

## Un-contemporary Mastery. The ordinary teacher as philosopher

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The feature films of the Belgian directors the Dardenne brothers<sup>1</sup> are one of the most lauded bodies of work in contemporary world cinema (They have twice won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival).<sup>2</sup> Their films can be seen as educational cinema in a number of ways. On one hand, they investigate in an intriguing way the contemporary reality of education and, more particularly, the actual relationship between adolescents and adults. Their films can be seen as empirical philosophical studies that ask questions of essential educational situations and matters: What does it mean to be a child, an adult, a father, a son, a mother, a daughter, a teacher, a schoolmaster, a pupil? What does it mean, not in general, but in the concrete (and sometimes extreme) situations and conditions that society presents today? (See Masschelein 2011, in press). On the other hand, their films can be seen as educational because the way they are made engages the spectator in a particular way. The directors do not just represent an educational situation or matter but *present* a situation or matter in such a way that the spectator can be transformed and enlightened. Not in the sense that the films explain something (the reasons for and causes of what happens) or teach us a lesson. Their cinema is not moralising, it does not proclaim or defend any truth, nor does it express any doctrine, theory, or conviction. Rather, they enlighten in the sense that, to use the words of Robert Bresson one of their ›film fathers‹, they make appear (disclose) what, without them, would not appear (Bresson 1988, p. 82). This is not a revealing of what is underlying or presupposed or invisible, but a disclosing of what in a certain way is enclosed in the present. This disclosing does not offer reality-as-it-is or immediate access to a truth but, through a certain aesthetic arrangement and design, obliges us to take part in a sensory experience

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to the five films Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne have made since the mid-nineties: *La Promesse* (in 1996); *Rosetta* (1999; Winner, Palme d'Or, Cannes); *Le Fils* (2002); *L'Enfant* (2005, Winner, Palme d'Or, Cannes); *Le Silence de Lorna* (2008).

<sup>2</sup> This article is partly based on an article (Simons, 2008) published in an edited book (Masschelein, 2008) that presents ideas on education all starting from the film *Le fils* (The Son) of Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. We thank Mathias Decuypere and Naomi Hodgson for their help with the English translation.

wherein something discloses itself and is communicated/shared in a way that a dis-interested attitude is difficult to maintain: something starts to inter-est us, to concern us, to take part in/be part of our world. Such cinema, then, could be called educational (*bildend*\*) in this sense also, and it would be interesting to delve into the ways the films are made in order to further investigate this educational ›power‹: the film itself as a kind of ›master‹ (see Ahrens 2010, Masschelein 2008, 2010, 2011). What interests us in this contribution, however, is not this kind of educational ›power‹, but rather what these films actually make present to us. Here we focus on one film in particular *Le Fils* (2002) and what it shows us about what is at stake in education and, more specifically, in educational mastery. In what follows we will try to clarify this in a rather straightforward language, not really engaging in more ›technical‹ or philosophical discussions and theoretical frameworks (concepts). Rather we attempt to say something of what appeared to us in what the film shows, trying to avoid seeing it as an argument, statement, explanation, or story that we would like to critically test or dissect, but making use of some of Michel Foucault's suggestions and distinctions to find the words that offer some articulation of what there is to see.

### *Le Fils*

Our starting point is the film *Le Fils* (*The Son*). In the film, near-silent images riddle the exchanges; in their silence these images contain a certain tension that makes us attentive. The focus is on the minutiae of the workplace, the techniques of woodworking, the source of lumber, the precision of measurements, how to hold and carry wood and so forth. There is no soundtrack other than the hammers and electric saws. The claustrophobic camera follows Olivier – a carpentry teacher for pupils who come from juvenile detention centres – an ordinary and inexpressive looking man with eyes hidden behind thick glasses and a back protected by a support brace. As a teacher he agrees to take Francis, a young boy who is newly released from juvenile detention, as an apprentice. Olivier follows the boy, who is impressed by his ability to estimate distances with his eye. He makes the boy attentive to the wood and, in a certain way, inspires him: disclosing a world in a way that starts to transform Francis and offers him the world in a new light. Francis is, however, not only a new pupil: he is also the murderer of Olivier's son. It is remarkable that, throughout the film, Olivier does not judge Francis; nor does he address him for the murder he has committed. He does not ask Francis *why* he has committed the murder. Or more precisely, he does ask once but not to know the underlying reasons. Rather, he wants to hear what Francis has to say about *what* he has done and *how*. Indeed, he says at one point

in the film that he just wants to speak with Francis. »Je veux juste qu'on parle« (»I just want to speak with you«) is the answer he gives to Francis' request that Olivier becomes his guardian. Francis himself learns only towards the end of the film that his teacher is the father of the boy he killed.

It could be said, then, that Olivier is interested in Francis, at least if we understand interest as *inter-esse* (or in-spiration) and see it as a movement in which Olivier puts himself at stake and leaves behind his position as the father of a murdered child. This movement has no meaning, that is, there is no real explanation, but the effect of an opening or beginning. »Pourquoi fais-tu ça?« (»Why are you doing this?«), Olivier's ex-wife asks him after he has accepted the boy as an apprentice. Olivier answers that he does not know himself: »Je ne sais pas«. For Olivier, Francis does not appear primarily as the murderer of his son, but as the announcement of a new beginning, or as an invitation to speak and this, so we contend, can only happen because he is a master, meaning that Francis primarily appears as a schoolboy/apprentice.

*Le Fils* is a small film. It does not show a teacher who embodies the promise of a new or better society. It is not a film about the future or the past. Of course, the past does play a role – there is the murder of Olivier's son. And, of course, the future is also important: the future of the young murderer (Francis), of Olivier himself, of his ex-wife. But the film is not about that past or that future. The film is primarily a registration of moments and situations (in which past and future are compressed or condensed and are, in that sense, unimportant), and most importantly it is a registration of the attitude and *stance* of Olivier in these moments and situations, a registration of his gestures rather than of his (almost absent) words. In calling it a registration, we want to emphasize that the film *shows* something rather than telling us a story. What is shown does not depend on coming to an end in order to get meaning. A registration can always be interrupted (for what is registered does not vanish together with stopping filming), whereas a story has an end, even if it is an open end (and what happens, then, gets its meaning from this end). Therefore, one could say that the film is the registration of the daily common/ordinary life of a masterly teacher. It shows us what someone does by literally and figuratively staying focussed on someone. We will contend that the film registers how someone cares for himself and for the world.

There is of course, simultaneously, the story of the murdered son, of the hesitation, the approach, the misunderstanding, the conflict, the silent reconciliation. But this is not the story that carries the film; it could have been another story. The film continues after the reconciliation (which maybe was not really a reconciliation) and stops without announcement. This emphasizes once more that it is just a registration and not a story. Stories have heroes or anti-heroes, where-

as a registration does not, and in this film there are certainly no heroes. What counts here is somebody caring for his craft (carpentry), accepting the world, trying to care for himself out of this acceptance and, thus, showing what we want to call mastery. Mastery here is understood in relation to a philosophical stance whereby philosophy refers primarily to a way of life, to a way of working on the self (Hadot 1995, Foucault, 2001/2005). The film is about someone who tries to live in the company of himself in and through the care for his craft. What we see, therefore, is not the story of someone silently reconciling himself to the death of his son, acknowledging that he will have to live with the murderer. It is rather the registration of someone who cares for himself out of a certain accepting stance: someone who doubts, thinks, walks, is silent, speaks, sweats, counts, ... . Olivier does not display an attitude of wanting to know, or of wanting to change, something. He does not live the life of someone who (as the hero or anti-hero) wants to change the existing world. The person who is registered is someone who shows his mastery in carpentry, who in his mastery accepts ›reality‹, and precisely therefore sees the murderer of his son first and foremost as a pupil. Or, put the other way around, it is Olivier's mastery that positions the murderer as someone who wants to engage with the craft, who becomes fascinated, and to whom a future (*un a-venir*\*) opens up. In short: the film is the registration of the educational (*pädagogische*\*) force of mastery.

In this way, the film registers perhaps something that is at stake in the daily occupation of each teacher. If one would register the daily concerns of teachers at school, one would (probably in many cases) arrive at the same images: registrations of the small investigations, the fast thinking, the reluctant speech, the transpiration. And in particular: registrations of small actions and gestures that testify to the love of the craft (passion), or to mastery. These are the registrations that take place in *philosophically* caring for the self as a teacher, and of the hand of the master in banal, daily situations. For someone who accepts what is given, this given does not appear as something that has to be changed (by a heroic act or intervention – i.e. I have to change myself or to change the world). On the contrary, the self and the world appear as something asking for a caring concern, for a search for perfectionism (›I have to perfect what I do, what I think‹, ›I have to see, here and there, small things differently‹, ›be more present‹, ›be more attentive‹). What is registered first may be this attempt: the attempt of somebody who is trying to take care of herself and her craft. And precisely in doing this, a situation is created in which somebody else becomes a student/apprentice and becomes interested. Put in another context, it is the ordinary situation in which the child gets interested in what her father or mother (grandfather, grandmother, ...) is doing – and gets interested precisely because her father or mother is not interested in the child, but in ›some-thing‹. This is not the situation where parents

spend ›quality time‹ with their children (being interested in their children), but where parents are dealing with something, showing their mastery in small gestures, and in this way render their children interested – often despite themselves and their educational intentions.

When looking at the mastery presented by Olivier from the perspective of the prevailing contemporary schemes, it appears as un-contemporary – maybe even ridiculous or, worse, irresponsible. Looking at Olivier from the perspective of the competent expert teacher would let him appear most probably as incompetent (not emphatic, friendly, not taking into account pupils' needs, etc.). However, as we mentioned, we think that Olivier shows us crucial elements of what we consider to be the educational (*pädagogische*\*) dimension of teaching: its inviting, inspiring, and inter-esting dimension (which perhaps we could call also its ›worldly character‹). Let us sketch first, therefore, very briefly, the contemporary figure of the teacher that can be summarized in the attitude of the expert.

### The contemporary teacher-as-expert

Today, teachers are expected to be *experts* (see also Geerinck *et al.* 2009, Geerinck 2011). To see oneself as an expert is to assume that your ability is based on ›knowledge‹ and ›competence‹. We can describe the teacher-as-expert along three dimensions: her relation to the world, to others, and to herself. In each of these dimensions, knowledge is crucial.

First, the expert teacher is someone who has acquired knowledge about *the world*, or a part of the world. She is an expert in at least one (scientific) discipline or ›subject‹. She knows how things are, how to deal with them, and wants to introduce students/pupils to this knowledge, or to enable them to discover or construct it by themselves. Second, *the relation to the other* is equally to be seen in terms of knowledge. The expert teacher disposes of didactic and pedagogic knowledge to support the student in acquiring (or constructing) knowledge. She shapes her relation with students on the basis of her knowledge about class management, learning processes, individual learning needs, learning styles, learning plans, attainment targets, etc. Third, for the expert teacher, *the relation towards herself* is also knowledge-based and knowledge-oriented. She assumes that she is, in principle, able to know herself and that this self-knowledge is crucial to the monitoring of her expertise. This self-knowledge is a self-awareness; that is, being aware that one's own opinions, emotions, and interests can play a role and always threaten one's expertise and ›professional judgement‹. For example, the expert is someone who knows to make a distinction between what is ›private‹

and what is ›work‹; someone who can decipher her own self-interest in order to neutralise it, and can then orient her action to the needs of the student.

We can indicate some recent shifts in the figure of the expert teacher along the three dimensions mentioned above, and it should become clear that knowledge remains central. First, whereas traditionally the relation towards the world (the teacher as the expert in a discipline) was central for the teacher, today it seems that increasingly it is her relation towards the student that is central (the teacher as the expert in facilitating learning processes). It is less about content and programmes based on (scientific) disciplines (based on knowledge about the world), than about competences and modules (based on what you should be able to ›perform‹ in the world). Moreover, the teacher is expected not only to efface herself in favour of a defined scientific knowledge base (about effective means), but also to constantly renew her own (implicit) knowledge base through permanent reflection on herself as she is confronted with new situations. Therefore, the contemporary teacher is required to be a ›reflective practitioner‹ (Schön 1983), and is expected to activate and mobilize self-knowledge on a permanent basis. Notwithstanding the fact that these shifts imply major changes, knowledge remains the base (see Geerincx et al. 2010).

Second, the relation to the other is focussed on ›correctness‹ and ›authority‹. For the teacher-as-expert, teaching is about acting ›correctly‹. The expert teacher is correct in as far she allows herself to be guided by means of knowledge and thus with respect to course content, didactics, and pedagogic means. Moreover, the teacher-as-expert is someone who borrows authority from her knowledge or expertise, and, hence, is someone who constantly distances (or tries to distance) herself from people that do not possess the expertise (e.g. pupils, but parents as well). In line with Jacques Rancière (1987), one could state that this concerns not only a distancing, but also an attempt continually to render oneself necessary. In claiming exclusivity, the following message always echoes in the voice of the expert: ›Without my expertise, you (pupils, parents) are not able to ...‹. It is an authority or, rather, power based on knowledge and having access to knowledge.

Third, the contemporary teacher is expected also to take up an educational task, besides the instructional tasks. Here, the teacher enters the realm of norms and values, and hence is concerned with such things as personal, moral, or character development. In this domain as well, expertise has become a requirement (e.g. Veugelers and Vedder 2003). The expert teacher is someone who, with knowledge, involves pupils in the ›communication of values‹ and the ›clarification of values‹ – someone who is aware of her own values and norms and who offers expert guidance to pupils in order that they are able to develop their own sets of values and norms.

Finally, in the multifarious attempts to professionalise the teaching profession, it is this figure of the teacher-as-expert that is aspired to. By analogy with so-called ›real‹ professions, e.g. medicine, the aspiration is a teaching corps that is self-organizing (›an order of teachers‹ that also controls entry to the profession), that monitors that actions are based on valid knowledge (›professional expertise‹ taught in ›professional institutes‹ and based on knowledge supplied by ›professional researchers‹, and thus being ›evidence-based‹), that is further developing the ›knowledge base‹ (›professional development‹ by means of ›permanent training‹ or ›permanent improvement through self-reflection‹), and that imposes on itself certain rules and forms of behaviour (›professional deontology‹). Professionalism and expertise go hand in hand here.

The teacher-as-expert is contemporary. This is the type of teacher that many policy makers and, maybe to a certain extent also teacher educators, have in mind. Olivier is certainly not an expert in this sense. He is not a specimen of the ›order of teachers‹ that policy makers, teacher trainers, and educationalists often dream about today. The image of the expert seems hardly to tell us anything about what is shown in the registration of Olivier. Is Olivier not too preoccupied with himself to comply with the professional profile of an expert teacher? Isn't he too concerned with carpentry? Doesn't he keep too little distance in order to teach and explain something in a professional way? Olivier clearly knows a lot about carpentry. But, it seems that this is not only about knowledge and knowing. He seems not only to know his craft, but also to live up to it. He has authority: he has something to say and, eventually, Francis wants him to be his guardian. Francis asks him this somewhere in the second half of the film, inspired by his way of behaving and of relating to what he is doing (and still unaware of Olivier being the father of the boy he killed). In a way it seems that Olivier, one could say reluctantly, not only transmits his knowledge, but also what inspires his life, what makes him live (and clearly not only in the sense that it gives him a living). But again, he does not fit the profile of the expert in moral or spiritual development. He seems to do that without really strongly intending it: there is little evidence that Olivier has the explicit intention to ›save‹ the boy. Thus if the teacher-as-expert is contemporary, the least we can say is that Olivier is un-contemporary (and maybe still many teachers possess, in the light of the contemporary profile of the expert, that kind of un-contemporaneity).

### Un-contemporary mastery

This attempt to sketch the teacher who has mastery is our philosophical exercise to think the un-contemporary teacher. That teacher is not someone who is repre-

sented by the film, but is our name for what presents itself (in the film) in small gestures, small things, little words and specific ways of relating. Hence, this sketch is not so much the description of another type of teacher, but is rather about the introduction of (necessarily un-contemporary) words that show other things and that might also invite (future) teachers to look differently at themselves. The notion ›the teacher-as-master‹ thus does not refer to a reality waiting for a (scientific) description, nor is it a mere concept that no reality responds to (yet). Instead, it names and ›brings to thought‹ what, according to us, presents itself in the film. A new three-dimensional sketch (regarding the relation towards the world, towards the other, and towards the self) is useful for this exercise in thinking that the film invites. For the teacher-as-master, it is not knowledge that is central to these three relational dimensions, however, but care.

Olivier's hands are shaped by the wood. The way in which he deals with the wood, is attentive to how the boys treat and manipulate it, and how he himself is concerned about what happens to it, has inscribed itself in his body, his gesture, his gaze. They testify to his caring relation towards the wood. While expertise implies a relation of knowledge towards the *world*, mastery is characterised by the relation of care. For the teacher-as-expert, the world is something that can be known. Expertise and knowledge constitute the basis for mastering, fashioning, shaping, and inhabiting the world, and they constitute the objects an expert teacher wants to transmit to the pupil (or the objects she wants to develop herself). The master, on the other hand, is the one who perceives the world, or something in the world, as demanding care. It is someone who takes up responsibility for the world, to use the words of Hannah Arendt (1968). The mastery of Olivier in carpentry manifests itself in the care he takes for the wood, just as this might be the case with the English teacher and her relation with the language, or the mathematics teacher who manifests this care towards the world of numbers and arithmetical operations. In this care for the world, *respect*, *devotion*, and *passion* come together in what we might, in uncontemporary terms, describe as ›embodied love‹.

Mastery shows itself in some sort of *respect* for the ›essence‹ of something, that is, of its thing-ness. The wood asks, as it were, to be carved in a particular way. This respect for the matter implies a particular *devotion* as well. The master is, in a certain manner, in service of the wood, or in service of the English language, or of mathematics. Olivier is not mastering the wood he works with, but he touches it with devotion and his respectful hands embody a kind of mastery that the wood imposes on him. Furthermore, this relation of respect and devotion seems to be connected with a kind of *passion*. The teacher as master is, in one way or another, filled with enthusiasm or, rather – and explicitly formulated in the passive voice – the master is filled with enthusiasm for her subject matter.

But, as Olivier shows, this enthusiasm and passion are neither primarily expressed in words, nor does it manifest itself in grandiose, glorious, extraordinary, or spectacular activities or behaviour. They show themselves in the rather ordinary gestures that embody his being taken away. Olivier is also blinkered when it comes to his subject matter. It is a form of idiocy, which as Giorgio Agamben formulates strikingly, on the one hand has to do with a ›ceasing‹, a being struck dumb, and thus a being touched by the matter, and on the other hand with a simultaneous desire to engage oneself with something or to be in service of the thing (Agamben 1995). This double aspect implies that the master does not get totally absorbed in what she is doing. She is not someone who coincides with herself. There is a constant distance in this involvement – both with regard to the self and to the subject matter or the world. Hence, the master is someone who can, in the practicing of her job, also and always be engaged in a certain way with herself and her life; she is someone who has to take care. It is never final. And because it is never final, it is a question of searching, of being engaged, of caring – that is, of not being indifferent. This brings us to the second dimension: the relation to the self, in the form of *meditation*, *mastery*, *exercises*, *embodied knowing*, and *perfection*.

The expert regards herself as an object of knowledge and tries to found her actions on knowledge about the world and on dealing optimally with others. For the master, involvement with the self, or reflexivity, is not about knowledge. The relation between ›reflexivity‹ and ›knowledge‹ is perhaps evident to us. However, following Foucault, it is interesting to stress that, in Western history, different forms of reflexivity can be distinguished. Foucault understands the notion of reflexivity (*réflexivité\**) as ›an exercise of thought, of thought's reflection on itself, of looking at oneself‹ (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 460), and one is dealing, therefore, with involvement with the self: Foucault also speaks of a ›permanent presence of the self to itself‹ (ibid.). A central idea in these ›exercises of thought‹ is that of conversion, of converting to the self (*se convertere ad se*), of the return to the self, of turning around towards oneself. In constituting oneself as a subject of truth, Foucault distinguishes three major forms of reflexivity: recollection, method, and *askēsis*, and it is the third that he associates with mastery.

In *recollection* (and as outlined exemplarily by Plato), the past is regarded as a carrier of truth. This past, then, needs to be made present through recollection. The truth is, as it were, present in everyone, but has to be made present again reflexively, that is, through recollection. This form of reflexivity is also a core element of some religions that consider tradition (and recollection of the beginning) as the source of truth. In *method* (and here Descartes is exemplary), one is primarily concerned with the search for a criterion of certainty, on the basis of which truth is organized as a unity of objective knowledge. The methodical

form of reflexivity is characteristic of the modern researcher, who is led by the scientific method and is concerned about her neutrality or objectivity. Method as form of reflexivity is also characteristic of the expert (teacher). The form of reflexivity characteristic of the master, however, is, if we follow Foucault, neither method, nor recollection, but *meditation*. It is important to try to describe the term meditation (or, ascesis or philosophy as an art of living) more precisely.

Very often the term ›meditation‹ has the connotation of ›being attentive to one's inner condition‹, or the ›emptying out or purifying of the soul‹. And in combination with contemporary forms of spirituality, meditation is regarded as a technique for obtaining knowledge about the self based on introspection. In the context of Greek antiquity, in which Foucault situates mastery, however, ›meditation‹ or ›ascesis‹ is a (lifelong, philosophical) exercise in which one ascertains (or tests) whether what one thinks and does are in accordance, and in which one tries to transform oneself so that this accordance is achieved. In meditation, one does not want, then, to gather knowledge about one's ›innermost feelings‹ or ›concealed desires‹ (i.e. that would act as the origin of one's actions), but rather to test thoughtfully whether what one does (and has done) is in accordance with the truth one postulates or the ideas one has. Here, then, the self is not something that can be known (or deciphered, discovered, or liberated), but rather the origin of one's actions and something that requires constant care. For this particular kind of care, one needs to know the self in a certain manner; one has to test oneself, and trace to what extent thinking and doing are in accordance. But this knowledge of the self is in service of the care of the self; it is not a knowledge about some ›deep I‹.

Olivier is clearly someone who thinks, but silently. It is embodied. He is not someone who stops working, tries to find out who he really is, and takes his time to look for some evidence in order to take a decision and to move on. He acts, he works, he faces events, hesitates, gives instructions, does his exercises, but in all this there is a concern, a kind of attentiveness for the self in the situation, in relation to others, and primarily as someone who works with wood. The care of the self indeed aims at mastery, and this mastery shows itself in a constant and attentive search for accordance between what one thinks and what one does. Put differently: someone's mastery shows itself to the extent that someone is present in what she does, and to the extent that someone, in what she says and does, also shows who she is or what she stands for. Olivier establishes mastery not because he carves the wood as such, but because he is present himself in this carving, and to the extent that he does this in an attentive or concentrated manner. In this sense, of course, someone who establishes mastery is very ›contemporary‹; she is precisely someone who is very present in the present. For the teacher as master, then, there is always something at stake. The English teacher for example can

have, and establish, an enormous amount of expertise regarding grammar or literature, but can set herself aside and be absent, as it were. In that case, the devotion or inspiration is not there; this is a teacher for whom nothing is at stake in what she says and who, in a manner of speaking, deals disrespectfully with her subject matter.

This presence does not mean, however, that the teacher has to express her opinion or show a personal or unique touch. It is not about being personal, but about, as it were, the wood: to enable the wood to appear as wood, the pupil to come into its presence, the wood to become part of his world, and the pupil to be formed at the same moment that the wood becomes ›some thing‹, i.e. something that inter-ests. Care of the self and thinking are not, then, a personal issue, or about expressing one's inner self and unique personality. The care of the self always implies a care for the world. Care of the self is needed in order for wood to present itself as wood, and not for Olivier to appear as a unique, sensitive person.

It is important to stress that devotion, respect, and passion have to be established in some way. To be attentive requires effort. In that sense, the teacher-as-master is someone who works on herself in ›meditative exercises‹, someone who struggles with herself, someone who searches. As Foucault (2001/2005) remarks, it is no coincidence that the Greeks refer constantly to the figure of the athlete who is working on her condition. Mastery implies exercise, or preparation. The master is someone who works on her condition (of devotion, respect, passion) and, precisely for that reason, is someone who will never completely disappear in her work. One is never prepared as a teacher, at least not in the sense of having a sufficient knowledge base to confront all challenges. Olivier was not prepared in that sense – how could one be prepared to face the murderer of one's son? Yet, at the same time the film could be looked at as a long exercise of preparation, that is, careful looking for a just attitude, rights words, and meaningful gestures, including the physical exercises required to keep in shape. Is this really different from a more ordinary situation where a teacher who, before entering the classroom and starting the class, takes some time to read something? They may not be readings directly referring to the course, but readings that enable her to become attentive and to concentrate herself. Or we could think of the teacher who meticulously prepares for a course. Not initially to follow these preparations (that is often not the case), but primarily because the writing of these preparations and the thinking about that course help to achieve attentiveness for the matter. These preparations, then, do not function as plans to be applied during the course: this would be a function of the preparation for the teacher-as-expert. The teacher-as-master in particular prepares herself, so that she can be attentive and deal passionately with certain matters during the class. Or stated otherwise: the

master prepares something out of respect for the matters she deals with, while the expert does this out of fear of not knowing how to act. In other words, by means of these (in some respect banal) preparations and exercises, one can prepare oneself or work on one's condition. It is important to stress that there is no logical or causal connection between this condition and preparation, and the ultimate (athletic, intellectual, verbal, pedagogical ...) performance. This connection is present for the expert but, in that respect, (course) preparations have the meaning of planning, or the measuring out of a plan of action. Bringing oneself into condition or preparing ›the self‹ does not guarantee a masterly performance, but it can lead to inspiration, attentiveness to, or concentration on the matter. This brings us to two other elements that are central in the relation to the self of the teacher-as-master: embodied knowing and perfection.

The expert is perpetually dealing with knowledge, but this knowledge is something that is placed outside the expert herself (e.g. course contents). In mastery, knowledge is something that is embodied. Olivier's mastery in carpentry establishes itself in his body – in the hands and the gaze of the master. The hands and the gaze know, as it were, what they have to do and how to do justice to the wood he is dealing with. One might say that the gaze and the hands of Olivier embody a knowing, and that this knowing is in accordance with the matter itself (the wood). Yet, it is not about what one calls an ›automatism‹ or a ›routine‹; someone who is acting routinely, or ›on autopilot‹, is someone who is not present, someone who is ›reciting a course‹. The master – out of respect for her subject and being attentive to what might happen – remains present and is never, therefore, totally absorbed in what she is busy with. This is perhaps the unease, but at the same time presence, we see in Olivier as he tries to relate to the situation.

The central attitude of the expert consists in enlarging her expertise, and this means adapting the available knowledge base in order to act ever more correctly or with ever more expertise. In our ›postmodern condition‹, as Jean-François Lyotard (1979) stirringly describes, the expert teacher – aside from her knowledge about targets (modules, curriculum, final attainment levels) – pays tribute to the following principles: effectiveness (reaching the goal), efficiency (reaching the goal in the fastest or cheapest way), and performativity (attaining more and more with less and less). These terms do not apply to mastery. The central attitude in mastery is, conversely, an orientation towards perfection. In all his comments to Francis and the other schoolboys on how they perform, in the way he looks at them, stands by them, and in the way he shows them how to do something, and evaluates and adjusts their actions, Olivier testifies to this orientation towards perfection. Perfection is not to be confused here with what was earlier, in the idiom of the expert teacher, called ›correctness‹. Perfection is not a

state (or a final destination), but has to do with ›doing right‹; not as in ›in accordance with the criteria‹ or ›based on knowledge‹, but in the sense of ›the right words‹ or ›the right deeds‹. Confronted with an unusual situation or with a sudden question from a pupil, the teacher-as-expert might say and do the ›correct‹ things (that is, in conformity with set criteria), but these are not necessarily the ›right‹ words and deeds. What is right depends on the situation, and one can only utter the ›right words‹ or do the ›right things‹ when someone is attentive to and present in the situation at hand. To act correctly and say the right things also always means a kind of ›appropriateness‹. But at the same time, what the master does must be in accordance with the thing itself – it has to be right, or ›just‹. The teacher as master is someone who succeeds in saying and doing ›the right thing‹ in a particular situation. In making the right gesture or pronouncing the right words, the master also always brings her thinking and acting in accordance with each other. And the master is able to do this because she does not coincide with the matter at hand or with the self. Thus, the matter and the self are not determined. There is such a thing as rightness because nothing is fixed, and something always can and always needs to be determined. It is the rightness by means of which Olivier reprimands Francis and the other pupils now and then, but it is also the rightness of his always careful words and deeds.

Perfectionism, then, does not refer to some pathological attitude, but to a lifelong occupation that has as its purpose always obtaining this condition that enables one to do and say ›what is right‹. A deviation (from a certain criterion) can, for an expert carpenter, be insignificant in as far as the goal is attained. That is not the case for Olivier. The master indeed is concerned about the very same deviation because it is not right, at least not according to the nature of the matter and in line with her involvement with that matter. It is the perfectionism of the teacher who demands respect for the subject and for her non-indifferent presence with that subject. In the eyes of the expert, the perfectionism of the master is exaggerated, useless, or even morbid and unbearable. For the master, the expert has no ›professional pride‹, that is to say, she has an indifferent relation with what she is dealing with.

### The un-contemporary master-as-teacher

It is not without reason that in the discussion of the first two dimensions (i.e., world and self), there is hardly any reference to the third dimension: the relation towards the other, or the relation towards the pupil. For the expert, the relation to the other (as pupil) is central – certainly in the contemporary form where the well-being and individual needs of the pupil have to direct or guide the teacher's

actions. For un-contemporary mastery, this relation is in a certain respect secondary, and it is perhaps better therefore to speak of the master-as-teacher. Indeed, for the master, ›care or love of the subject‹ (and the care for oneself) is central, and the relation towards the pupil or student is a derivative of this love (and care). Or to put it differently: the pedagogical is the brilliant *shadow side* of mastery.

Referring to the mastery of Socrates, Foucault (2001/2005) reminds us that, in mastery, the care for the self precedes the care for the other; one cannot engage with others, one cannot care for others, when one has not learnt to take care for oneself. Such thoughts may be at odds with our contemporary appreciation of relations in the context of education and teaching. We often presume these relations are characterized by the ›care for others‹: teachers, parents, youth workers ... efface themselves, give up their self-interests, and proverbially live for others. Someone endowed with mastery, however, is not the person who sacrifices herself for the other. But that does not mean the master puts her own interests first or that we are dealing with egoism or egocentrism. Mastery concerns a particular relation to the world (viz., a devotion to something in the world), and also always implies a care for the self (viz., working on oneself in that distance regarding the world). It is precisely because of this mastery (care for the world and care for oneself) that the master ›opens up‹ a world, offers the opportunity to get interested, and hence invites others to take care for the world and for oneself. What is so apparent in *Le fils* is precisely that, despite himself, Olivier – who is also permanently confronted with the murderer of his son, who is certainly not oriented towards Francis' ›learning needs‹ or his enjoyment of learning (indeed up to the very end it remains a real possibility that he will take revenge), who never is particularly friendly or showing any empathy – his love and care for the wood and his care for himself being so embodied, can inspire Francis. Francis, who appears as beaten, enclosed in himself, deeply alone, and anxious in some way, becomes interested in the wood and in carpentry i.e. wood becomes part of his world and gets meaning. Wood starts to form him. Not because Olivier would like to save Francis and would like him to become a carpenter in order to give a young delinquent a new chance. Indeed he suspends what he wants of him or for him. It is because Olivier, despite himself, arrives at making the wood present, bringing it to life so to speak, and bringing Francis literally near to it, through his way of dealing with it.

Mastery thus involves care of the self and care for something, but that does not prevent someone from being there for her students. On the contrary, it seems as if precisely this position (of working on one's subject and on oneself) places those youngsters – including Francis and the other schoolboys – in a position in which they can and want to study, that is, they have become inter-ested. This is

close to the thoughts of Arendt (1968). According to her, only people who take up responsibility for the world are able to be engaged with teaching and education; only they can make it possible, by means of rendering the world (or something in the world) *present*, in order that the new generation can show itself as a *new* generation in the world. Not taking up responsibility for the world as a teacher or as a parent implies depriving young people of the possibility or the ability to renew the world. What is at stake here is that making ›some thing‹ present or disclosing the world (e.g. wood) makes possible that unique educational experience of being able to begin, an experience of potentiality (Masschelein and Simons 2010). Perhaps the expert teacher, and the expert parent, despite good intentions, are too occupied with students or children actually to make possible that experience of ›being able to be in front of some thing‹. Indeed, the child or the pupil probably does not want a parent or teacher who is (only) interested in him/her, but first and foremost a parent or teacher who is interested in ›some thing‹ and who can, thus, generate interest. In the terminology of mastery, this means the following: only she who cares for the world, and for herself in the world, can take care of the other. The notions *authority*, *invitation*, and *touchstone* enable us to describe more specifically the relation to the pupil that arises from mastery.

In her mastery, the teacher does not represent the world for the pupil (as the expert teacher would), but rather *presents* the world. Olivier embodies his mastery in carpentry. This mastery is as such not transmittable – you cannot teach someone love for the subject. Yet, Olivier lets pupils practice, lets them prepare themselves, tries to make them attentive, and to keep them focussed on the subject. With her mastery, the teacher will continually give instructions, saying what can and what cannot be done, demanding exercise and perseverance, concentration, attention, and devotion. It is striking also how Olivier is concerned about what happens to his pupils outside school, not in their life world or social conditions *per se*, but as he wants to avoid them impacting negatively on the attention and discipline needed to deal with the subject at school. Moreover, with his passion and perfectionism, Olivier cannot but intervene and say how it ›must be‹ – if only because he is not able to hide it and shows it despite himself.

The master-as-teacher has authority, but this authority is not based on knowledge or expertise. Authority is connected to her mastery and thus to her devotion and the knowing that she *embodies*. In the relation of authority between the master-as-teacher and the pupil, two things converge: one, the invitation to become involved with the subject (carpentry, language, mathematics, ...) and thus an invitation to take care for oneself and the world and, two, the offering of a kind of touchstone (with regard to perfectionism in carpentry, language, mathematics, ...) and thus the call to do this with love or mastery. In a way, the mas-



ter-as-teacher calls a classical pedagogical setting into being: she invites pupils to engage themselves with wood carving, formulas, texts. She makes something available with the invitation to experience the subject and at once to experience one's ability. By showing her mastery, the teacher will always be a touchstone. Olivier is not a teacher who merely facilitates or someone who eschews intervention. He is present, he intervenes in what the students are doing, he gives instructions, and in doing so his love for the subject and for the students seem to merge. In and through her perfectionism, the teacher becomes someone who offers students time and again the opportunity to verify whether their thinking and doing are in accordance.

### Acceptance

As a last point, we want to emphasize the attitude of acceptance that characterizes Olivier's mastery. The term ›acceptance‹ refers here to an attitude of devotion; an attitude that consists in devoting oneself to reality: to giving up the longing to know how it came about, to change, and to design it (characteristic of the attitude of expertise), and instead being caringly present in ›what is‹. This acceptance is not something that happens to someone, but is a state of mind on which one has to work. Acceptance, thus, does not refer to a defeat (›Unfortunately, I have to reconcile myself to the facts or to the recalcitrant reality.‹), but to a positive state of mind, or attitude of devotion and being present. The distance to oneself and to the world that is inaugurated in this acceptance is not to be regarded as a relation of indifference, but as a relation of involvement in which something in the world, but also for oneself in that world, is at stake. *Le Fils* shows this attitude of acceptance that is connected with mastery. It is present in at least three different respects and on at least three different levels.

First, there is the acceptance of Olivier on behalf of his work, particularly his perfectionist attitude to carpentry. Olivier is, first and foremost, someone who devotes himself to some thing – but precisely without losing himself in it. It is both his way of taking responsibility for the world and his way of taking care of himself. And this love for the world is at once a love of the renewal of the world, of sharing his world, having someone partake in it, or setting it free for the new generation. Second, it seems as if precisely this acceptance, or this attitude of devotion, coincides with an attitude of acceptance towards Francis. The moment that Olivier accepts Francis as a pupil is the moment at which Francis stops being primarily the murderer of his son. It is the mastery, the love for the subject or for the world and its renewal, that seems to triumph here, or that at least opens up a space in which a pupil can start to take care of herself, and in

which she can search again for accordance between acting and doing. Mastery casts a pedagogical shadow. From this perspective, the film is a registration of how mastery prevails over revenge or rage – it is a registration of someone who perseveres in trying to take care of himself, however hard that might be and however much incomprehension this might raise. Third, this also implies an acceptance of the future or of ›the new‹. Since Olivier lets mastery prevail – and thus keeps on caring for himself – he grants Francis a future, or at least he inaugurates a pedagogical (shadow) space in which Francis can try to take care of himself and prepare himself for the future. It is a kind of ›second chance‹, then, but not a second chance that Olivier grants him out of charity, or that he grants in exchange for a promise or a confession. Instead it is perhaps a second chance that originates (time and again) from mastery and implied acceptance, and to a certain extent also despite the intentions of the master. Olivier indeed is acting upon, what Rancière (1987) terms, the ›assumption of equality‹; that is, his point of departure is not the possible difference between or inequality among his pupils. In what he does he seems to assume that everyone is equally able to be interested, skilled, and hopefully devoted to carpentry. This assumption of equality is at once an assumption of potentiality, that is, of acting as if everyone is able to. Although Francis is different, very different, and although Olivier surely hesitates and struggles throughout the whole film, Francis is at the same time accepted as pupil like any other, and addressed as being able like any other. But this assumption is also an acceptance of the future or of ›the new‹ for Olivier himself. He lets mastery triumph, and remains present in what he seems to like doing, with what he seems to have to do, and with what he seems to keep on having to do.

### Credits

Each remark and each concept is undeniably an exaggeration of reality. In that sense, the foregoing account deviates from the purpose of describing the small, ordinary teacher. Yet, maybe these remarks and concepts, and the somewhat un-contemporary terms, make it possible to grasp something of the teacher. It might be something of the teacher that everyone knows, and that, probably precisely for that reason, no one really knows: mastery and acceptance – something that is, regarded through the contemporary lens of expertise, not worthwhile. The care of the self and the mastery of the teacher are manifest in small things – if we are able to think small and a bit out of time. It is in the teacher who, for instance, quickly sifts through something between times, ponders for a second, walks around in a hurry, and answers a question with a slight hesitation. The teacher

who briefly doubts what she is saying while she is saying it, who listens attentively to pupils yet does not lose herself completely in that attention, who speaks routinely, and who gesticulates without being predictable. It is not in the teacher who constantly seeks eye contact with her pupils, and who wants to listen actively to them, but equally it is not in the teacher who, turning to the blackboard or tradition, turns her back on the pupils. It is in the teacher who keeps an eye on the pupils, who is present in the classroom, but who is equally and also just that bit too much occupied with the subject matter, departing from her love for the subject. It is in the teacher who succeeds in bringing pupils in to contact with the subject matter – and this by small things and small acts – with a certain severity, for a moment. It is in the (magnificent) moment or situation in which pupils are exposed to the subject matter; the moment, and the situation of mastery that, in a manner of speaking, has absorbed past and future. This is simply the moment in which teacher and pupil, drawn into the masterful moment of the class, lose track of time for a while, and become interested in something, exposed together.

It was the film *Le Fils* that, for us, made something present, provoked thinking, made us interested. We became students again – and remembered the importance of study in doing research today. This text is an attempt to think about the teacher in the presence of Olivier and Francis. Of course, it is all fiction, but what makes the films of the Dardenne Brothers so interesting is that they bring us into contact with reality (again). Not because their films are realistic – that would imply that they are telling us stories. They made us think of Olivier and Francis, and far from being the names of some characters in a neat script they became part of our world. That is perhaps the mastery of the Dardenne Brothers: their mastery in the art of making things present, disclosing the world, and hence casting a pedagogical shadow in which we can think of education again.

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