must remain unstated directly, on behalf of not feeling defeated. He manifests mourning without feeling it in an explicit way as hopelessness but as what we might call a cruel optimism, a projection of unworkable fantasy.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, perhaps this combination of disappointment and protectiveness can be misread as a hardwired love of subordination, but I think not. *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* show in countless ways the children's desire to protect their parents from experiencing, within the family, a repetition of the humiliation they know all too well outside of it. At the same time, these children are forced, by the parents' lack of fight, to fight the parents on behalf of a dignity and sense of possibility that they maintain only as a fantasy they pass down to their kids—this is clearly the case in Rosetta's constant refusal of her mother's homemaking gestures—making salmon, planting plants outside their caravan—because those things are effects of charity and sexual exchange, and “we are not beggars” and “you are not a whore.” Likewise, Igor never says no to his father, even after they kill Amidou, but would instead fall silent, and though he rescues Assita from his father and she wants to go to the police, Igor says, “My father's wrong, but I'm no snitch,” and in

39. Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “Inside ‘The Zone’: The Social Art of the Hustler in the American Ghetto,” in Bourdieu et al., *The Weight of the World*, 156. For cognate readings of a cleavage in the relation of lived life on the bottom of class society and aspirational normativity with a particular focus on youth, see Paul Connolly and Julie Healy, “Symbolic Violence and the Neighborhood: The Educational Aspirations of 7–8 Year Old Working-Class Girls,” *British Journal of Sociology* 55, no. 4 (2004): 1–19; Edwards, “‘We're Decent People’”; Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Katherine A. MacTavish and Sonya Salamon, “Pathways of Youth Development in a Rural Trailer Park,” *Family Relations* 55 (April 2006): 163–74.

40. This paragraph reworks material in Lauren Berlant, “Compassion (and Withholding),” in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

the end it is Assita who must physically overpower Roger, because Igor wants to protect him from really facing that the network of illegal patriarchy has now been exposed not as making do or building a life but as the petty reproduction of exploitation's instrumentality at the level of the informal everyday. Igor begins to see it, but his body freezes, much as Rosetta's body is being eaten alive by an ulcer that cramps her up, but neither of them can reject the drowning parental body that is also pulling them down, perhaps for fear of becoming identical to the police, the state, the bosses, and inspectors who would see only practices and care little for the motives of love.

Given their geopolitical and historical specificity, what can we take away from thinking through these readings of the ways some children reproduce the forms of the bad life insofar as they are rooted in the family? We have seen that the child, the subordinated subject, learns early that relations of reciprocity are likely to be betrayed when the only way to survive the world is to resort to informal economies, the bribes and bargains of biopower, with its discourses of untruth. The films show the youths struggling to tell their truths without harming anyone, but that is impossible, because in their worlds love is constituted through acts of lying to protect the feelings of intimates, while at the same time, and behind the veil of lies, the ruthlessness for survival that anyone on the bottom of class society must mobilize ends up shaking up the intimate sphere as much as anything else. The subjects of survival require cultivating techniques of scavenging, syncretism, and mistrust. There is barely time to reflect on belonging, and no time not to react to threat: the tiny folds of moral peace and optimism these two films allow their protagonists cannot be sustained by personal will, after all, but by control over resources they do not have.

I close not with a solution to the problem of aspirational normativity as expressed in the conventionalities of subaltern feeling, because, I am arguing, the subordinated sensorium of the immaterial worker, whose acts of rage and ruthlessness are mixed with forms of care, is an effect of the relation between capitalism's refusal of futurity in an overwhelmingly productive present and the normative promise of intimacy, which enables us to imagine that having a friend or making a date or looking longingly at someone who might, after all, show compassion for our struggles, is really where living takes place.

