

A FILMOSOPHY OF THE DARDENNES



The Belgian filmmaking brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne have bled their documentary foundations into a mesmerically pure fiction style. Their films absorb us in a recognisable world, that nevertheless shows us ordinary things in a *new* way, makes us look again at what we thought we understood. Their four most recent films – *The Promise* (1996), *Rosetta* (1999), *The Son* (2002), and *The Child* (2005) – almost entirely reject some key conventions of fiction filmmaking (shot-reverse-shot, point-of-view shots, establishing shots, etc.) in favour of a close and empathetic form of film-thinking. These films use images to think about (and for) their characters – thinkings which steer the emotions of the filmgoer. Here I shall sketch out a few areas of film-thinking in the four films: action/space, ellipsis, empathy, questioning, transsubjectivity.

The films ask us to understand action more than words (images more than dialogue). Physicality is a theme across all these films: most are based around work and labour; and all include forced contact, some

sort of fight or wrestle between the main characters (for example, Bruno and Sonia in the apartment after he has sold and then bought back the child). But, moreover, each concerns the meaning of physical being. In *The Promise* the father makes of his son a work mate (a father who doesn't want to be a father, but 'Roger', a friend, a colleague); in *The Child* the young man endlessly traipses around town selling 'stuff'; in *Rosetta* the girl is addicted to work (as an escape from, a reaction to, her mother's sloth); and in *The Son* man and boy attempt to get closer via work – indeed, the boy copies him, mimicking his actions (airblowing sawdust from his clothes, ordering the same food). But action in the images is enriched by the action *of* the images. In *The Promise* the film gives us repeated images of Igor racing around dusty industrial streets

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on his moped, the background a blur – the filmgoer receives a sense of a fast moving life, a speeding image of a boy growing up too fast, beyond his years. (Later, when Igor has been calmed by the responsibility of the promise, the film gives us his less frantic movement, standing quietly in a bus.) It is the films' forms that think a physicality that the filmgoer affectively, directly, *feels*: the rough shift cuts, the always-active movement, the grainy grey image. If *The Son* thinks about distance and physical/emotional space, it is about the *closing* of distance: of presumption when far away, of understanding when closer, of knowledge on contact. The films think a certain relationship to their stories, enhancing them, allowing the filmgoer to *receive* the meaning of the dramas as much as they do by *interpreting* the events.

The four films are ostensibly straightforward narratives, almost played out in real time, but with significant shift-ellipses, jumping forward after each scene, often right into the middle of an ongoing action. As when we are thrown into the father's attempted beating of Igor in *The Promise*, or when *The Son* suddenly shifts from a calm image to one of the father running down some stairs. Indeed *The Child* begins with Sonia already halfway up some stairs, and *Rosetta* plunges us straight into her violent refusal to leave a job. These shift-ellipses make for a brisk pace that draws us in, *absorbs* us – the filmgoer is left no time to assess situations or reflect too much on character actions. This is crucial to the thinkings of the films: we are held by the films, and the films don't want us to dwell. To be is to do; we must understand the characters by their actions; we should feel meanings directly without undue reflection (until the film is over).

Each film, with its close images and following movements, makes us feel that the characters really are being understood by a filmind, a meta-physical film-being that watches them without their knowledge. Many images resemble furtive, almost angelic surveillance, with most frames being half-obscured by the corner of buildings or walls. Of course any film can be said to be 'watching' its characters, but these films show a concern, an *empathy* for the characters that belies a new kind of film-thinking. This 'thinking' style is responsive, reactive, inquisitive, yet knowing. The filmind has knowledge of the whole story, knows the relationships between its characters. In *The Son* it is the film (by way of a linking movement) that makes the first connection between man and boy, while the father's back is turned. The filmind reveals its knowledge of the situation – it *knows* which boy the father has been looking for.

But we do not receive the thinking of the father through the thinking of the film images. We receive a *feeling* of his thinking. The film aligns us with his thoughts without ever presuming to more directly *express* them through image design. The film shows us him in a way that helps our understanding of him, but does not presume to reveal his 'actual' thoughts. *The Promise* (its filmind) *wants* us to understand its young protagonist. The filmgoer feels this presence from the beginning, when the film follows Igor after he steals a purse: the film *looks* at the boy (it doesn't just *show* him, it *thinks* him), not so much confronting him, as wanting to understand, wanting to work out why he makes the decisions he makes. *The Child* (perhaps their simplest film to date) similarly thinks about Bruno, always facing him, attempting to work him out. *The Child* is a film that tries to understand Bruno,



why he does what he does, how he comes to make the decisions he does.

Perhaps most significant about these four films is their movement away from 'classical' filmmaking forms, especially as regards point-of-view images and the traditional shot-reverse-shot. In *The Son* the father tries to see into an office where details important to him are being discussed — the film aligns itself with him, squeezes a look at what he sees (half a desk, a hand, a pen), but without shifting to a point-of-view shot that denotes his *actual* seeing-point, his 'actual' thinking. What we get is a thinking of his half-knowledge, through an obscured, fractured, half-information image. What this means is that the four films do not break into their stories to try to replace their characters; they do not remove them from the film (by replacing them with a 'view-point'). Importantly, we might say that the films do not presume to *become* their characters.

At the very beginning of *The Son* the film, the moving sound-image, *emerges*

from behind the father (moving up from darkness to reveal the back and then the neck and head of the father). We feel that the film derives itself from him, has lived with him, will live with him. The film thinks this close affinity, thinks (through framing and movement) this empathetic emotion. The film clings close to the father, tracing his neck and back and profile more than his face or locale. There is almost no space, no measurable distance between filmgoer/film and father. The film thinks an intense bond, creating a *pure relationship* between character and filmgoer.

We begin to feel what he feels: tension, half-knowledge, anticipation. The film's thinking doesn't create an identification so much as an allegiance, a *being-with*. Through this closeness the films also enact a questioning thinking. The films watch Igor and Rosetta and Olivier and Bruno think, watch them make decisions, almost hears them decide. All of the films at some point 'hold' on each of them, studying their faces, questioning them, asking them 'what are you going to do?'. The responsibility and conscience in both *The Promise* and *The Child*; the betrayal and enduring affection of the boy in *Rosetta*; the closing of distance between man and boy in *The Son* — each is unexpected for the protagonist. These are people who are unprepared for the humanity that won't let them go.

In the cinema of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne the characters are accompanied, are followed and watched, by another consciousness, a new-consciousness, a filmind. This thinking is at one and the same time subjective and objective (it acts like another character, yet can occupy multiple spaces and shift from one time to another), in

films that absorb the physical through (and into) the metaphysical. The 'filmosophical' thinking of these films is distinguished by their refusal to even attempt to 'become' the characters. The Dardennes resist these conventions of classical fiction filmmaking, and in doing so the films think with humbleness and respect. One person's actions are never completely understandable; we can never become them to understand them, we must learn from what they do. Ethics resolves into a question of action: what do we do? Each of the four films presents us with a filmind that is asking that for us, of a person, from a point of view we can never have: an omniscient, invisible, free mode of thinking.

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Images: p57 *The Son*; p58 *The Child*



For the chance to win either a copy of *Filmosophy*, or a set of 4 DVDs of the Dardenne Brothers' films (*Rosetta*, *La Promesse*, *Le Fils* and *L'Enfant*) just answer the question:
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