

Review of

## *Philosophical Presentations of Raising Children: The Grammar of Upbringing*

By Naomi Hodgson and Stefan Ramaekers: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019

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JUDITH SUISSA

UCL Institute of Education

Many philosophers in recent years have turned their attention to the ethics of parenting and the moral status of the family. This is, primarily, a book about what it means to *be* a parent, not a book about “parenting.” But it is also a book about films. The bulk of the book is devoted to a discussion of three films: *The Seventh Continent* (Heiduschka & Haneke, 1989); *Dogtooth* (Mavroidis, Tsangari, Tsourianis, & Lanthimos, 2009); and *Le Fils* (Dardenne, Dardenna, Freyd, 2002). In discussing the films, the authors draw on both philosophical work on the parent-child relationship and work in the philosophy of film, notably, Stanley Cavell’s influential *The World Viewed* (1979), the subtitle of which, “Reflections on the Ontology of Film,” captures their philosophical approach and style. If you haven’t seen the films, this book will certainly make you want to watch them. And if you have seen them, it may well inspire you to watch them again.

The authors acknowledge that part of their motivation for writing the book was a shared sense of disagreement with the predominant ways in which these films have been received by film critics and by the general public. Their aim, they explain, is not to *understand* the films, but to explore the ways in which they, in Cavell’s words, “reveal reality and fantasy (not by reality as such, but) by projections of reality, projections in which [...] reality is freed to exhibit itself [...]” (1979, p. 166). Likewise, their philosophical reflections on parent-child relationships, illustrated through a meticulous attention to the detail of the films’ visual and narrative aspects, are not intended to offer “a full-blown theory of what raising children ought to be” (p. vii). In reflecting philosophically on these films, the authors are not suggesting an alternative interpretation of what they “mean.” Rather, they are articulating the force of their own responses to the films in terms of “the particular aspects of them that make visible elements of what we do when we bring children into the world, and invite them to share our world, that we claim are rendered invisible by the dominant account of ‘parenting’” (Ramaekers and Hodgson, 2019, p. vii).

Chapter One rehearses and elaborates on themes that will be familiar to anyone who has read the authors’ and others’ recent philosophical work on upbringing and parent-child relationships (see Ramaekers, 2018; Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012; Vansielegheem, 2010). Central to this work is a critical exploration of the ways in which the ethical significance and phenomenology of parent-child relationships are obscured, or distorted, by mainstream, largely instrumental narratives of parenting. The alternative philosophical account explores ideas and experiences that are “an inevitable part of the human activity we call raising children” (p. 5). This chapter thus revisits some critical work on the ways in which paradigms from scientific research in psychology, and increasingly neuroscience, have “claimed” popular and academic discussions of parenting, particularly regarding the language of effectiveness and causality. The chapter builds on some of this earlier work but also develops it in significant ways by offering an insightful account of the idea of “depersonalization” in parenting discourse. The discussion draws compellingly on the work of Cavell and Wittgenstein in articulating the complexities and difficulties in articulating this “grammar of

upbringing” and, as such, constitutes a valuable addition to recent philosophical work on the implications of these thinkers’ ideas.

The three films that the authors discuss in detail in the subsequent chapters “provide the starting point for articulating” the experience of raising children that these philosophical reflections are reaching for; in doing so, they say, the films, like the work of the philosophers discussed here, “are exploring the complicated regions and limits of our experiences” (p. 23).

The first thing to be said about the choice of the three films which provide the basis of this exploration is that it is an unsettling choice. Although parents and children feature centrally in each of these films, they are not obviously films *about* parenting. And perhaps this is the point. The authors make the bold claim that these films “assert existential truths about aspects and dimensions that are an *inevitable* part of the human activity we call upbringing and that are left out of the picture in the predominant accounts of ‘parenting’” (p. 27, italics in original).

The films, they explain, achieve this by “drawing attention to what is there” (p. 37). The particular quality of the films and the devices they employ, they argue, “invite us to resist readings that are all too quickly provided—a psychological reading, for example, or a political one—by our pre-existing explanation.” (p. 38) And yet, by their own admission, the authors’ own response to these films is not one shared by most viewers. This fact, one would have thought, may invite some further self-reflection, perhaps some autobiographical exploration of the type that Cavell was so acutely, even obsessively, committed to in his work.

The authors follow Cavell in arguing that the medium of film “is ontologically distinctive and that it has a specific, potential, educational force” (p. 31). But if this is the case, then what can account for this educational force in a context where most viewers, I think it is fair to say, will have a very different response? If all the authors are doing in discussing these films is “providing reminders” about “what we do when we raise children” (p. 108), then an obvious question arises: why choose films where the main narrative centre is precisely one outside the mundane, everyday experience of being a parent? Namely, the narratives in the films deal with, respectively, an act of filicide and collective suicide; an abusive, incestuous relationship; and a child’s murder.

Hodgson and Ramaekers do not deny the films’ strange, even shocking, aspects; indeed, they suggest, it may be precisely their uncanniness that accounts for their ability to make visible to us the existential quality of the everyday experience of raising children. And yet, to the extent that the educational force of a film lies not in its ability to teach us a lesson, but in its ability to “shift[s] one’s relation to the subject matter—here, raising children—and to one’s self” (p. 45), one might have expected a more self-reflective discussion of who that self is, and of how different selves, with different experiences of parent-child relationships, may have a very different relation to the subject matter—may indeed have a very different understanding of what *constitutes* the subject matter—of these films. How do viewers who are not parents respond to them? What, if anything, should we say about this difference? Each of these films, in very different ways, and notwithstanding their “possibly unsettling contents,” present, the authors argue, something of the “relation between grown-ups and children in general” (p. 46). Yet surely this claim opens up a range of philosophical questions into the different kinds of relationships that may obtain between parents, non-parents, and the children with whom we share our world.

Haneke’s *The Seventh Continent*, the authors suggest, invites us to consider the notion that raising children is essentially “about a plain, uncomplicated form of taking care of things in the world and of one another; about showing these forms of care; and about passing on these and the objects concerned in it” (p. 58). But in the same way that, as they argue, dominant accounts of parenting leave out important aspects of what it means to be a parent, so too, I couldn’t help feeling, their own account of the films leaves out important questions that these films pose about parents, children, and their relationship to the world.

Haneke’s film, which depicts a fairly unremarkable family going about their daily business up to and including the moment when the parents calmly, and with considerable foresight, end their own lives and those of their two children, is perhaps the most shocking of the three films discussed in the book. It is also

the one that, for me, left the most questions hanging, in spite of my appreciation of the philosophical exploration that the authors develop in response to it. To put it bluntly, if being a parent is, in the Arendtian sense, centrally about taking responsibility for the world, then what does it mean for parents to be so willing to end this world for their children? Most criticisms of the film, as the authors note, focus on its ending. But it is its ending that poses the troubling questions here, even on the authors' own account. For central to the idea of the "plain, uncomplicated forms of taking care of things" is that this is something that one does "and has to be willing to do, time and time again...." (p. 58, 2019). But the very narrative of the film prods us to ask: at what point, and why, might one decide, as a parent, that one is no longer willing to do this?

What needs to be in place for this work of caring to be able to continue? Perhaps this involves resources, relationships, sources of meaning, outside the parent-child relationship? But these questions are evaded by the authors' suggestion that what the film shows, through a close attention to the detail of the mundane everyday interactions between the parents and their children, is how they "are in fact connected to the world and to one another [...] in and by the very ordinary things they do" (p. 59).

For "the world" is seldom present in anything but the blurriest contours in the background of the film's action. What in fact *is* "the world" here? The action of the film is not anchored in any clearly identifiable social or political reality. Although the central characters interact occasionally with other people, we know nothing about these people's lives, their history or the quality of their relationships with them; the parents seem, in fact, contrary to claims about "sharing the world" with their children, to be holding the world—the concrete social and political reality of their world—very much at a distance. The film, in fact, could be anywhere and at any time in history. This is in striking contrast to Haneke's more overtly political films, particularly his masterpiece *Caché* (2005), in which the very ways in which people within the family relate to each other and to others in their environment are inflected, subconsciously and inescapably, by an ever-present political past and present. The contours of the characters in the film are filled out, come into being in fact, through concrete political events, and these events in turn are part of a bigger historical narrative. The viewer can only make sense of the characters' actions and choices against the background of this historical context. Indeed, the film's power, and its profound political significance, come precisely from its depiction of the ways in which the protagonists constantly attempt to hide (hence the title) from these often subconscious aspects of their past. The film is, in an important sense, a metaphor for collective denial, and its force lies not just in what it tells us about contemporary French society, but in what it tells Western viewers about their own denial of past colonial brutality and its ongoing legacy.

Hodgson and Ramaekers explicitly reject the dominant accounts of *The Seventh Continent* which "adopt a critical position, to reveal what the film is 'really' saying to us about our political conditions" (p. 69). This, they argue, is to overdetermine the film. Yet while *The Seventh Continent* may not be straightforwardly "about" the emptiness and alienation of modern life, in the same way as *Cache* is "about" collective denial, the film surely poses profound moral and political questions about parent-child relationships.

The parents in *The Seventh Continent*, like all parents, make choices in the course of their everyday interaction with their children. Yet the moral and political questions about their choices—indeed, about whether their ultimate act as parents was their choice to make—have no place in the authors' exploration of what the film is revealing to us about being a parent. If a film such as *The Seventh Continent* has the capacity to reveal to us what it means to describe upbringing as being, at heart, a "preparation for the task of renewing a common world" (p. 108), then surely it also demands that we ask ourselves what it means to take the decision to cease this act of renewal, and under what circumstances a parent may find themselves willing to do so.

"You don't need to be scared," the mother in *The Seventh Continent* says to her daughter in one scene, "I won't do anything to you." If this scene and its place within the narrative does not raise questions about the meaning of trust, responsibility, and care in parent-child relationships, then I'm not sure what does.

Hodgson and Ramaekers, I presume, would not deny that films such as those they discuss here raise ethical and political questions about parents and the family. In fact they refer, at several points in the book,

to the idea that the parent-child relationship is “political.” But in the face of three films which are so strikingly detached from any real socio-political and historical context, and in the absence of any discussion of what such a context could be and why it might be relevant, I am left somewhat perplexed as to what exactly they mean in saying that parenting is “political.”

To the extent that politics is, on most understandings, to do with relationships of power in a shared space, where people, in Pitkin’s (1981) words, “determine what they will collectively do, settle how they will live together, and decide their future, to whatever extent that is in their power,” (p. 343) these films seem to present parents and children in a decidedly *a-political* setting. There is no “public” shared space; the real political events, institutions, and processes of the society surrounding the family at the centre of each film remain strangely muted, if not altogether absent.

This is true of *The Seventh Continent*, as well as of *Dogtooth*, widely described as “bleak,” “surreal,” or a “black comedy” and which, one online reviewer suggests, “is a bizarre fantasy that takes the concept of home schooling to squirmy extremes” (Ebert, 2010). But if this is true, it is so only because the caricature of home-schooling in the popular imagination is just as unrealistic as the picture of family life in the film. Most home-schoolers, like most parents, do not live in total isolation from surrounding society, and, in fact, many advocates of home-schooling seek precisely to recreate a more community-oriented form of education in which children interact with adults in everyday social settings and engage in practices of social interaction and work, rather than being artificially segregated by age in institutions. The picture of upbringing presented in *Dogtooth*, in fact, does not capture the sense in which education, like language, is an irreducibly public activity. *Dogtooth*, the authors suggest, “invites us to articulate the inevitability that parents do not have control over the meaning or the world into which they introduce their children” (p. 47). But this is so precisely because this world is always a public world. And it is precisely this political, public, world that is absent from the film. Thus in a way, the film, perhaps like *The Seventh Continent*, seems to illustrate the danger in presenting ideals of parenting as a-political, and the impossibility of saying anything normative about parent-child relationships—whether through depicting a utopia or a dystopia of family life—without confronting head-on the always contingent and specific political reality in which these relationships are situated.

The authors, however, do not explicitly make this point, nor do they reflect on the apparent oddness of referring to the political significance of the parent-child relationship in the context of three films that seem so peculiarly detached from social and political reality. They are most explicit about this “political” significance when it comes to their discussion of *Le Filis*, which, they say, “invites us to consider how raising children is always already a collective, political responsibility” (p. 47). Yet, the parents in *Le Filis*, like those in the other films discussed here, could be anywhere. Although it is set in Belgium, viewers are not given any glimpse of the surrounding social and political context in which the action of the film takes place. Like the parents in *The Seventh Continent*, the protagonists of this film are never shown engaging in relationships with anyone outside their own rather claustrophobic little world. A lot, it is implied, goes on off screen. And surely there is a value—cinematic as well as philosophical—in focusing in on the quality of the relationship between the actors on the screen: fathers, mothers, children, siblings. Hodgson and Ramaekers illuminate, with great care and nuance, the value of slowing down and looking at this relationship, articulating the ways in which it can both raise and reflect profound philosophical questions at the heart of what it means to be human. But these questions do not emerge in a vacuum.

In our 2012 book, Stefan Ramaekers and I noted the problems with attempts to draw prescriptive conclusions for parents from artificially constructed research settings which normalise the mother-child dyad. Similarly, we tried to capture the sense that philosophical accounts of parents’ and children’s rights, articulated within the framework of normative political theory, might, by focusing our attention on end-points outside the parent-child relationship, obscure some of the first-person complexities of being a parent. And yet, as philosophers, we need both these perspectives.

Whatever one’s initial reaction to these films, there is a lot to be gained from a slow, careful reading of the authors’ own slow, careful reading of them, and of the philosophical literature that accompanies their

exploration of the themes they see in them. I found this particularly compelling in the discussion of *Dogtooth*, where Wittgenstein's and Cavell's (1979) work on language is used insightfully to show how the film reveals subtle aspects of our fundamental relationship to language, not least regarding the existential anxiety and vulnerability of the educator facing Cavell's question of "whether our words will go on meaning what they do" (p. 80).

Hodgson and Ramaekers do a fine job at articulating the everyday experience of being a parent that goes on, unremarked, below the surface of these films. For anyone familiar only with popular interpretations of these films and with mainstream accounts of parenting, their book is a welcome invitation to look again, and to look more closely. But what goes on outside the frame is inextricably intertwined with the questions these films pose about the moral and political significance of being a parent. In this sense, then, the book also reminds us that we need to keep asking these questions.

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## About the Author

**Judith Suissa** is Professor of Philosophy of Education at UCL Institute of Education, London, UK. Her research interests are in political and moral philosophy, with a focus on anarchist theory, questions of social justice, radical and libertarian educational traditions, utopian theory, the role of the state, and the parent-child relationship. Her publications include *Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective* (2006) and *The Claims of Parenting: Reasons, Responsibility and Society* (2012).