Performing Ethics through Film Style
Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers, Barbet Schroeder and Paul Schrader

Edward Lamberti
Edinburgh University Press is one of the leading university presses in the UK. We publish academic books and journals in our selected subject areas across the humanities and social sciences, combining cutting-edge scholarship with high editorial and production values to produce academic works of lasting importance. For more information visit our website: edinburghuniversitypress.com

© Edward Lamberti, 2020

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12 (2f) Jackson’s Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in Ehrhardt MT Pro by
Manila Typesetting Company,
and printed and bound in Great Britain

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 4400 2 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 4402 6 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 4403 3 (epub)

The right of Edward Lamberti to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 and the Copyright and Related Rights Regulations 2003 (SI No. 2498).
Contents

List of Figures iv
Acknowledgements vi

Introduction: Textual Performances in Levinas and Film 1

Part I The Dardenne Brothers: An Ethics without Rest 29
Part I Introduction
1. *Je Pense à Vous* and *La Promesse*: From Describing to Performing 33
2. Levinasian Responsibility in *Le Fils* 50
3. *The Kid with a Bike* and the Reframing of Ethics 69

Part II Barbet Schroeder: Devoted to the Other 85
Part II Introduction
4. *Maîtresse*: Direction without Domination 89
5. The Ethical and the Juridical in *Reversal of Fortune* and *Terror’s Advocate* 105
6. *Our Lady of the Assassins* and Levinas’s Ethics as First Philosophy 129

Part III Paul Schrader: An Unexpected Ethics 147
Part III Introduction
7. *American Gigolo* and the Ethics of Falling in Love 151
8. Levinasian Limits of Performativity in *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* 170
9. Passivity and Responsibility in *The Comfort of Strangers, Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist* and *Adam Resurrected* 187

Conclusion: Levinasian Films in the World 204

Notes 209
Bibliography 231
Index 241
Figures

1.1 The opening shot of *Je Pense à Vous* shows Seraing

1.2 Igor hears Assita being attacked; Roger intervenes; Roger pays the assailant

1.3 Hamidou thanks Igor for his help with the gas

2.1 Olivier reads the form announcing Francis’s arrival at the centre

2.2 Olivier turns as he hears Francis’s question; Francis pauses as he walks past

2.3 Olivier and Francis: from half a meal each to matching sustenance

3.1 Cyril rides his bike away, having been rejected by his father again

3.2 Cyril clings to Samantha in the doctor’s surgery

4.1 Olivier discovers the noose in Ariane’s den

4.2 Olivier looks down in the direction of Mario’s departure... and looks up towards Ariane’s apartment

4.3 ‘The distance of love’: Ariane interacts with clients in her den

4.4 Ariane and Olivier drive along at the film’s climax

5.1 Sunny in her hospital bed is shown from above

5.2 Claus romances Alexandra on a spacious yacht

5.3 Alan is surrounded by his students at Harvard

5.4 Symmetry: Christmas at Clarendon Court; Sunny walking towards her bathroom; Claus and Alan at the club; Clarendon Court in the snow

5.5 Jeremy Irons made up to play Claus von Bülow

5.6 Jacques Vergès brandishes his cigar

5.7 The film’s information onslaught

6.1 Fernando cries at the table in the bar; Alexis attends to him

6.2 The two old friends hug and Fernando is shown in a classic first close-up

7.1 Julian hangs upside down, exercising and learning Swedish

7.2 Julian’s ties and shirts

7.3 Julian and Michelle talk in the bar on their first meeting
FIGURES

7.4 Julian drives along, in his utter self-containment 159
7.5 Julian accepting Michelle’s love 167
8.1 Making the structure clear from the outset: the four chapters 174
8.2 *American Gigolo* and *Mishima*: laying out clothes on a bed 177
8.3 *American Gigolo* and *Mishima*: getting dressed in the mirror 178
8.4 *American Gigolo* and *Mishima*: Venetian blinds 179
8.5 Mishima as an adult, as a boy, as an adolescent, as a young man; Mizoguchi; Osamu; Isao 182
9.1 Colin and Mary are unaware that a stranger is photographing them 190
9.2 Colin and Mary wonder whether to go up to Robert and Caroline’s apartment 192
9.3 Stellan Skarsgård as the melancholy Father Merrin 195
9.4 Merrin goes out to do the Lord’s work 197
9.5 David looks out from under his sheet; Adam looks back at him 199
9.6 Adam contemplates the future 203
My first thanks go to Mrs Goddard, who, when I was about ten, read my short story ‘The Curse of Blue’ out to the class. Teachers like that change your life.

I came to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Barbet Schroeder and Paul Schrader via separate routes. My engagement with Schrader’s work began in the early 1990s, when I first saw American Gigolo on TV. I remember enjoying it but I wasn’t quite sure what to think about it. A few years later, I encountered it again, as an undergraduate studying Film and Literature at the University of Warwick. With the benefit of two screenings of the film in two days and Colin McArthur’s lecture and seminar, I found myself really getting into it. It was Colin’s seminar that sealed the deal. His comments on Schrader’s work opened my mind to this fascinating filmmaker. From then on, I was conscious of wanting to seek out films written and/or directed by Schrader.

It was in about the early 2000s that it dawned on me that every time I watched a film directed by Barbet Schroeder, I seemed to like it. I ran back through the films of his that I had seen up to that point: Single White Female, Reversal of Fortune, Before and After and General Idi Amin Dada: A Self Portrait. I had indeed liked them all – and if the same name keeps cropping up on films that you have liked without thinking about it, you’re surely a fan. From that point on, Schroeder, like Schrader, was someone whose work I was consciously seeking out.

With the Dardennes, it was the release of Le Fils in UK cinemas in March 2003 that got me hooked. I had read the reviews out of Cannes and was intrigued by its premise, but when I saw the film, it astounded me. Within a few weeks I had also seen La Promesse and Rosetta. I was an instant fan of the Dardennes.

Over the next few years, something started to form in my mind about the work of these different filmmakers. Then when I was studying for an MA at King’s College London in the late 2000s, Sarah Cooper’s module ‘Thinking Cinema’ introduced us to Levinas’s ethical philosophy and its burgeoning impact on film scholarship. And I realised that Levinas’s
work was enabling me to see connections between some of the films of the Dardennes, Schroeder and Schrader. At the same time, the films were helping me to understand more about Levinas and to appreciate crucial aspects of his ethics.

I should therefore like to thank Colin and Sarah for the different ways in which they sparked my thoughts on these filmmakers and on ethics. Sarah was also my PhD supervisor, and I feel so fortunate to have had the benefit of her expertise, her encouragement and her support. Thank you also to Martin O'Shaughnessy and Libby Saxton, my thesis examiners, whose encouraging words spurred me on to think that I could develop my research further. On a more general note, I want to say thank you to the Department of Film and Television Studies at Warwick and the Department of Film Studies at King’s for all their teaching and for being so friendly and supportive over the years. V. F. Perkins taught me at Warwick and became a dear friend; his death in 2016 was a huge loss, but his influence lives on through all who were inspired by his teaching, his writing and his kindness. And I want to mention two people who, like Victor, taught me and whose friendship means a lot to me: Richard Dyer and Edward Gallafent. With regard to this project, my thanks to Richard for his thought-provoking advice at the start and my thanks to Edward for his invaluable feedback on the draft manuscript.

I have presented aspects of my research at a number of institutions. I should like to say thanks to Robert Sternberg and Stephen Webster at Imperial College London for inviting me to give a talk on *Terror's Advocate*; to Alan Bernstein, Jonathan Hourigan and Sophia Wellington at the London Film School for inviting me to give classes on Levinas and *Le Fils*; to Catherine Constable at Warwick for inviting me to talk about *Reversal of Fortune*; and to the department at King’s for inviting me to present my research more generally. Also, I was very grateful for the opportunity to give a talk on *American Gigolo* at the 2013 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Chicago and to the department and the Faculty of Arts & Humanities at King’s for their financial support for the trip. My thanks to the attendees on those days: their support and their comments were invigorating. Thanks also to Sonia Mullett for inviting me to appear in the British Film Institute’s documentary ‘Domestic Masochism: Barbet Schroeder’s *Maîtresse*’.

I should also very much like to thank Edinburgh University Press, especially Gillian Leslie, Richard Strachan and Eddie Clark, for their enthusiastic support for the project and for being such a pleasure to work with, and the readers for their encouraging comments. My heartfelt thanks to all my friends, for variously helping me engage with my work and
helping me take my mind off it. My colleagues at the British Board of Film Classification have accommodated my research and writing interests and have kindly asked how it’s all going: thank you to every single one of them. And thank you to the Institut français du Royaume-Uni, including the admin staff, my teachers – especially Cécile Alais and Annie Vengeant – and all my fellow students, past and present.

Finally, much love to my parents, Bruno and Rosalind Lamberti; my brothers, Richard and David, and their families; and Uncle Barry, Auntie Pam, Auntie Teresa and all my cousins and their families. They all know how much I love books, films and writing and I’m proud to be able to share this work with them.
One of the defining characteristics of Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical philosophy is the emergence of a prose style that seeks not just to describe but to perform his ethics. This performative quality is vital in that it strives to communicate the struggle to express something that, for Levinas, exists outside of reason or choice – namely, the self’s inescapable responsibility for the Other. This book will argue that this performativity adds an important new dimension to how we can read films in terms of Levinasian ethics. To demonstrate this, I will focus on a range of films directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Barbet Schroeder and Paul Schrader. These directors have all made films that contend with Levinasian concerns, and of primary significance to this study is how we can understand these films to be performing Levinasian ethics through their styles.

I shall start with an observation from Schrader. Before he became a filmmaker, he was a critic, and in 1972 he published a book entitled *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. His book seeks to define a common style prevalent in the films of those three geographically and industrially distinct filmmakers, a style that expresses the Transcendent. At one point, discussing the difference between an experience and a form, Schrader says ‘a form can express the Transcendent, an experience cannot’.¹ For Schrader, experience is local and individual – it changes from person to person and from place to place – but a clear and successful deployment of form is something that can be perceived by all and that all can benefit from. Schrader illustrates this with an everyday example:

[A] certain form (the mass, transcendental style) expresses the Transcendent. A viewer, perceiving and appreciating that form, undergoes the experience of transcendence. He then seeks to evoke that same feeling in his friend. He tells his friend exactly how he felt; his friend is curious and faintly amused, but does not share the speaker’s transcendent feelings.²
The issue here is that the viewer is not successfully recreating his own experience of the form so that his friend can have a good chance of feeling what he felt. Instead, the viewer is indulging his own feelings, his own experience: he is more invested, even if unintentionally, in the excitement of his own experience and its retelling than he is in conveying that experience to his friend. What should he have done instead? Schrader says, ‘In order to successfully induce transcendence in his friend, the viewer would have had to transform his feelings into a form (as transcendental style does) in which his friend could perceive the Transcendent, and then experience transcendence.’

Two aspects of Schrader’s observation are especially pertinent here. First, if we must turn our experience into a form in order to convey that experience to another person, this is a demanding prospect: we need to deny what we think of as our own enjoyment so that the friend can have an experience. We need to focus on the Other’s needs rather than on the gratification of our own. Second, not only is a demand placed on us, we are required to become a form so as to convey what we want to convey. We need to engage performatively; we need to use the tools of communication and performance available to us in order that the friend might benefit. In linking the effectiveness of a film form such as transcendental style to the behaviour of the viewer, Schrader connects discipline in human form – bodily discipline, psychological discipline – with the discipline of a film style. The person and the film communicate successfully in the same way: through a disciplined approach to form.

Similarly, Levinas performs his ethics through a form of language that is designed to give the reader an ethical experience, and part of this experience is the exposure that the self, or subject, undergoes in being ethical:

The subject is not in itself, at home with itself, such that it would dissimulate itself in itself or dissimulate itself in its wounds and its exile, understood as acts of wounding or exiling itself. Its bending back upon itself is a turning inside out . . . [I]t becomes a sign, turns into an allegiance.

This stance, from Levinas’s 1974 book Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, shares with Schrader’s observation a sense of the selflessness of what Levinas will go on in the same book to articulate as ‘substitution’, which is his word for when the self takes the place – and thus takes on the burdens – of the Other. In both the Schrader and the Levinas, there is an emphasis on the behavioural state that substitution imposes. Transforming experience into form and ‘turning inside out’ are descriptions that challenge the reader to understand a process seemingly beyond comfortable, easily achievable everyday actions.
For both film style and Levinas’s prose style, there is a set of creative choices involved in conveying experience through form. In Levinas’s ethics, however, it is a lack of choice that helps to define behaviour as ethical. If to offer oneself to the Other, to stand in the Other’s stead and receive the Other’s burden, were a conscious decision, it would rob the condition of its ethical dimension. As Levinas says, it ‘would then extend forth as an intentionality, out of a subject posited in itself and for itself, disposed to play, sheltered from all ills’. This would be unethical because, for the self, there would be no risk (as the self would be ‘sheltered from all ills’), and instead there would be self-centred fun and frivolity (the subject being ‘disposed to play’). It would be difficult for the subject to feel ethical while being ‘posited in itself and for itself’. Instead, for Levinas, ‘giving has meaning only as a tearing from oneself despite oneself’. As ethics happens outside any possibility of there being a choice in the matter, our responsibility for the Other is inescapable. Through the creative choices of its prose style, Otherwise than Being attempts to perform the inescapability of the self’s responsibility for the Other.

Through my readings of a range of films directed by the Dardennes, Schroeder and Schrader, I will propose that films can perform a Levinasian ethics in ways that enable viewers to experience that inescapable responsibility. The films I am going to discuss do not have a uniform approach to style, and my Levinasian readings of them are also by no means uniform. Rather, the principal connection I make between Levinas’s work and these films is via their attempt to perform what Levinas calls the Saying. The Saying is the ethical encounter that happens prior to the conventions of language, which is why Levinas calls it ‘pre-original language’. It conveys the newness of the ethical encounter with the Other, ‘the proximity of one to the other’, which founds the self as ethical prior to the fixity of regular language and its complacent communication. These films reproduce the vitality of the Levinasian Saying, what Levinas refers to as ‘the anarchy of responsibility’.

Levinas and Film Studies

Levinas’s philosophy has proved to be enticing to Film Studies scholars. There is a strain running through much of Levinas’s work, especially in its early years, that is against seeing art as ethical. Levinas does not speak of film as such, but when, for example, in his 1948 essay ‘Reality and its Shadow’, he denounces the status of time-based arts, claiming that they are unable to exist as a site for ethical engagement and that only criticism
can do this work, he implicitly implicates cinema.\textsuperscript{11} It is in particular the fixity, the resistance to change or even the inability to change inherent in a work of art to which Levinas objects.\textsuperscript{12} As Reni Celeste notes: ‘His conclusion is that art is evasion rather than responsibility. Only real time can provide an opening to possibility and change through the existence of the other.’\textsuperscript{13} In his early writings, Levinas distinguishes between the fixed, static nature of art and the dynamism of criticism. And while his later philosophy does not really seek to build on such a position, he nevertheless never offers a total retraction. Sarah Cooper, in her introduction to her pioneering work ‘The Occluded Relation: Levinas and Cinema’, notes how ‘[t]here is something provocative, then, in wanting to ask what Levinas’s philosophy has to say about cinema, if we understand this realm as the location \textit{par excellence} of the moving image’.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, in order to discuss Levinas in relation to film, it is important to be willing to engage with the challenge of the pairing.

Much film scholarship on Levinas begins with the \textit{visage}, the Levinasian concept of the face. In his 1961 book \textit{Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority}, which, along with \textit{Otherwise than Being}, is commonly considered to be one of the two central books in his writing on ethics, the face figures as a key aspect of the ethical relationship between the self and the Other. Levinas describes the face as a purveyor of signification beyond the purely phenomenological. The Levinasian face is enigmatic, providing an opening onto the Other’s presence as it arrives unexpectedly, interrupting the self’s contented mastery of the immediate environment and placing a demand on the self. The ethics of the encounter happens when the self recognises the Other’s demand and responds favourably.\textsuperscript{15} This sense of the Levinasian face as being something hard to define, certainly in relation to what we commonly understand a face to be, has proved a fertile site for engagement within Film Studies, as it prompts questions regarding the status of the image. Cooper’s early study \textit{Selfless Cinema?: Ethics and French Documentary} focuses on issues pertaining to the filming of human subjects in the work of several French documentary filmmakers and considers the implications for both the face and film itself as surfaces through which a Levinasian sense of alterity can be perceived.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, Libby Saxton has expressed an interest in ‘how Levinas’s critique of representation as liable to “thematize” and thereby reduce the “visage” to a projection of the Same, may be brought to bear on filmic sounds and images and the ways in which they address, compel and command us as spectators’.\textsuperscript{17} Writing on director Claude Lanzmann’s Holocaust testimony film \textit{Shoah} (1985), Saxton considers how although the faces of the interviewees express a great deal about what happened, the cinematic face is Levinasian
not for what it shows us about the filmed subject but for what it cannot show us:

The film consistently frustrates our desire to see, know and understand by refusing to allow the other and his or her history to take shape as objects under our gaze. By holding us at a distance the images and voices afford a more intimate encounter with traumatic experience, opening up the possibility of proximity while preserving separation. In so doing, they call Levinas’s critique of images and vision as inherently totalising into question.18

For Saxton, it is imperative that we consider ourselves both arrested by this filmic encounter with the Other and denied knowledge of that Other: only by recognising the limits of our understanding, and the existence of otherness outside our totalising sphere of comprehension, can we be said to be having a Levinasian response. Cooper makes a comparable observation with regard to the final scene of the Dardenne brothers’ film L’Enfant (The Child, dirs Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 2005): ‘In spectatorial terms, the ability to relate to the characters’ suffering depends on our being close to both but identified with neither . . . [T]his positioning firmly outside of the characters’ lives is precisely the ethical point.’19 The implications of the Levinasian face for spectatorship have also been discussed by Michele Aaron, who posits that ‘[s]pectatorship is not ethically interesting but intrinsically ethical’,20 while Doug Cummings (also on the Dardennes) and John W. Wright (on Steven Spielberg) are two more critics who have discussed the Levinasian face in relation to film.21 This scholarship acknowledges the Levinasian face as something visible but also beyond our ontological grasp, thus inviting the viewer into a relationship with film that makes of the visible a filmic version of the Levinasian Other, which necessarily for ethical engagement evades comprehension.

This interrogation of the face, and its importance for understanding how film’s visual properties can open onto something beyond the ontological, has very much helped shape the discourse on Levinas and film so far. An upshot of this is that many film scholars have remained close to the ideas of the face and the Other as expounded in Totality and Infinity and have not yet in general attended in any sustained way to the development (and, in some cases, revision) of the ideas from that book in the later major work Otherwise than Being. Arriving thirteen years after Totality and Infinity, Otherwise than Being presents dramatic ideas of the inescapability of the self’s ethical obligation to the Other, such that the self is considered hostage to the Other. It presents these ideas not just through its descriptions but through its own textual practices, and film scholarship on Levinas has so far not included sustained engagement with how
the extremely demanding nature of Levinas’s staging of his ethics in this
text might be rendered in filmic terms. Robert Bernasconi and Simon
Critchley, in their introduction to their 1991 collection of (non-film-
related) writings on Levinas, suggest that as ‘the first generation’ of
Levinas scholarship was guided by *Totality and Infinity*, their volume will
aim to concentrate more on *Otherwise than Being*.22 Similarly, in this book,
I propose that it is time for *Otherwise than Being* to play a more central
part in discussions of Levinas and film.

*Otherwise than Being* and the *Inescapability of Responsibility*

*Otherwise than Being* is often thought to have been written in part as an
indirect response to Jacques Derrida’s critique of *Totality and Infinity*.23
Derrida’s viewpoint is founded on the argument that, while Levinas sets
out in *Totality and Infinity* to reconceptualise ethics in terms of what is
beyond the self’s comprehension so as to open up the possibility of an
‘infinite’ engagement with the Other, the project ultimately fails, because
Levinas ends up falling back on the age-old philosophical language of
ontology he has intended to dismantle.24 For Derrida, ‘[b]y making the
origin of language, meaning, and difference the relation to the infinitely
other, Levinas is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosoph-
ic discourse. The latter is understood, and instructs, only by first per-
mitting the same and Being to circulate within it.’25 Thus, so it is implied,
*Totality and Infinity*, for all its work to establish the unknowability of the
Other and the mysteriousness of the ethical relation as expressed through
the encounter with the face of the Other, can ultimately be discussed in
terms of preserving the primacy of the self as locus of meaning in the
world, for the self–Other relation remains reducible to the self’s comfort-
able (and therefore unethical) totality.

*Otherwise than Being*, however, cannot be so easily reduced or sum-
marised. In this later text, Levinas refines his linguistic approach, taking
words to new extremes, ‘to near-breaking point’,26 as Colin Davis says, so
as to move away from the totalising language of the earlier work. Diane
Perpich discusses this move in terms of a narrative that is abandoned:
‘*Otherwise Than Being* explicitly abandons the narrative commitments of
the earlier work and is explicit about the problematic status of its own
discourse.’27 The idea of the ‘narrative’ of *Totality and Infinity* relates to
a sense of the chronology of the self undergoing an ethical transforma-
tion through the encounter with the Other, something that *Otherwise than
Being* reconfigures in terms of a more problematic relation to chronology,
not least through the sense of the self being always already ethical.
Troubling this position, however, is a question that is remarkably persistent in commentaries on Levinas: how do we implement Levinas’s demanding ethical philosophy in the real world? The reason this is asked so often is that Levinas’s own work does not tell us in any obvious way, and indeed is perhaps not interested in offering ideas for its implementation. There is a good reason for this: to do so may be to violate the Levinasian idea that I cannot expect anyone else to share my ethical responsibility for the Other. As Levinas says, ‘Does one have the right to preach to the other a piety without reward? . . . It is easier to tell myself to believe without promise than it is to ask it of the other. That is the idea of asymmetry. I can demand of myself that which I cannot demand of the other.’28 According to Levinas, I am responsible for all others, and this includes being responsible for their failings. Thus, I cannot demand that others behave ethically, or even how they might do so if they wanted to, because even that might be to impose my view on them and bring them into my totality, rather than accepting their other ways of doing things. Some Levinas scholars, such as Perpich and Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak,29 have queried whether what Levinas was producing was an ethics at all – especially, says Peperzak, ‘if we understand “ethics” as a doctrine about the moral principles, norms, obligations, and interdictions that rule human behavior’.30 Peperzak thus identifies what we commonly look to ethics to provide: a set of rules instructing us in how to live a more ethical life. Levinas’s work avoids, except in fleeting references, any mention of how one might implement his philosophy in the world. Nor does he make more than passing references to real events or situations. He dedicates Otherwise than Being primarily to victims of the Nazi persecution that saw more than six million Jews exterminated during the Second World War, and to the countless millions ‘of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism’.31 But within the book itself there is no discussion or analysis of that genocide.

And yet, on another level, Levinas’s work is full of instruction – it is to be found in his writing style, which is indistinguishable from the meanings it generates. If we read Levinas’s writing not so much as an ethics, or even as philosophy, but as prose, we can see ways in which his work acquires uses that are very different from prescriptive tenets. I do not mean to suggest that we should not consider Levinas’s work to be an ethics – indeed, it is precisely in thinking of it as an ethics that its particularly invigorating qualities come to the fore. But it is in the ways in which the texts contain and transmit their meanings – and in particular the efforts we see in Otherwise than Being to comment on its process of meaning-making as a crucial part of its argument – that Levinas’s contribution to ethics is made especially apparent.
The striking innovation of *Otherwise than Being* is that it reconfigures the terms of *Totality and Infinity* so as to enact or perform the unfixed, uncertain, never-satisfied condition of responsibility for the Other. Levinas is trying to describe the indescribably anterior, the otherwise-than-being. The encounter of self and Other is borne not of description or thematisation – the Said – but of an unexpected occurrence – the Saying. The Saying happens prior to the thematisation the Said makes of it, or, as Levinas says, ‘[a]ntecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates’. It happens prior to reflection, interpretation, or description; it is an unexpected burst of an utterance, ‘a foreword preceding languages’, a Big Bang that brings into being a world of possible ethics. Levinas’s language performs an ever-renewing, never-settling set of propositions that seek, slowly but surely, to school the reader in the primary ethical importance of the Saying, the refusal to settle for the stabilised terms and complacent articulations of the Said. Through paragraph after paragraph and page after page of this linguistic onslaught, the text strives to have us recognise what has always been there within us: our goodness, which is founded on our relation to others and which is unwavering, infinite. This, for Levinas, is ethics as first philosophy, the idea that before anything else – selfhood, thematisation, the conventions of language – there is the ethical relation. If we consider *Otherwise than Being* in its entirety, we can say that the first three chapters lay the groundwork for the adventure of ethical responsibility for the Other, an adventure that will be most expansively expressed in Chapter IV, ‘Substitution’. This chapter is the core towards which the book moves and away from which it spins. I do not use the word ‘core’ accidentally: Levinas has, by this point in the text, discussed ‘dénucléation’, the ‘coring out’ of the ego, as part of the process whereby the self turns towards the Other, and we can see that the central thesis of *Otherwise than Being* is to elucidate how, if the self has a core, it is to be found not in the ego but in the substitution of the self for the Other – the process Levinas names ‘the-one-for-the-other’. We may feel that the remaining two chapters that follow ‘Substitution’ decrease in terms of intensity, but it is precisely for this reason that I believe them to be fascinating: like a course of antibiotics that one sees through to its end long after the symptoms of one’s malady appear to have cleared up, *Otherwise than Being* performs its own medicinal ethical work on readers by repeating, restating and, in the process, frustrating anew any understanding of the book’s persistent cause – what Peperzak defines as ‘[t]he pretheoretical responsibility practiced in proximity . . . analyzed by Levinas as substitution, obsession, accusation, election, and persecution’. By the end of the book, the repeated mentioning of the Saying and the Said achieves two importantly contradictory things: it gives
definition to what is apparently impossible to define and it frustrates the
definition through recapitulation and revision. In this regard, we might
feel that Levinas’s prose repeats words such that they begin to lose their
effect. This may be especially the case if we were to read *Otherwise than
Being* out loud. Indeed, perhaps we are meant to experience it in that way.
Reading the prose out loud would accentuate its repetitive qualities, and
may even draw out some humour in the writing. Levinas’s prose is difficult
to read and to absorb, but it is a mistake to approach it with nothing but
solemn regard. Whether we read it out loud or silently, we need to wrestle
with the prose – to live it – if we are to unlock its ethical power.

Thus, *Otherwise than Being* is not only a presentation of Levinas’s ethical
philosophy regarding the self’s responsibility for the Other but also a per-
formance of the restlessness of that responsibility. Levinas says of *Otherwise
than Being*, ‘[t]his book interprets the subject as a hostage and the subjectiv-
ity of the subject as a substitution breaking with being’s essence’.\(^{37}\) Hostage
status is prisoner-like – we are held by another and the situation robs us of
control. For Levinas, the self’s status as hostage to the Other is the status of
the self in the world – and this particular hostage situation is life-long. It is,
one might say, for the self simply a fact of life. And what we see in *Otherwise
than Being* is a continual, and continually dissatisfied, attempt not just to
describe the self’s status as hostage to the Other but to perform it.

In order to talk about the notion of performance both in Levinas’s writ-
ing and in film, this book will draw on performativity theory. The link
between performativity theory and film is not obvious – and not unprob-
lematic – but what I aim to do is articulate ways in which certain films
perform a Levinasian ethics akin to the performance that Levinas gives
through his textual practices in *Otherwise than Being*. That performance
places the reader or viewer in the position of being invited to engage with
the process of dénucléation that leads to the-one-for-the-other, the substi-
tution of the self for the Other. *Otherwise than Being* is recognisably the
work of the same man who wrote *Totality and Infinity* and earlier books of
ethical philosophy such as *Existence and Existents*\(^{38}\) – and yet in *Otherwise
than Being*, the language becomes its own subject to a greater extent than
before. It is because *Otherwise than Being* goes further than *Totality and
Infinity* both in detailing the responsibility of the-one-for-the-other and in
performing it through its own textual strategy that I believe it proves more
instrumental than *Totality and Infinity* in illuminating both the themes
and the stylistic strategies of the films in this book.

I present this study in the knowledge that discussions of Levinas’s work
have sometimes taken place within the context of more general consid-
erations of ethical philosophy and film. For example, Lisa Downing and
Libby Saxton’s co-authored volume *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* considers Levinas among a number of other philosophers whose work has significance for ethics and film and for discussions of the relative importance of the self and the Other, such as Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek.39 Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey’s collection *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship*, meanwhile, presents a range of debates concerning ethics and film that are attuned to three strands, the ‘revisionist perspective’ (which includes, among others, Levinas, with his efforts to reorient ethical debates within philosophy), the ‘moral perceptionist perspective’ (in which, among other pieces, Vivian Sobchack posits a phenomenology of the viewing body and the viewed film) and the ‘cognitivist perspective’ (which includes such writers as Noël Carroll, Gregory Currie and Carl Plantinga who seek to theorise the emotional aspects of viewer engagement).40 Robert Sinnerbrink offers a theory of film’s capacity for conveying ethical experience aesthetically and a survey of the filmic ethical landscape in his book *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film*, which encompasses philosophers from Stanley Cavell to Gilles Deleuze and includes a consideration of Levinasian themes through a discussion of the Dardennes’ film *La Promesse* (The Promise, dirs Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, 1996).41 These studies, and others besides, show the rich range of approaches to ethics in film, including issues of viewing and spectatorship, ethical aspects in film production, ways in which films dramatise ethical dilemmas or ideas, and debates concerned with how best to bring philosophy to bear successfully on film (and vice versa). In contrast to these recent approaches, my book offers an intense focus on one proposition: an examination of the self’s responsibility for the Other as performed by Levinas’s prose in *Otherwise than Being* and by the work of the Dardennes, Schroeder and Schrader. This book therefore presents this philosopher and these directors in symbiotic union so as to consider in detail an ethical encounter hitherto under-theorised in studies of ethics and film.

**Performativity: J. L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory and Beyond**

In order to develop the discussion of the way in which Levinas’s prose style in *Otherwise than Being* seeks to perform his ethics, it is beneficial to consider the origins and some of the developments of performativity theory. I shall begin with the English philosopher of language J. L. Austin, who developed his work on performativity primarily through a series of
twelve lectures he gave at Harvard University in 1955. Austin died young, in 1960, and two years later his lecture notes were prepared for publication and published as *How to Do Things with Words*. This book is the primary text that brought Austin’s theory into the philosophical sphere. The lecture series begins with Austin proposing that whereas philosophers of language have typically considered statements to be descriptions and thus verifiable as true or false, for Austin many statements do not describe an action but instead *are* an action in themselves – they *do* what they are saying. Austin presents many examples, such as, ‘I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow’, in which the uttering of the statement does not describe the bet but rather *is* the bet. He suggests calling this type of statement ‘a performative sentence or a performative utterance, or, for short, “a performative”’, in comparison with the constative, which is the statement that purports to be a description. And he explains that ‘[t]he name is derived, of course, from “perform”, the usual verb with the noun “action”: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something’. Austin goes on to determine that we can evaluate performative utterances in relation to their contexts. The statement, ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife’, for example, only has performative success if the person saying the statement is qualified to pronounce the man and woman husband and wife; if the person is not qualified to do so, the statement is said to fail as a performative utterance. Austin classifies such successes and failures as ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ or ‘felicitous’ and ‘infelicitous’ utterances. Austin points out that not all statements are designed simply to record facts: ‘for example, “ethical propositions” are perhaps intended, solely or partly, to evince emotion or to prescribe conduct or to influence it in special ways’. As Austin develops his theme, he begins to question the distinction between the constative and the performative. This leads to a new and enduring position in which he complicates and all but abandons the constative-performative distinction in favour of a proposition that more or less *all* utterances are performative in various ways. He refers to these as speech acts, and theorises this claim by breaking down speech acts into their locutionary (grammatical), illocutionary (intended) and perlocutionary (unforeseen) qualities. Austin concludes his final lecture with an invitation to students to take up his work and explore it in new ways.

Austin’s work on performativity and speech acts has proved to be very enticing to scholars working in a wide range of contexts and has retained its relevance surely beyond what he may have imagined. One of
Performing Ethics through Film Style

Austin’s most significant respondents was Derrida, who, in an essay entitled ‘Signature Event Context’ in 1972, reacted to Austin’s work by suggesting, as Jeffrey T. Nealon has noted, how it is not simply the case that a performative utterance is dependent on the context in which it is uttered; instead, the performative utterance is understood also to influence the context in which it is said, as it has an effect that carries over into the context that, previously, was being used to define it as performative. Derrida’s separate critiques of Austin and Levinas share a sense of how the form, or style, of a work is unavoidably part of its effect.

Performativity has also intersected with literature, notably in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose queer readings of texts by Herman Melville, Henry James and Marcel Proust, among others, have interrogated society’s perceived division of sexualities into the heterosexual and the homosexual. Sandy Petrey, in *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*, carefully charts the development of speech acts from Austin and Derrida to the realm of literature and insists on the fundamental societal dimension of performativity. Austin’s theories have also been taken into areas of enquiry such as performance theory and identity politics. One of the most significant voices in the latter area is Judith Butler: in her groundbreaking 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she explores, with the help of performativity theory, ways in which gender can be said to be a construct rather than something innate, while her later book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* offers extended engagements with the performative effects of words in social and political arenas. Butler’s adaptation of Austin’s theory, as Nealon observes, shows how, if what one says does not have a fixed meaning, it means that utterances can not only be deployed to wound and discriminate against certain sectors of society but can also be turned around and, through their performative qualities, deployed to affect relations for the better. Time and again these theorists show us multiple kinds of performativity, from the performance of a character’s point of view to the illocutionary and perlocutionary effects of language in social, political and ethical terms. James Loxley draws this sprawling heritage of Austin’s work together in his book *Performativity*, offering a lucid account of the key movements in performativity over the past sixty or more years and correcting some of the common misconceptions and generalisations that have arisen.

I shall now discuss two aspects of performativity in Levinas’s work: the notion of the ethical encounter being in itself a type of speech act and the ways in which Levinas’s writing style seeks to perform his ethics.
Performativity in Levinas: The Ethical Encounter and the Prose Style

In *Totality and Infinity*, the foundational idea, the ‘primordial expression’, of the face-to-face encounter between self and Other is ‘the first word: “you shall not commit murder”’. In effect, this is what the face of the Other articulates to the self. The self can respond either by killing the Other or by being open to the Other’s demand. This encounter happens outside the conventions of everyday language and communication – it is the Saying, and it therefore poses issues for conventional understanding.

Michael L. Morgan, for example, asks, ‘[i]f the face-to-face is a prelinguistic, preconceptual mode of relationship or dimension of everyday interpersonal life, how is it meaningful?’ For Morgan, the Saying is not a speech act, because ‘it is not the conversational situation nor the act of speaking. Saying is not what we do with words, the act that we perform in uttering “I promise to meet you at ten o’clock.”’ In Morgan’s reading, the timelessness of the Levinasian face-to-face cannot be pinned to the type of pre-existing social discourse that enables the production and identification of speech acts. After all, Levinas considers ‘You shall not commit murder’ to be ‘the first word’. But an alternative reading to Morgan’s could see the speech act at work. ‘You shall not commit murder’, as a pre-linguistic act of communication between the self and the Other, brings the ethical relationship into being and initiates the self’s ethical response. Until the Other says to me that I shall not commit murder, I am open to doing just that, so as to defend my personal universe. Once the Other makes this claim on me, I am constituted as someone who will not commit murder and who will, instead, accept the Other and all the unknowability and responsibility that comes with it. There is therefore perhaps a performative dimension to the moment, which marks out the face-to-face encounter as having value not far removed from that of the speech act proper.

Whether the face-to-face is considered a speech act or not, however, *Totality and Infinity* positions the encounter within a chronology of ethical emergence, which goes something like, ‘I was not ethical and now I am.’ By contrast, in *Otherwise than Being*, I am already hostage to the Other, prior to reason, prior to my own needs, and even, as we have seen, prior to any choice to be ethical. For Perpich, Levinas’s work represents ‘an arguable original analysis of the performative dimension of language’, one that ‘think[s] language as providing the formal structure of the possibility of [an ethical] response’. We can therefore consider the project of *Otherwise than Being* to be one of performing the wrenching demands on the self...
called to responsibility before the Other. This makes *Otherwise than Being* a
difficult book to read initially. But, says Davis, ‘[t]he difficulty of the work
and the problems of understanding that it poses are not tangential to the
point; they *are* the point’. When one understands that Levinas’s constant
desire to redefine terms so as to avoid settling on one fixed meaning is a
key aspect of his ethics, one can begin to comprehend the possibilities for
new meanings and new understanding made possible by this textual per-
formance. Perpich notes that ‘[a]s the narrative of the ego coming to moral
conscience is abandoned, the conception of responsibility undergoes a cor-
respondingly important shift. The core features of responsibility remain
stable between Levinas’s two works, but they are rendered in *Otherwise
Than Being* in increasingly hyperbolic terms.’ Thus, we might say that
the language of *Totality and Infinity* is inclined to state ideas that the lan-
guage of *Otherwise than Being* sets out instead to stage. This means that
while both achievements are textual performatives, *Otherwise than Being*
is a more explicitly ethical exploration of words as not just saying but doing.

Attending to Levinas’s work, and above all *Otherwise than Being*, in terms
of its use of a performative language does, however, come with hazards
attached. Paul Davies is one Levinas scholar who has cautioned against a
reading of *Otherwise than Being* that would see form and content as working
in tandem with each other, as it would ‘reintroduc[e] the most conventional
conception of a form being appropriate to its content’ and would there-
fore go against Levinas’s desire to create a destabilised text, in which the
content is a continual surprise that engages with the ethical need to evade
fixity of meaning even as it purports to be creating meaning. For Davies,
the performative reading – of the text *doing* the ethics – is reductive in that
the effect of such a reading is to diminish the sense of alterity that must be
felt by the reader. He reminds us that ‘the references to nonphilosophical
experiences and the empirical event of obligation to another . . . must come
as a shock’. To do otherwise, he believes, would be to overlook key points
that *Otherwise than Being* is making about the difference between the Saying
and the Said, about the originary power of language before fixity. Similarly,
Sam B. Girgus notes that Levinas’s project places him ‘in a classic dilemma
of using language to escape language’, while Hagi Kenaan observes how

when we try to explain the distinction between Saying and Said through the familiar
set of oppositions used in the paradigmatic analysis of speech acts, we are inevitably
buying into a dominant metaphysical picture of language that, in principle, cannot
make room for the possibility of a transcendental alterity.

And Alphonso Lingis, in his translator’s introduction to *Otherwise than
Being*, observes how the difficulty of Levinas’s task in the book lies in
the notion that as soon as you seek to articulate what precedes Being, you turn it into Being, ‘just by formulating it in its terms, which are those of theoretical and ontological intelligibility’. These theorists all acknowledge the difficulty of Levinas’s project in seeking to convey the Saying through words. Their concern is in support of the book’s ethics: they are mindful of any reading of Otherwise than Being that risks dulling the effect of its ethical Saying by ascribing to it a formalism that would turn the text into the complacent Said, too easy to understand and therefore, perhaps, too easy to discard.

The issue, then, becomes how to discuss Levinas’s approach to language in Otherwise than Being without damaging the work’s ethical intentions. I should like to address this first by restating something that is widely understood, which is that it is always questionable as to whether form and content can be separated. Theories of performativity testify to this – and so does our understanding of why Levinas has chosen the prose style he uses. All commentary on Otherwise than Being has the potential, of course, to elucidate Levinas’s work in such a way as to risk robbing his readers of the chance to experience his prose as an example of the Saying in action. But if we do not attempt to account for Levinas’s use of language, we risk closing Levinas off to all but the most learned readers of ethical philosophy, those already, in a sense, prepared for the experience. The ‘shock’ Davies refers to is, surely, only recognisable as a shock if, paradoxically, one knows what one is looking for.

Kenaan offers a solution in noting that ‘[i]f we find it impossible to encounter the Other’s Saying, this is not because the Saying is missing in language, but rather because its turning toward us always precedes any encounter initiated by us’. This means that the Saying is not to be found in any obvious, direct way through the performativity of language; instead it already exists, and it is the hope of language to perform that pre-existence as best it can. Film can do this, too: it is an art form with a visual and aural immediacy even while viewers know that what they are viewing is already in existence. Such immediacy holds always the potential for surprise, as what appears stable can be destabilised in a split second. This makes film an ideal medium for performing the ‘shocks’ of the Levinasian Saying.

**Language, Performativity and Film**

If film is going to perform the Saying, however – or to attempt to convey something akin to it – then film needs, first of all, licence to perform. The word ‘performativity’ has come to assume many different meanings, and
the term, and its related theories, have been appropriated in a myriad of ways. A reason for this, Loxley notes, is that performativity ‘appears to focus a valuable but not too difficult idea, detachable from the circumstances of its formulation without significant loss and usefully applicable to a wide range of differing intellectual challenges or problems’. Given that Austin began with the linguistic properties of the performative, a logical approach to discussing performativity in relation to film would be to consider film as a language.

Film has been discussed as a language from the earliest days of film theory. To present one influential position, I shall turn to the work of Christian Metz. In his seminal essay ‘The Cinema: Language or Language System?’, Metz draws on the linguistic analysis of Ferdinand de Saussure in order to raise the question of whether film can be considered a type of language. One of Metz’s claims is that Saussure’s notion that language has a signifier (for example, a word) and a signified (the idea the signifier represents) is incompatible with the essence of the moving image, because the film image cannot be separated in terms of signifier and signified. Metz notes how ‘[m]any people, misled by a kind of reverse anticipation, have antedated the language system; they believed they could understand the film because of its syntax, whereas one understands the syntax because one has understood, and only because one has understood, the film’. By this he means that people are mistaken in considering film’s properties – such as, for example, montage, shot/reverse shot, continuity editing, or the 180-degree rule – to be in themselves carriers of meaning. For Metz, the opposite is true: it is through having seen these properties at work in specific films, and having understood those specific films, that the properties themselves have come to be intelligible. But, says Metz, film might be considered a type of language more generally through its signifying qualities.

The idea that film is a language has been explored and contested elsewhere, too. Gregory Currie, for example, in ‘The Long Goodbye: The Imaginary Language of Film’, argues that film cannot be considered language-like. Currie suggests that language works the way it does because it is productive and conventional. It is productive in the sense that ‘there is an unlimited number of sentences of English that can be uttered’ and conventional in that its meaning is determined ‘by adventitious uniformities of practice that are adhered to because they facilitate communication’. Although Currie does not refer to Austin in his chapter, his discussion of language has obvious parallels with Austin’s sense of language as rooted in social life – a sense recognised by Petrey in his discussion of the societal dimension of Austin’s speech acts. We can therefore
draw on Currie’s argument to say that words are performative because of agreements regarding usage that have been established within a particular society at a particular time: words have become conventional; their usage is understood conventionally. According to Currie, however, film cannot work in this way, because ‘it is not possible to identify any set of conventions that function to confer appearance meaning on cinematic images in anything like the way in which conventions confer (semantic) meaning on language’. Currie notes that films include some standard ‘conventions’, such as shot/reverse shot editing, but he argues that these are not arrived at through conventionality. For Currie, using the word ‘conventionality’ to describe something other than the conventionality of language is a failure of rigour. He cautions that

[...] the distinction between meaning that is determined by convention (and that is therefore conventional) and meaning that is merely connected to convention is overlooked by those who appeal to a vague, impressionistic and all-purpose notion of convention to support their claims about the conventionality of images.

Currie’s objection echoes an observation from V. F. Perkins, who, in *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*, also considers the component parts of language to be dissimilar to the material complexity of the image:

The simplest close-up in the crudest silent film shows much more than can be expressed in one word. Language separates the different aspects of a single phenomenon by its use of nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on; but on film, even edited film, the object (noun) cannot be dissociated from what it does (verb) or how it looks (adjective). The more complex the content of a shot, the less relevant the verbal parallels become.

For both Currie and Perkins, then, the way language works is not akin to the images (and sounds) of film, which present a complex interplay of any number of elements. We may therefore be driven to conclude that the attempt to consider film as performative is futile. More specifically for this study, we may feel that, if *Otherwise than Being* is dependent on the performativity of language to bring its ethics into being, and if film cannot be considered akin to language, then there is no possibility of considering a film as a counterpart to Levinas’s textual performance.

This study proposes, however, that if performativity is assessed in terms of conventionality, the conventionality of language is not the only type of conventionality that comes into play. When Currie says that language is conventional because its ‘meanings are determined by a co-ordinated practice based on mutual expectation’, that could also serve as a definition of, for example, Classical Hollywood Style. As James Monaco observes, the
study of signs, semiotics, came into play in film theory as a way of appreciating the systems and signs that film deploys in order to create meaning:

[F]ilm needs to be considered as a phenomenon very much like language. It has no codified grammar, it has no enumerated vocabulary, it doesn’t even have very specific rules of usage, so it is very clearly not a language system like written or spoken English; but it nevertheless does perform many of the same functions of communication as language does.86

Film, like language, has developed through social practices within particular places and times and is therefore generally understood through a recognition of the conventions that operate within it. To recognise this is to acknowledge the different types of conventionality that determine meaning-making in different contexts within societies. Doing so maintains the fundamental Austinian notion of performativity.

Indeed, while language is a key aspect of the root of performativity theory, it is not inextricable from it, even in Austin’s work. For Austin, I would argue, the specifics of language are located in the locutionary, which Austin defines as ‘[t]he act of “saying something” in [the] full normal sense’87 and which can be considered a subset of the speech act. There remain, however, the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of the speech act, both of which lead away from the words themselves and towards considerations of achievement and response. And it is in the light of these latter considerations that I believe film can be considered as performative. While Austin’s theory of performativity is initiated by an investigation into the effects of the spoken word – thus, performative utterances – Austin expands this in Lecture V to include written performatives, such as ‘Notice is hereby given that trespassers will be prosecuted’.88 It is only a small step from a written notice warning trespassers to a pictorial sign indicating something similar, by way of, for example, a red line through an illustration of a person walking. And if signs can be speech acts by dint of their conventionally recognisable meanings – locutionary in their textual properties, illocutionary in their functions and perlocutionary in the reactions they inspire by doing what they do – then film is similarly expressive. Because of its emphasis on the moving image (and its accompanying soundtrack), film does not ‘say’ things the way language does, but it nevertheless has parallels with other aspects of performativity. It is through film’s uniqueness, through considering it on its own terms rather than as a poor relation of language, that we are most properly able to discuss film in terms of performativity.
The Performativity of a Film and Performativity in a Film

Drawing directly on Austin’s work, anthropologist Liza Bakewell, in a chapter entitled ‘Image Acts’, posits the notion that images are just as performative as words. She offers the term ‘image acts’ as the visual counterpart to the power of the linguistic speech act. For Bakewell, ‘[i]f images are actions, it follows that images must have an effect on us. From the simplest gesture to the most complex artistic and engineering feat, images do things, and they do these things to us, to our interlocutors, and to our passersby.’ She argues persuasively for the importance of giving images their due in studies of language and communication: she notes that calling images ‘text’ has held us back from seeing images as acts, but she believes nevertheless that humanities scholars are coming to see more and more value in studying not just the artistic importance of images but also their political importance. In pointing out that language systems are symbolic while images are iconic, Bakewell appears to echo the long-held distinction between language, with its signifier and its signified, and film, which has no such easy division. She says, however: ‘Rather than emphasize the similarities between verbal and visual forms of communication, a better approach would be to give equal attention to their differences. Among other things, this would broaden both the theoretical and empirical base of language studies.’ This assertion – to treat film as film – of course echoes Perkins. Bakewell notes that images do all sorts of things, just as words do, and that we use images when words fail us. Thus, ‘a proper theory of speech acts should incorporate images, in the same way that a proper theory of image acts should incorporate language’. Bakewell’s chapter therefore inspires engagement with film for its properties as a type of performative just as we engage with the performativity of language.

The 2010 book *Exploring Textual Action*, edited by Lars Sætre, Patrizia Lombardo and Anders M. Gullestad, considers how theories of performativity have an impact on a range of artworks, including films. J. Hillis Miller’s chapter in the collection points out a distinction between the performativity of a text (Performativity), which relates to the Austinian sense of a text performing, and performativity in a text (Performativity), which refers to events of a performance nature going on within the text. Thus, in Performativity, the performative relation is between the film as text and the reader or viewer, while in Performativity, the performative relation is between the characters within the film’s world.

Svend Erik Larsen, in the same volume, notes similarly that ‘the double orientation of
the performance *in* the text and the performance *of* the text has underlined
the interaction between text and reader as a particular performative textu-
tal dynamics'.97 My analyses of the films in this book will recognise both
levels of performativity, as well as keeping in mind a third level, which is a
wider sense of the performativity of film more generally.

Performativity theory has also been important to discussions of docu-
mentary film, most notably from Bill Nichols and Stella Bruzzi.98 Nichols
has proposed the ‘performative documentary’ as a type of documentary
The performative documentary focuses ‘on the evocative quality of the
text rather than on its representationalism’.100 This is suggestive, there-
fore, of a documentary that deploys style in overtly expressive ways. The
result is a film that ‘gives priority to the affective dimensions struck up
between ourselves and the text’.101 This prioritising of the viewer’s expe-
rience suggests a concern with how a film might set about conveying the
experience of the documentary’s subject rather than depicting it in a more
ordered fashion. Bruzzi takes up the notion of the performative documen-
tary by relating it explicitly to the lineage of Austin and Butler. She notes
how performative documentaries can ‘function as utterances that simul-
taneously both describe and perform an action’.102 The idea is that some
documentaries can engender understanding of their subjects by drawing
attention to the constructiveness of the documentary form itself. Bruzzi
derives this notion from ‘Austin’s radical differentiation between the con-
stable and performative aspects of language’103 and proposes ‘that a docu-
mentary only comes into being as it is performed, that although its factual
basis (or document) can pre-date any recording or representation of it,
the film itself is necessarily performative because it is given meaning by
the interaction between performance and reality’.104 I shall return to the
notion of the performative documentary in my discussion of Schroeder’s
*L’Avocat de la terreur* (*Terror’s Advocate*, dir. Barbet Schroeder, 2007). For
now, it is significant to note that the idea that a documentary ‘only comes
into being as it is performed’ shows how it is not just fiction films that
perform through a complex interplay of style and content. Documentary
and fiction film alike can be assessed in terms of Miller’s notion of
Performativity₁ and Performativity₂.

Scholarship on Levinas and film has sometimes come close to discus-
sions of performativity. For example, Cooper mentions how ‘Levinas’s
reformulation of ethics as first philosophy creates a fissure at the root
of the philosophy of being. The Dardennes’ films, in turn, perform a
Levinasian-inspired challenge to the being of cinema’.105 She notes also that
‘Levinas’s language [in *Otherwise than Being*] performs the very challenge
to being that his writing articulates'. This tallies with Dominic Michael Rainsford’s assertion, when discussing Levinas in relation to the work of filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, that ‘Levinas conveys philosophical arguments artistically, in the sense that he goes on reformulating his major concepts, over and over again, finding new words every time, in a process that seems unending: an evasion (as much as this is possible) of fixity and thematisation’; thus, we could say that Rainsford is arguing for the performative effects of Levinas’s prose in everything but name. Critchley, discussing Film (dir. Alan Schneider, 1965), with its screenplay by Samuel Beckett, mentions the ‘speech act’ in relation to a moment of dialogue in the film, but does not develop this in terms of performativity of the film itself, and he observes how Beckett’s textual practice of declarations and withdrawals can be paralleled with the non-fixity of the Levinasian Saying. Asbjørn Grønstad, in his book Film and the Ethical Imagination, discusses Levinas as part of his exploration of ethics in film, which is founded on the significant claim that ‘images do not dramatize ethics; they are not first and foremost “about” ethical issues. Rather, images perform, or embody, ethics through a process that is considerably more profound and far-reaching than that of a mere thematization of an immediately recognizable issue.’ But he develops his claim in ways that do not include discussion of performativity theory. Perhaps most extensively, Kristin Lené Hole’s study of the films of Claire Denis alongside the philosophy of both Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy engages considerably with Otherwise than Being and is alert to how its prose style can inform our understanding of film style. She says, for example, that Denis’ films ‘require the kind of patience and openness that are also necessary for reading Levinas’s philosophy, and in this way they point us towards his style itself as a model for film’. In all these examples, there is an acknowledgement of a way in which film can be seen as capable of achieving something similar to Levinas’s prose, with similarly ethical effects. At every turn, the performative power of style is implied.

In what follows, I will show how the different uses of film style deployed by the Dardennes, Schroeder and Schrader invite us into an experience of the self’s inescapable responsibility for the Other. This is through specific camera angles, such as in Maîtresse (dir. Barbet Schroeder, 1975); camerawork and editing, such as the uses of close-ups and long takes in La Promesse and Le Fils (The Son, dirs Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 2002); or narrative structure, such as the different time frames in Adam Resurrected (dir. Paul Schrader, 2008), the ominous, menacing trajectory of The Comfort of Strangers (dir. Paul Schrader, 1990) or the juxtapositions of present day, flashbacks and imaginary events in
performing ethics through film style

*Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (dir. Paul Schrader, 1985) and *Reversal of Fortune* (dir. Barbet Schroeder, 1990), delineated through their colour schemes, voiceovers, and other factors. We will also see how film style helps convey ways in which a character puts on a performance, either as part of their job or for an ulterior motive, such as Ariane in *Maîtresse*, Claus von Bülow in *Reversal of Fortune*, Jacques Vergès in *Terror’s Advocate*, Julian Kay in *American Gigolo* (dir. Paul Schrader, 1980), Yukio Mishima, and Adam in *Adam Resurrected*. And we will see how conventionality relates to performative power through, for example, the subverting of expectation in *Le Gamin au vélo* (*The Kid with a Bike*, dirs Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 2011), *La Virgen de los Sicarios* (*Our Lady of the Assassins*, dir. Barbet Schroeder, 2000), and *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist* (dir. Paul Schrader, 2005). Through all of this there is an awareness of how creativity and individual expression can have an impact on the wider world, just as Austin was attentive to how we use words in contexts outside the purely philosophical realm.

Selection of Filmmakers and Films

In analysing the work of the Dardennes, Schroeder and Schrader, I do not propose a link between them in terms of overt stylistic commonalities in the manner of, for example, Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film* with its argument about the commonalities in the film styles of Yasujirō Ozu, Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer. The films of the Dardennes have a style in common with one another (although it shifts and modifies from film to film, as I shall discuss) but Schroeder’s films do not have what we would call a uniform, recognisable style – Schroeder changes his style according to the film he is making, rather than there being a ‘Schroeder style’. As for Schrader, while his preoccupations are often recognisable from film to film, some of his films are more ‘stylised’ than others. Nor are these directors linked in industrial terms: they spring from different filmmaking circumstances – the Dardenne from a documentary background in southern Belgium in the 1970s and 1980s, Schroeder from the French New Wave in the 1960s and Schrader from the ‘Movie Brat’ generation of 1970s American filmmaking. What brings the work of these directors together here is a Levinasian dimension to some of their films that plays out not just within the narratives but also through the different approaches to style that the directors deploy.

Notions of style are central to film and to film scholarship: uses of the term often imply or even make overt claims for a distinct stylistic approach that acts as a director’s personal signature, a readily identifiable and
individualistic deployment of what Alexandre Astruc called ‘la caméra-stylo’ (‘the camera-pen’). Organising a discussion of Levinasian performativity in film around the work of particular directors could therefore prompt readers to infer an auteurist agenda. Reading a film in terms of Levinasian performativity, however, works primarily by seeing style as performative within an individual film rather than as an end in itself across a directorial career. It is the case that the Dardennes have already been characterised – and have characterised themselves – as filmmakers whose work exhibits a Levinasian influence, but to come to each of their films expecting a Levinasian agenda would frustrate engagement both with the stories in the films and with each film’s individual stylistic approach to its subject. With Schroeder and Schrader, too, the Levinasian dimensions I identify may come to stand as significant achievements of the bodies of work, but this can only happen by first focusing on the individual films in question.

All that said, I hope that my discussions of the films will shed new light on these directors and contribute to the ongoing study of their work. With regard to the Dardennes, I wish to build on studies that have gone before by developing an analysis of their work in explicitly performative terms. And in discussing their work before that of Schroeder and Schrader, I aim to establish the terms of a Levinasian-performative reading of film that will carry through the rest of the book. In the case of both Schroeder and Schrader, I am reading the Levinasian where the filmmakers have not declared that it is present, in order to draw out the Levinasian dimensions that I believe are there within the films.

It does not escape my attention that all of the directors I have chosen to focus on, as well as Levinas, are white males. I appreciate how their whiteness and maleness could suggest a white and patriarchal dominance, a lack of diversity, in the examples explored. I believe, however, that when it comes to what the films of the Dardennes, Schroeder and Schrader are able to offer viewers in terms of ethics, this includes a lot of diversity – such as in characters, representations, subject matter, and cultures – and that this can transcend issues of the filmmakers’ gender and skin colour. With the Dardennes coming from Belgium, Schroeder having been born in Tehran, Iran to parents from Germany and Switzerland and having been brought up in Colombia and France, and Schrader coming from the USA, these directors are diverse in nationality; additionally, Schroeder and Schrader have made films in a number of countries and languages. And performativity theory helps show that these films can be considered to be performing an ethics akin to the anarchic restlessness of the Levinasian Saying, the very point of which is the refusal to coalesce around simple categories and
definitions. Therefore, I believe that the ethical dimension of the films is most fruitfully engaged with when considered beyond the ‘essence’ of identity categories. These filmmakers may enjoy privileged positions within society – but privilege can work in tandem with self-awareness and doesn’t preclude ethical engagement.

Another matter relating to my choice of filmmakers also needs to be addressed. Given the fractured nature of Levinas’s prose in *Otherwise than Being* and the relatively easy-to-understand styles deployed by Schroeder and Schrader in their films, readers may feel that it would be more fruitful to discuss Levinas and performativity in relation to more ‘experimental’ filmmakers, such as those of the avant-garde with its explicit and multi-faceted radicalisation of film style, its ‘othering’ of film. Avant-garde styles might indeed be very well-attuned to attempting to depict the otherness of the Other. But the sense of a Levinasian subject, inescapably responsible for the Other, is performed not just in obvious ways in film but also in subtle and unemphasised ways. Bakewell, in discussing image acts, notes that '[l]anguage does not have to be employed for dramatic purposes to be effective. Even in its most prosaic form it is a powerful political tool.' Language cannot help but be political, simply by dint of its central role in the creation of social discourse. Film, in a similar way, holds perpetual performative power, and analysing the subtleties of a seemingly straightforward moment in a relatively mainstream film for its ethical dimension exposes this power’s potential.

With regard to mainstream cinema, there are arguments in favour of discussing directors other than the Dardennes, Schroeder and Schrader in relation to Levinasian ethics and performativity. Many mainstream films tell stories about ethical dilemmas of one kind or another and often use style in ways that draw out the power of the situations. But the films analysed here prove, I believe, to be especially important for a study of how film conveys, through style, the self’s responsibility for the Other. This responsibility emerges so effectively in the work of these directors because of their films’ particularly judicious combinations of the stylised and the down-to-earth that relate Levinasian ethics on film to the wider world. With the Dardennes’ dynamic presentations of character and action through style and the sheer range of subject matter and styles handled with a Levinasian openness to alterity by Schroeder and Schrader, cinema’s treatment of the self’s responsibility for the Other is presented especially pertinently within the work of these filmmakers.

My chosen films do not just present dramatised examples of Levinasian ethics; they also communicate a Levinasian ethics through their uses of film style. They are examples of the Levinasian Saying on film, with all
the restless, anarchic energy that this implies. They greet viewers who are expecting clarity of definition, fixity of meaning, a kind of filmic ontological Said – and they turn those expectations on their heads. I aim to locate in the films a powerful sense of both the inescapability and the vitality of the self’s responsibility for the Other.