

Introduction

A Critical Fairy Tale

THE CINÉMA DU NORD IS A critical cinema, a cinema that at once expresses and emerges from crisis. The Cinéma du Nord brings, moreover, a marginal, northern perspective to longstanding debates in francophone European film and philosophy that, besides the Dardennes, Dumont, and Pialat, includes the texts and images of Blaise Pascal, Robert Bresson, André Bazin, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and, beyond francophone Europe, Vittorio de Sica, Antonio Hardt, Michael Negri, Lauren Berlant, and Baruch Spinoza, among others. The Nord after which this cinema from and of the North is named spans the French North (in particular Nord-Pas-de-Calais, France's northernmost administrative region until its 2016 merger with Picardy into Hauts-de-France) and Wallonia, the predominantly francophone south of Belgium. Other than the French language and their capricious climate, these bordering regions share a history of coal mining and heavy industry. Once, the Nord was a cradle of the first Industrial Revolution (and thus also of the era of fossil-fueled capitalism). In 1720, a coal mine in the Dardennes' hometown of Seraing, which is part of the Liège agglomeration, was first to operate the steam engine on the European continent, and subsequently the Belgian south and French north grew into economic superpowers. Over the course of the twentieth century this industrial golden age gradually gave way to structural economic crisis. At the turn of the twenty-first century—while only short train rides away, in the nearby cities of Brussels, Strasbourg, and Maastricht, political leaders founded the European Union—the French-Walloon Nord had become a rust belt, its coal mines depleted, its industries superannuated, while unemployment skyrocketed. After seven generations of life structured by the pace of heavy industry, that industry's decline created a generation

in which many grew up without ever seeing their parents work, without an example of a “normal” life. In *Rosetta*, set and shot in Seraing, this crisis reality determines the protagonist’s obstinate struggle for such a *vie normale*, starting with a job. Just across the border, *L’humanité*, which Dumont mainly filmed in his hometown of Bailleul near Lille, integrates socioeconomic crisis more obliquely and with a degree of caricature, turning the region’s crisis reality into the backdrop for the film’s carnal-spiritual quest for “humanity.”

Rosetta and *L’humanité* have a lot in common, which is something that has also struck Jacques Rancière. Following Cannes 1999, in an essay titled “Le Bruit du peuple, l’image de l’art” (The noise of the people, the image of art) that was published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, Rancière asks:

What is it exactly that unites *Rosetta* and *L’humanité*, other than the fact that at the latest Cannes festival they were both loaded with the jury’s praise, and similarly dismissed by a large part of professionals and critics? What makes them a joined symbol or symptom, even though everything in the long shots, the distant gaze, and the aesthetic-spiritual discourse of Bruno Dumont seems to oppose itself to the panting camera, the lens glued to the protagonist, and the denunciatory tradition that characterizes *Rosetta*? That Bruno Dumont continues to film the small people of the North, and the Dardennes the slums and wastelands of Wallonia. . . . This all seems sufficient for certain people to locate—and generally lament—a new wave of “realism” and a new instance in which art compromises itself with the “social.”¹

I will return extensively to Rancière’s own answer to his question of what unites *Rosetta* and *L’humanité*. But there are also a few parallels Rancière leaves unaddressed. The first is that *Rosetta* and *L’humanité* are both variations on films by Robert Bresson, namely, *Mouchette* (1967) and *Journal d’un curé de campagne / Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), respectively, which are in turn adaptations from novels by the French Catholic author Georges Bernanos. *L’humanité* cites, moreover, Pialat’s aforementioned *Sous le soleil de Satan*, another Bernanos adaptation. Like these films by Bresson and Pialat, *Rosetta* and *L’humanité* are moral tales. They are fables, also, with humans instead of animals as their protagonists. Crucially, whereas Bresson’s and Pialat’s protagonists all die in the end, *Rosetta* and Pharaon (the protagonist of *L’humanité*) miraculously survive. Both films end on long close-ups of their main characters, looking offscreen, shots in which we at once see an acting face, an acted face, and an *idea* of a “human” face (figs. I.1 and I.2).



Figure I.1. *Rosetta* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 1999).



Figure I.2. *L'humanité* (Bruno Dumont, 1999).

Second and directly related, both films owe their affective textures to the idiosyncratic ways the Dardennes and Dumont work with their predominantly amateur casts. Also in this respect, they clearly take inspiration from Bresson, who referred to his actors as “models.” Yet whereas Bresson used his models as vessels for a disembodied speech, the Dardennes and Dumont are also very much concerned with bringing out the “humanity” of their nonexperienced actors. How comfortable are “we,” critical viewers, with this whiff of humanity?

The third parallel between *Rosetta* and *L'humanité* is that they both employ a secular-Christian vocabulary for a world without God. Both

films investigate what remains of humanity in a time and place where it is no longer clear what a normal everyday life looks like, as the power of traditional and modern, life-shaping institutions has waned—from mass-employment industries to the Church, and from the labor movement to the nuclear family. The Dardennes and Dumont ask this question in a way that integrates the universal with the particular. On the one hand, *Rosetta* and *L'humanité*, like all of the Dardennes' and Dumont's films, are secular-religious tales that self-consciously flirt with a human essence that binds people together in a single humanity. On the other hand, they are very contemporary stories rooted in the material-historical reality of the Nord. Other than being marked by economic crisis, this reality is one of tension between ethnic-cultural groups. Both Wallonia and the French North have a long history of migration, first from poverty-struck Flanders, and following World War II from southern Europe, Africa (in particular North Africa), and, more recently, the Middle East. In the recent past both regions have periodically made headlines in European and world news around issues of cultural tension. Liège and Charleroi, two of Wallonia's former coal belt cities with high rates of social exclusion, have been identified as breeding grounds for fundamentalist Islamic groups. At the other side of the border, the French North, long a socialist stronghold, was almost captured by Marine le Pen's Front National in the 2015 regional elections. Moreover, together with the Mediterranean and the Eastern borders of the EU Calais at the French northern Sea Coast is *the* place in northwestern Europe where the borders of and within the European Union are most tangible, as it has been "home" to encampments of migrants who wish to cross the Channel into the United Kingdom (which also before Brexit was not part of the Schengen Zone). The Dardennes and Dumont tend to address issues of migration and xenophobia only tangentially, but their work, and the Cinéma du Nord in general, does compel the viewer to think through the complex relations between cultural tension and economic crisis in this region where the transition from a mono-industrial economy to a more diversified and precarious, postindustrial socioeconomic structure has hit harder than anywhere else in Northwestern Europe.

The fourth major parallel between *Rosetta* and *L'humanité* is their "Egyptian connection," which is first of all present in their protagonists' names: Rosetta (whose name connotes the Rosetta stone) and Pharaon. Both films hide, in plain view, a hieroglyphic double meaning. At first sight *Rosetta* and *L'humanité* are rather straightforward quests of a young woman for a job and a policeman for a murderer. When watched more closely, though, these films turn out to be secular-religious mind games encrypted with the spirit: a north wind investing the image despite and

because of its realism. That secular-Christian spirit only manifests itself to the obsessive viewer who, remote control in hand or glued to their laptop, commits to deciphering these films' secretly coded quests for grace.

So there are many parallels between *Rosetta* and *L'humanité*. In fact, the parallels are so many that I am tempted to speculate as to whether the Dardennes and Dumont did perhaps coordinate their 1999 Cannes releases. However, other than the visual evidence cited here, I don't have any proof for such a *complot*. That said, I find it hard to believe Dumont's claim in a 2009 interview that he never saw *Rosetta*.² Speculation aside, it is certain that the joint victory of *Rosetta* and *L'humanité* cast the spotlight on the intricate web of parallels between these two films: the "miracle" of Cannes '99.

What, actually, is a miracle? A miracle is impossible, per definition, or more precisely, a miracle is *the* impossible. A miracle remains impossible even though its very occurrence has just demonstrated the opposite. And strictly speaking, a miracle does not *occur*, that is to say, it does not occur in the present tense. A miracle knows no presence, because its occurrence changes, or would change, the very notion of what it means to be present. There is no point in hoping for a miracle; a miracle can only be the object of belief. Whereas hope is oriented at a potential event, belief orients itself at that "event which surpasses, or is thought to surpass, human comprehension,"³ the definition of miracle Baruch Spinoza gives in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670). Like Spinoza, I do not believe in miracles, because I also agree with Spinoza that there are no potentialities that remain unactualized, or events that surpass comprehension. So if a miracle seems to have happened anyway, like at Cannes '99, one better reminds oneself that such a miracle exists in the gaze of its beholder and take the invitation to dwell in wonder, for as Spinoza writes, "most people think they sufficiently understand a thing when they have ceased to wonder at it."⁴

This book therefore explores the extraordinary coincidence of *Rosetta* and *L'humanité*. It seeks to explain why and how these two films with such similar narratives, vocabularies, and inspirations saw the light at the place (the French-Walloon Nord), and at the moment in history (the end of the twentieth century, and of cinema's long first century) they did. The book does so by situating both films within the French-Walloon Cinéma du Nord, understood as both an artistic-cultural movement and an industry. As stated, my overarching argument is that this cross-border Cinéma du Nord at once expresses and emerges from crisis. The Cinéma du Nord expresses crisis in that it asks how the Nord's uneven transition from a heavy-industrial to a precarious, postindustrial economy has affected the social fabric, down to the structures of people's

quotidian lives. The Cinéma du Nord emerges from crisis in that the development of Wallonia and the French North into major Euregional hubs of cinema and media production has been part of these regions' more general endeavors to reinvent themselves economically and culturally after decades of recession.

Let me briefly situate my analysis of the Cinéma du Nord within a broader discourse of national and transnational cinemas. For long, the study of cinematic movements has been dominated by a nation-state-based approach that goes as far back as Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947). As Dudley Andrew writes in "An Atlas of World Cinema" (2006), "national cinema studies have by and large been genealogical trees, one tree per country. . . . Their elaborate root and branch structures are seldom shown as intermingled."⁵ In the globalized era, Andrew observes that this nation-based approach continues to remain the dominant model, but he also observes tendencies that call this approach into question:

Let me not be coy. We still parse the world by nations. Film festivals identify entries by country, college courses are labeled "Japanese Cinema," "French Film," and textbooks are coming off the presses with titles such as *Screening Ireland*, *Screening China*, *Italian National Cinema*, and so on. But a wider conception of national image culture is around the corner, prophesied by phrases like "rooted cosmopolitanism" and "critical regionalism." . . . Such terms insist upon the centrifugal dynamic of images, yet without surrendering the special cohesion that films bring to specific cultures.⁶

So even though the nation-state remains the most common label to identify new waves and film cultures, the consensus is that as a concept "national cinema" falls short. This is now also the opinion of Andrew Higson, who a decade after his "The Concept of National Cinema" (1989) writes that "the contingent communities that cinema imagines are much more likely to be either local or transnational than national."⁷ In recent years, cinema studies has seen a surge of publications that adopt a transnational perspective. Here it is important to distinguish "transnational" from "international" and "global." As Nataša Đurovičová writes in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (2010), whereas the term "international" is predicated on relations of parity between nation-states and "global" is predicated on the category of totality, "the intermediate and open term 'transnational' " "acknowledges the persistent agency of the State" and thus implies "relations of unevenness and mobility."⁸

Intertwined with this transnational turn, but also partially in opposition to it, cinema studies has equally seen an increased attention for local, regional, and small national cinemas, which often are inherently transnational cinemas. As Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie write in *The Cinema of Small Nations* (2007), many small countries have limited domestic markets for the goods and services they produce. As a result, their cinema industries face relatively strong pressure to integrate themselves into transnational structures, if only because with their small domestic markets it is very difficult to raise the funds necessary for feature-length fiction production.⁹ In the case of Europe, so Janelle Blankenship and Tobias Nagl argue in their collection *European Visions: Small Cinemas in Transition* (2015), this integration of small national cinemas into transnational networks has been stimulated by EU funding initiatives like Eurimages, the MEDIA program, and the Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production, as well as by the European Film Academy and the Europa Cinemas Network.¹⁰ Also the Cinéma du Nord is a small cinema integrated into transnational and European structures. But the Cinéma du Nord is not a small *national* cinema. It is the cinema of a geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural region—the Nord—that itself exists across a national border.

This book thus adopts at once a transnational and regional perspective, and in doing so proposes to think transregionally, which is the slanted perspective from which the Nord and its cinema are seen. Much more than cinematic movements tied to geopolitical spaces firmly entrenched in international law and power relations, the Cinéma du Nord is largely immanent to the researcher's efforts to trace the contours of the border-crossing space it is named after. And let me state from the outset here that my thinking about space and territory has been inspired by Spinoza's equation of right and power, which in this context implies, for example, a perspective according to which France has the borders it has simply because the structures that keep these borders in place outweigh the powers that may have an interest in challenging them, like the Basque National Liberation Movement (Basque Country being a region that, like the Nord, exists transnationally, albeit in a very different way).

The Cinéma du Nord is at once a cultural-aesthetic movement—a “north wind”—and an industry. On the one hand, “Cinéma du Nord” thus refers to a body of films that at once emerge from and that express the Nord as a transnational reality. On the other hand, it is the infrastructure of film production in Wallonia and the French North. Defined more precisely, in its connotation of cinematic movement, Cinéma du Nord is a body of fiction features, shorts, and documentaries, including TV productions, that 1) have a narrative set or partly set in either Wallonia or Nord-Pas-de-Calais; 2) have a production connection to

either Wallonia or Nord-Pas-de-Calais, either because they were shot or partly shot in one or both of these regions, or because they were produced or coproduced by an organization established in these regions; and 3) contribute to a definition of the Nord as a cross-border region. In its connotation of a cinematic infrastructure, Cinéma du Nord refers to the network of organizations involved in the production and financing of cinema in Wallonia and the French North, including collaborations between both regions.

As far as the criterion that films *du Nord* have a production connection to Wallonia or Nord-Pas-de-Calais is concerned, here I follow the funding criteria used by Wallimage and the northern French Pictanova (formerly Centre Régional de Ressources Audiovisuelles du Nord-Pas-de-Calais), which have promoted film production in Wallonia and the French North since 1999 and 1985, respectively. Both these organizations almost exclusively support films that have a connection to their regions, both in terms of content and production. Here it is important to emphasize, though, that my definition of the Cinéma du Nord is also inclusive of films that engage the region even though they were *not* produced or coproduced regionally. For example, *Nord* (1991) by Xavier Beauvois was shot in Nord-Pas-de-Calais but without regional funding, while *Rosetta* was coproduced by the Walloon region only *after* the film's success in Cannes (a story to which I will return in chapter 3).

Because the Nord is not an official administrative region, integral to my investigation of the Cinéma du Nord is a mapping of the Nord as a geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural region. I thus define the Cinéma du Nord recursively, as a cinema that allows me to define this region immanent to the material and discursive realities that cross the French-Belgian border. Films play a double role in my analysis. Insofar as that analysis is a transdiscursive mapping of the Nord, I discuss films as cultural objects among other cultural objects that allow me to identify the Nord in discourse, including literary texts (e.g., Émile Zola's *Germinal*), painting (Van Gogh, Magritte), architecture (the new international railway stations of Lille and Liège), but also folklore, interregional maps, political documents, reportage, and economic analyses. In this endeavor to identify the Nord as a truly transregional space and to at points invite the reader to forget that that space is cut through by an international border, the main challenge has been that also in an increasingly transnational world most regional discourses are still written from within an intranational perspective. Insofar as my analysis is an argument *about* the Cinéma du Nord, I simply assume the Nord exists, like most studies of French national cinema assume that France exists.

As a final note on method: my analysis of the Cinéma du Nord is not bound by a historical period, at least not directly, because of course the Nord, like any space and community, is also a product of history. The following pages therefore do not tell the story of the Cinéma du Nord from its beginning—say André Capellani's 1913 screen adaptation of *Germinal*—to its transmedia future. Instead, my organization of argument gravitates around the moment that the Cinéma du Nord manifested itself most clearly to an international audience for the first time: the joint victory of *Rosetta* and *L'humanité* at Cannes 1999. Formulated differently, were this project a museum exhibition, it would commence in an auditorium where *Rosetta* and *L'humanité* are screened back to back. From there, the exhibition continues in four connected gallery spaces, each of which corresponds to a different methodological approach. While the first space contains a lot of clips and frame grabs, in the second the walls are covered with maps, and while at some moments my analytical gaze may seem as obstinate as Rosetta's battle for employment and Pharaon's investigation, at other moments I paint in broader strokes. What unites these four spaces is their combined endeavor to explain why the two films, whose sounds and images resonate throughout the rooms, were made at the time and place they were.

Metaphor aside, the book has four chapters, over the course of which it integrates methods and perspectives of textual analysis, discourse analysis, film history, theory, industry studies, and film philosophy. While the first and last chapters are conceptually driven, the two middle chapters are historical in their orientation and are largely based on the research I did at the Cinémathèque Française and the Bibliothèque National de France in Paris (which also houses the Inathèque of the French Institut National de l'Audiovisuel) as well as the Cinematek in Brussels. At those archives I substantiated my idea of the Nord, and I analyzed films unavailable through North American academic libraries, the web, or P2P file-sharing programs.

The first chapter, "Hunting for Easter Eggs in *Rosetta* and *L'humanité*," presents a *very* close analysis of the films whose coincidence forms the starting point of my exploration of the Cinéma du Nord. The chapter opens with a *play* button, this in emphasis of the chapter's reenactment, in writing, of my process of decoding of the affective mind games both films cast their viewers into. As the chapter title indicates, over the course of that analysis I discover a number of Easter eggs, including the very hard-boiled egg Rosetta knocks against her head and eats before she attempts suicide in the final scene. In computing, an Easter egg is a program's coded response to an undocumented user command, like a secret level in

a computer game or the tilted interface upon googling the word “askew.” In cinema, an Easter egg is an element easily missed by the first-time spectator but that may aid in unlocking the narrative code. Consider, for instance, Alfred Hitchcock’s cameos, the shadow of Michael Haneke’s camera in *Caché* (2005) (which proves it’s the filmmaker himself who did it; fig. I.3), the mirroring scars in Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers* (2003) (which confirm that Isabelle and Théo are really two sides of the same fantasy), or the password at the end of the final credits in *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) (which allows the spectator to “hack” into whatisthematrix.com, until Warner Bros. suspended the website in 2011; fig. I.4). In Christianity, the originally pagan association of the egg with fertility was baptized as a symbol of Christ’s resurrection. Combining these three connotations, in the spiritual mind games that play out in *Rosetta* and *L’humanité*, these hidden plot elements lead the close viewer to reveal the well-hidden yet unmistakably coded passion stories—with a lowercase *p*—that both films hide in their plot spaces, like a secret level in a computer game. Mind-game films, Thomas Elsaesser writes, are “indicative of a ‘crisis’ in the spectator-film relation, in the sense that the traditional ‘suspension of disbelief’ [is] . . . no longer deemed appropriate, compelling, or challenging enough.”¹¹ *Rosetta* and *L’humanité* indeed subtly challenge that suspension of disbelief, as both films tease the viewer into a concealed postsecular vocabulary, much like *The Matrix*, also from 1999, and an equally postsecular *neo*-Christian tale for a disenchanting world.



Figure I.3. *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005).



Figure I.4. *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, 1999).

But chapter 1 does not merely play along with *Rosetta* and *L'humanité*; it is also a critique. However self-reflexive these films may show themselves in their flirtations with Christian humanist tropes, their narratives are modeled on classical quest structures in which the male protagonists (Pharaon, Rosetta's friend Riquet) operate as the humanizing agents, while the female protagonists (Rosetta and Domino) are the passive recipients of a rather vague notion of "humanity." We here have yet another parallel between *Rosetta* and *L'humanité*: both their self-reflexive passion stories are driven by a conventional and somewhat patronizing Oedipal logic on its ceaselessly problematic quest for narrative closure.

Chapter 2, "Coal-Fired Dreams: The Cinéma du Nord," maps the Nord as a geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural-linguistic space. As stated, this transdiscursive mapping integrates the analysis of a variety of objects, including many films: from Henri Storck and Joris Ivens's 1933 pamphlet documentary *Misère au Borinage* (praised by Walter Benjamin as a film that turns any man into a movie extra) to the northern French blockbuster *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis / Welcome to the Sticks* (Dany Boon, 2008). Following my construction of the Nord as a material and discursive space that fades out the French-Belgian border, I reintroduce that border in order to articulate the similarities and differences in the ways films from either side of the border engage a similar crisis reality. As one

may expect from a coal-fired cinema, in both its Walloon and northern French manifestations the Cinéma du Nord displays a tendency toward socially critical and stylistically austere forms of realism. The Cinéma du Nord is highly affective but rarely becomes sentimental. It's often a cinema of silence (e.g., *L'humanité*) or terseness (e.g., *Rosetta*), but also of audiovisual poetry, as the folklore fairy tale *Quand la mer monte / When the Sea Rises* (Yolande Moreau and Gilles Portes, 2004), or Paul Meyer's 1963 *Déjà s'envole la fleur maigre* (The scrawny flower has already flown), the most Italian non-Italian neorealist film ever made. But there are also some important differences between the two halves of the Cinéma du Nord. Most crucially, northern French cinema, much more than its Walloon counterpart, is also a regionalist cinema that tends toward social caricature. This difference is explained by the difference in cinematic history between the French North and the Belgian South. As I will demonstrate, whereas Walloon cinema dates far back and emerged gradually from its 1930s documentary origins (even though for decades a Walloon fiction feature seemed a financial impossibility), a truly regionally rooted northern French cinema did not see the light until the mid-1980s (even though films have been made in Nord-Pas-de-Calais since the early decades of cinema).

Chapter 3, "Cinéma du Nord, a Euregional Cinema," continues the analysis started in chapter 2. Whereas the second chapter discusses the Cinéma du Nord as a cinematic movement, the third chapter looks at it as an infrastructure of film and digital media production. The chapter explains the remarkable stream of cinematic productions that have emerged from Wallonia and Nord-Pas-de-Calais since the early 1990s. I examine the emergence of northern French and Walloon regional cinemas within their French and Belgian national contexts. Whereas northern French cinema for the last three decades has been a forerunner region in France's traditionally very centralized national cinema, Walloon cinema is part of francophone-Belgian cinema at large, which further includes films from the Brussels region (e.g., Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*). On its turn, that francophone-Belgian cinema operates as a small national cinema within Belgium's internally split "federal" cinema (which further includes Flemish cinema). This structural difference between Walloon and northern French cinema manifests itself especially in the production of feature-length films. Whereas almost all Walloon (and more broadly francophone-Belgian) fiction features are coproductions with France, most films set and shot in Nord-Pas-de-Calais are entirely French productions. The chapter demonstrates that the development of distinct Walloon and northern French cinematic identities has been spurred by the active, and occasionally collaborative, efforts by

these regions to resituate themselves at the crossroads of Europe after decades of recession. As a Walloon commentator observes: “Cinema is good for the economy.”¹² The chapter ends on an excursus that cuts back and forth across the French-Belgian border, from Van Gogh’s house and Google’s datacenters near Mons to the Louvre museum in Lens, and back to Wallonia for a breathtaking art exhibition whose site-specific spirit is also found in the Cinéma du Nord.

Following a continuation of that excursus through the Nord in all its colors captured in black-and-white, chapter 4, “New Realism after the Modern Cinema,” situates the Cinéma du Nord within a wider wave of new realism in francophone-European and, more broadly, world cinema of the last three decades. I understand new realism as an ethics and aesthetics of filmmaking that reinvents earlier realist, and in particular neo-realist, perspectives on the everyday lives of ordinary people for the age of global capitalism, often in an austere documentary-like fashion. New realism, in the words of Anthony Scott, is “less a style than an impulse that surfaces, with local variations”¹³ all over the world, from postcommunist Romanian cinema (e.g., Christian Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days*) to sixth-generation Chinese film (e.g., Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*), from Naples (Matteo Garrone’s *Gomorra*) to Alaska (Kelly Reichardt’s *Wendy and Lucy*). New realism is, according to Lauren Berlant, a “cinema of precarity” that witnesses the fraying of socioeconomic structures all over the globe and across classes.¹⁴ To this, one can add that new realism produces an explicitly *humanist* cinema. *Humanism*, in this context, refers to a belief system according to which people have an innate moral drive toward community. Such humanism has been rightfully critiqued for its male, heteronormative, white, and European-centered gaze. For these same reasons, we need to be very critical, even vigilant, about new realism’s flirtations with humanist understandings of life, as for example through its frequent close-ups of human faces. Above all, new realism marks a return of belief in representation and realism in the wake of what Gilles Deleuze in his *Cinema* books (1983, 1985) has called “the modern cinema.” In contrast to that modern cinema, new realism resorts to rather classical modes of storytelling less conscious of the camera and the viewer. From the perspective of Deleuze’s film philosophy, new realism’s return to a plot-driven and often overtly humanist cinema can only be seen as a regression. It often is indeed, but in its most self-conscious forms new realism also urges critical posthumanist viewers to think through the vestiges of humanism in their outlook on the contemporary world, in their desire for a “human” face in a reality in which it is no longer clear what a life looks like.

This minimal humanism is also found in the posthuman tradition to which Deleuze belongs, because I would argue that that tradition has

not always been as “anti-humanist” as Rosi Braidotti claims it to be in *The Posthuman* (2013). Braidotti writes that the “radical thinkers of the post-1968 generation rejected Humanism both in its classical and its socialist version.”¹⁵ I largely agree. But why then does Deleuze mourn cinema’s “Catholic quality” to restore the belief in “love or life,” while he leaves unaddressed the patriarchal structures this belief in the world is tied up with?¹⁶ Similarly, why do Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri at the end of their otherwise immanentist *Empire* bring to stage Saint Francis, the *alter Christus*? And why do they list the utopian ending of *Miracolo a Milano / Miracle in Milan* (1951) as an inspiration for their “posthumanist humanism,” while they leave unacknowledged the male quest structure of De Sica’s fairy tale (whose hero Toto was found, “once upon a time,” in a cabbage patch)?¹⁷ Addressing these questions, I argue that post-structural critiques of humanism form a discourse of belief that is not fully prepared to do away with classically humanist assumptions about what drives people to community. This minimal humanism is not a problem per se. The problem is that these thinkers leave their secular-religious vocabulary undertheorized. That vocabulary takes very different forms than it does in *Rosetta* and *L’humanité*, but like Dumont and the Dardennes, Deleuze, Hardt and Negri, as well as Godard and Badiou inherit the same tradition of socialist-Catholic humanism in French film and philosophy. This book critiques these humanist vestiges, which remain too much of an afterthought in that tradition itself.

Miraculous Realism is thus not only an analysis of the Cinéma du Nord but also an analysis of francophone-European film and philosophy more broadly. Throughout its four chapters, the book traces—from a northern perspective—a secular-religious tradition from Pascal, via Bernanos, Bresson, Bazin, Pialat, and Deleuze to the Dardennes, Dumont, and Godard. In tracing this tradition, *Miraculous Realism* intervenes in a broader debate about the postsecular turn. Much like postmodernism presupposes a process of modernization, the postsecular turn presupposes a secular moment, “secular” understood as in Charles Taylor’s definition of it as a worldview that distinguishes between an immanent and a transcendent domain.¹⁸ As Jürgen Habermas writes, “a ‘post-secular’ society must at some point have been in a ‘secular condition,’ after which it has gone through ‘a change of consciousness’ about its secularity.”¹⁹ Or as John Caruana and Mark Cauchi write in *Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and Von Trier* (2018), “in homology with the classic definition of postmodernism given by Lyotard—that it is an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’—we could thus say that postsecularism is an incredulity toward the secularist narrative” (to which one could add that postsecularism may be also understood as a response to the postmodern incredulity toward overarching stories of humanity).²⁰ Citing Taylor’s

characterization of the postsecular as an “open space” where “you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief,”²¹ *Immanent Frames* identifies a body films that “inhabit” that space, from Lars von Trier to Terrence Malick, from Alejandro González Iñárritu to Jean-Luc Godard, and from Dumont to the Dardennes.

Miraculous Realism critiques the postsecular tradition and its move away from immanence, especially insofar as that tradition takes on secular-Christian forms, like in the films of the Dardennes, Dumont, and Godard (in whose disillusion with Representation and his concomitant montage of Grace the postmodern and the postsecular meet). They are films that employ a Christian vocabulary for a world without God. As stated, I situate the Dardennes and Dumont in a new realist tendency in world cinema that also includes strictly immanentist films like those of Jia Zhangke (e.g., *Still Life*, 2006) and Laurent Cantet (*Entre les murs / The Class*, 2008). I critique new realism for its postsecular tendency, its problematic humanism, its obsession with a human face in times of crisis, its obsession with grace also, regardless of whether the viewer is actually granted that grace, because as I will argue in chapter 1, to speak the vocabulary of redemption in order to say that “God does not exist” (as do the Dardennes, Dumont, and Godard) is still to confirm God. As I argue in chapter 4, whereas the Dardennes and Dumont make a cinema of affect and Godard a cinema of thought, they share a Bressonian inheritance, namely, the Question of what remains of grace in a world without God. Even more than in the answers their films formulate to this question of grace, I am interested in the fact that they ask it in the first place, without acknowledging that the terms of the question are not neutral but embedded in a parochial patriarchal tradition.

The question of grace is a recurring problem in francophone-European film and philosophy, as it stands in the way of a truly non-normative ethics. To think such an ethics is the drive behind this critical fairy tale of the Cinéma du Nord, which, inspired by that cinema itself, integrates an emphasis on the particular (my transregional focus on a small part of northwestern Europe) with a broader film philosophical reflection on questions that move beyond, but at once emerge organically from, that focus on the particular, which functions as a crystal ball onto the more universal outlook its sparkle is immanent to. That tale started, *once upon a time*, with a miracle, the extraordinary coincidence of *Rosetta* and *L'humanité*, while the final chapter ends on a *happily ever after*. In the pages in between there will be dragons, angels, burned-out priests, a magic mountain, flying broomsticks, a UFO, some monsters, several giants, and many christes (with a lowercase *c*). As in the best fairy tales there won't be a moral to the story.