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***THE PROMISE AND ITS ETHICS***

The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in the Work of the Dardenne Brothers

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***The Promise* and its ethics: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in the work of the Dardenne Brothers.**

**Abstract**

I have taken the subject of Ethics in the film *The Promise* (1996) by the filmmakers Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne as a case study in the use of philosophy, in this instance that of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906 - 1995), and how it can inform all aspects of storytelling. While not the only viable interpretation of the work, Levinas' thought is most relevant to the narrative as well as to the larger intellectual goals of the film. His ethics here is not merely tacked on intellectualism but is formative of the characters and the story told by the filmmakers, to the point where the film itself becomes a test for the acceptability of the philosophy, akin to a thought experiment in film form, something that it at the very end fails to prove. Despite its philosophical and story telling short comings, *the Promise* is a good showcase of the use of philosophy in filmmaking and, where it's successes show the strength of this approach, it's failures show the perils of it, something that the Dardenne brothers have shown to have learn from in their subsequent films.

## ***Slib* a jeho etika: Filozofie Emmanuela Levinase v díle bratrů Dardenneů.**

### **Abstract**

Zvolil jsem si téma etiky ve filmu *Slib* (1996) tvůrců Jeana-Pierra Dardennea a Luca Dardennea jakožto příkladovou studii užití filozofie, v tomto případě filozofie francouzského filozofa Emmanuela Levinase (1906–1995), a jak jeho filozofie ovlivňuje všechny aspekty vyprávění. Ačkoliv se nejedná o jedinou možnou interpretaci jejich díla, myšlenky Levinase jsou nejvíce relevantní jak pro příběh, tak i pro vyšší intelektuální cíle filmu. Zde je jeho pojem etiky jádrem postav a vyprávění až do bodu, kde se film sám o sobě stává testem pro přijatelnost Levinasovy filozofie, jako myšlenkového experimentu ve filmové podobě. Přijatelnost Levinasovy filozofie zůstává na konci filmu neprokázána. I přes filozofické a vyprávěcí nedostatky je *Slib* dobrým příkladem užití filozofie ve filmu, v jehož lepších částech se ukazuje síla tohoto přístupu, nicméně v horších částech můžeme vidět nebezpečí, které z tohoto přístupu vychází. V následujících filmech je zřejmé, že se bratři Dardenneové poučili ze svých chyb.

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## **1.Introduction**

When crafting a film, one of the dangers that beginner filmmakers are sometimes warned against is the over intellectualization of their work. Lofty ideas and philosophies can take over the story without adding any nuance or sometimes even actual substance to the story being told. A film maker can become so enthralled with the big ideas that a coherent plot and character development goes out the window, leaving a lifeless film that satisfies no one.

This is a serious threat to many of those wishing to tell their story, it is sometimes taken to the other extreme of rampant anti-intellectualism, where philosophical ideas and world views are at best not talked about or explored, or at worst attacked. The emotions, the feelings are important. Characters are alive, ideas are dead.

One of the hardest things to learn for an artist making a film is how to instil life into their work. How to make the characters and the story come alive. In this thesis I wish to discuss and analyse how two great film makers Jeal-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, brothers from Belgium, have crafted some of the best and most impactful films of recent memory.

I will argue that their approach has very strong philosophical roots based on the philosophy of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. His works, especially his ethics have influenced the stories that the brothers tell as well as the making of the films themselves. I will argue that the Dardenne brothers have managed to make



intellectual film, where the philosophy is at the very core of what they are doing, something which not only influences their world view but also the details and characters within their movies. And this while having made movies full of life and charm, that have fully fleshed out characters in all their detail, through whom the brothers tell their stories and explore the ethics that Levinas wrote about, while never falling for mere moralizing. Ethics always asks questions, it always sets itself up for scrutiny and the possibility of being itself mistaken, unlike morality, which claims absolute authority. I will argue that the brothers cinema manages not only to use Levinas' philosophy in their works, but by opening up to and not claiming moral authority, but rather using their format to explore whether the ideas are right or wrong, their films are truly intellectual, without any pretence.

For this thesis, I will look at the Dardenne brothers film “The Promise”. I have chosen to concentrate on this single film for several reasons. First, this is their feature film where they gave up on studio production techniques and found their unique voice in the cinema. (Mosely, 2013, p 76). While they had to this point made several documentaries and two feature films, here they changed radically their approach to production and storytelling. They made “The Promise” without studio backing and with a minimal crew. They also for the first time wrote the script themselves. It is a new beginning for them as artist where they found their voice, but, it is not yet a fully realized and developed one. With aspects that they would address and improve upon with their later film, “The Promise” is an intriguing film where their unique cinematic voice is clearly on display, but where it is still in need of refinement. This also is a good case study because, as I will hopefully show, it is their clearest example of using, sometimes to a fault, the philosophy the writings of Emmanuel Levinas. The narrative is full of clear examples of his philosophy and

how it's being used to in the exploration of the world and characters, in the hopes of finding the elusive face to face encounter that is at the core of Levinas ethics.

## **2. An Levinasian analysis of “The Promise”**

A teenager, clad in blue overalls of a mechanic, with a look about him that implies a maturity one would not expect at his age. For reasons we will soon discover, he is not in school as might be expected, but instead he is working as an apprentice. Within the first shot, Igor helps fix an old lady's car, a simple enough procedure for someone who knows what he is doing. He even refuses payment for such a simple job, but, we quickly learn that his refusal does not come from the goodness of his heart, but from fear. Namely the fear of getting caught with the lady's wallet, which now rests in his pocket, stolen. Another thing he knows how to do, and do well. Luckily for our protagonist, suspicion is not cast on him and the lady speeds off to find her lost wallet somewhere where it's not. Thus, in the first shot of the Dardenne brothers 1996 film *The Promise (La Promesse)*<sup>1</sup> we are introduced to Igor (Jérémy Renier), a quiet and hard working teenager who already knows the worldly affairs of getting money, especially from people who have little choice but to give it to him.

Igor is soon picked up, to the annoyance of the mechanic under who he works, by his father Roger (Olivier Gourmet), a tough no-nonsense man with little sympathies for anyone else. A new truck load of cars has just arrived into the city from abroad, and, within each of those cars is hiding an illegal immigrant for Roger

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Promesse (The Promise)*, Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne, 1996, ARP Sélection, DVD

and Igor to pick up and house, and exploit. Business as usual, even for our teenage protagonist, except, for this group has among them a black woman, the strong willed and vibrant Assita (Assita Ouedraogo), escaping from Burkina Faso with her infant child. She immediately stands out from the rest. While all the other passengers are rough and desperate looking men from East Europe, she is from Africa. She is a woman. She has an infant. And, she doesn't look miserable or downtrodden. She sees the world around her, immediately finding a birds nest and taking it, for what, we never find out, but that is hardly important. She is active like the other male illegals are not. She is different.

Once they arrive at Rogers building where he houses the illegals, Assita is reunited with her husband Amidou (Rasmané Ouédraogo) a worker who has come before to earn money for them, for better life, but who has instead gambled everything away and is always in debt. At the same time Roger and Igor go around collecting money from the illegal residents, listing all the things they need to pay for while setting themselves up as caretaker of the house, even offering to fix things that bother the shady tenants. In reality squeezing from them what else they have left, if not money, the labour.

And yet, for Igor, a disturbance has occurred, he no longer sees these immigrants as mere means to an end, to money, at least not all of them. There is Assita, someone completely different from the sorts he usually deals with. She looks different, she acts different. She is someone other. A mysterious and vibrant black woman, fascinating to a young man coming of age and sexuality. Indeed we first see Igor's interests as he secretly spies on Assita, now dressed in a sleeping gown and preparing her new room, a statuette set aside in a place of honor. She is truly

strange to Igor, yet compelling. Even to the point that, when interrupted by Amidou, who ask for gas to heat their room without having the money to pay it, Igor gives him the gas. A break in the money oriented approach so strong in his father, though he still expects Amidou to pay him back soon.

### **3. An introduction to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas**

We have here, in the first 15 minutes of the film, an intriguing introduction into the characters, their wants and the world they live in. We also have, I would argue, a set up of conflict that is informed by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), specifically his Ethical project, also known as his First Philosophy<sup>2</sup>.

*“[...] does the first question arise rather in the mauvaise conscience<sup>3</sup>, an instability which is different from that threatened by my death and suffering? It poses the question of my right to be which is already my responsibility for the death of the Other, interrupting the carefree spontaneity of my naïve perseverance. The right to be and the legitimacy of this right are not finally referred to the abstraction of the universal rules of the Law – but in the last resort are referred, like that law itself and justice – or for the other of my non-indifference, to death, to which the face of the Other – beyond my ending – in its very rectitude is exposed. [...] In this question being and life are awakened to the human dimension. This is the question of the meaning of being: not the ontology of the understanding of that extraordinary verb, but the ethics of its justice. The question par excellence or the question of philosophy. Not 'Why being rather than nothing?', but how being justifies itself.” (Levinas, 1990, p 86)*

Now, while the dramatic arc is being established and within the next 15 minutes we will be thrown fully into the narrative arc, with the death of Amidou and Igor's promise to him to look after Assita and her baby, the philosophical problem is already established. That problem being the encounter of the other as Other, as

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2 Levinas, E; Ethics as First Philosophy, 1990, Blakcwell.

3 Guilty conscience.

someone who refuses to be Totalized into an ontological category and who remains radically Other, outside the Self. As Levinas writes „*A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.*” (Levinas, 1961/2012 p 43).

The philosophical project of Levinas was that of challenging the Western Philosophical tradition of the primacy of Ontology. “*Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.*” (Levinas, 1961/2012 p 43). This, in Levinas' view, had dominated academic discourse ever since Plato and had led to horrors of the Holocaust, a disaster which was rationalized by those perpetrating it through Kantian ethics<sup>4</sup> and its totalizing reach to subdue all into one, simple sphere, to make everything the Same. “*A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice.*” (Levinas, 1961/2012, p 46) This Same is the sphere of the I, or the Self, the phenomenological basis of intentional experience, that, from Husserl on<sup>5</sup>, is the beginning from which philosophical discourse begins by analysing, or philosophizing, the directed experience. It is as such, always an intentional act, an experience of an “I”, of one that experiences the world, though not as a psychological subject, a subjective point-of view, that would already be a step beyond into the realm of values and attitudes.

The phenomenological experience is intentional<sup>6</sup>, it is always directed, it has an

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4 A brief mention of this in „*The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights*” (Levinas, 1990/1997, p 153)

5 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1969/2012, p 67

6 The intentional act or psychological mode of a thought is the particular kind of mental event that is, whether this be perceiving, believing, evaluating, remembering, or something else. (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/huss-int/> 31.08.2016)

object, an object that is thematized in the directedness. In Levinas' writing, he takes on the principles of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology, but argues against the understanding that the starting position of discourse, and of human experience, is ontology, it is not the objects and entities that are fundamental to experience. For him, the first philosophy is ethics, which is beyond ontology.

The philosophical framework that led to the crisis in humanity, to the Holocaust, is based, according to Levinas, on the notion that to understand the world one must start with ontology. By asking the question "what there is", or any formation of the question. It is a question about entities, what exists in the world, or beyond it. A question that may be materialistic, such as "what objects exist in the world?", or idealistic, such as "what forms or ideas exist?" To have a coherent philosophical discourse, there has to be a fundamental list of existing entities or objects. Now, this would not necessarily be a conscious list, or even one that philosophers have actively thought about, but through the long tradition of philosophy, with its primacy on ontology, philosophers have inherited this understanding of what exists and what does not. And, of course, these understandings don't match up between philosophies (i.e. materialism vs idealism).

One of Levinas' contributions to modern philosophy was questioning this primacy of ontology, and, not merely on philosophical grounds, but as a clear danger in the world at large. The argument being, that to take ontology as primary has the effect of categorizing entities, including people. It is the totalizing of all into the Same.

The Same is close to the "I", to the "self". It encompasses everything within my

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7 *"To be I is, over and beyond any individuation that can be derived from a system of references, to have identity as one's content. The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it."*  
(Levinas, 1969/2012, p 36)

reach, everything that is in my world, that I can comprehend, that I can manipulate, that I can use. It is my safe world where everything is for me. *“I am at home with myself in the world because it offers itself to or resists possession. (What is absolutely other does not only resist possession, but contests it, and accordingly can consecrate it).”* (Levinas, 1969/2012, p 38) The Totalizing that Levinas speaks of is the categorizing of the world, of the entities, making them the Same, for me. It is the designation of the table as a table for me. A chair as a chair for me. It is everything that “I” encounter, it is the intentionality of experience that totalizes the world into the same.

But, there is a crucial difficulty in this totalizing, and a danger. It comes from the encounter with the Other, one that does not lend itself to totalization, one that destroys the safety and comfort of the Same for the “I”. *“To welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom.”* (Levinas, 1969/2012, p 85) The Other is radically different from the “I”, it does not belong to my world, indeed the Other challenges me in my world, the Other forces me to see the infinity beyond totality, to see that I cannot control everything. *“The first consciousness of my immortality is not my subordination to facts, but to the Other, to the Infinity. The idea of totality and the idea of infinity differ precisely in that the first is purely theoretical, while the second is moral.”* Levinas, 1968/2012, p 83) There is infinity that is beyond me and the Other, the radical non-“I” makes me experience it.

Now, the danger of the primacy of ontology is that in practice, even with the Other that does not conform to the same of my “self”, the violence of ontology forces upon the Other categories, it tries to make ontological sense of something that is beyond understanding, or before, ontology. This is in the categorization of an Other

through the attributes, through a gender, a skin colour, hair, clothes, and all other ontological categories that the “I” forces on the Other to make sense of the Other. The Other has become a conglomerate of attributes, objectifications that hide the true radical otherness of the Other. The danger that this brings with it is the trivialization of the Other. We no longer see the Other as the Other, but make it part of the world of the “I”, a world where the “I” is tyrant, where the “I” can enforce its will through violence on its world, now, including the Other. We see now others as mere objects, as attributes that can be destroyed. Even ethics that came from the history of the Western philosophical tradition, Levinas here refers most prominently to Kantian deontology, can easily be abused to justify atrocities, as was the case with Nazis during the Holocaust<sup>8</sup>.

Against this is the notion of ethics as first philosophy. As the pre-ontological encounter of the Other by the “I”. And encounter where the whole Other is bare before me as an Other, before the ontologization and assignment of attributes, before the covering up of the Other. It is this encounter, this face to face encounter where “I” encounter the Other which is an ethical encounter where I am forced to recognize the infinity in the face of the Other, where I have no control or command over the Other, where I cannot do violence to the Other. Indeed the very fundamental command of this face to face encounter, the basis of ethics as first philosophy is the command that the Other gives me, “Thou shall not kill”. As Levinas describes in an interview with Philippe Nemo:

*„But the relation to the face is straight away ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: „thou shalt not kill.” Murder, it is true, is a banal fact: one can kill the Other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity. The prohibition against*

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<sup>8</sup> The famous trial of Adolf Eichmann, where he defended his actions on Kantian grounds, was famously discussed in the articles and later a book by Hanna Arendt „Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil” in 1963



*killing does not render murder impossible, even if the authority of the prohibition is maintained in the bad conscience about the accomplished evil - malignancy of evil.” (Levinas, 1985, Chapter 7)*

A responsibility to the Other, unilateral and radical, I am radically responsible for the Other.

And yet, there is violence in the world, there is death and killing, there is hard to see the ethical encounter with the Other that Levinas speaks of, and of the command not to kill. Here, again, is the danger of the primacy of ontology, which hides away the Other in its otherness, and forces on it ontological categories that muddle and forget the commandment against killing.

#### **4. „The Promise” and Ethics**

Although killing has not been present in the story of Igor thus far, we have already seen him and his father Roger as people who think nothing of exploitation and theft. As we look closer, this comes not merely from their their self-interested desires and lack of fellow feeling towards others. It underlines their being, we glimpse it through their words, through their expressions, and through all their small actions, how they respond to others.

We are even introduced to this in the imagery that the Dardenne brothers use within the hand held cinematography of Alain Marcoen. The method of smuggling in the illegals is by hiding them within cars on a trailer, with the scene beginning on a bleakly grey highway amongst the industrial buildings, shown in washed out colors against a washed out sky. The illegals are here the real cargo. They are the things loaded onto a trailer to be shipped across long distances as products, objects

their handlers will gain profit from. Keeping them barely content in an old house is the minimum Roger is willing to do for them. Indeed, as we soon see he has no qualms about selling out several of them to the authorities just to keep his business going. What are a few illegals and their fate to him. Most of them do not even have names, Igor and Roger keep on calling them by their country of origin, as “Romanian” or “Koreans”. They are categorized by the most general attributes, the skin level differences that are most easily distinguished. They aren't even given the consideration that they might be anything more. They are taken in and made part of the world of Igor, as objects in his world. Their Otherness is hidden beneath their attributes. And, among them Assita seems to have the most attributes, especially those different from all the other characters there. A black woman, a mother coming from Burkina Faso, she is singled out in the story and the imagery from the beginning, shining out above from everyone else. She looks different, she acts differently, she is an other. Her first act when they all get off the car trailer, a bit of freedom from a long ride, everyone else is concerned with getting into the van, to take another trip, to continue onwards. But she sees a birds nest, she sees more around her, and she takes it. She is a woman, a mother, who is building a new home. Not merely a dwelling to survive in, but a Home. As Levinas writes, *„The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but being its condition, and in this sense its commencement.”* (Levinas, 1969/2012, p 152) She is, herself, making her own world, as a dwelling is ones domain, where all is totalized, where all is under ones reign. *“The access to the world is produced in a movement that starts from the utopia of the dwelling and traverses a space to effect a primordial grasp, to seize and to take away.”* (Levinas, 1969/2012, p 158)

She will continue do build her home throughout the film, collecting thins from the

world she finds herself and bringing peace and openness to those around her. She makes a crib for her baby out of an old suitcase, she buys livestock, a chicken and a goat and builds a pen for them out of leftovers, she even manages to make a garage into a welcoming dwelling for Igor once they are on the run. She is indeed the opposite of Roger and Igor even in this, as she, with almost nothing to her name, builds and makes a home for herself, while they, with power and money, are unable to build their own home, the goal of Roger, who collects money to finish their own house, using illegal labour to do so. They are building a dwelling for themselves. She is building a home.

The first moment that we discover more about Igor is when Assita, for the first time in her new dwelling, immediately sets out to make it her home. She walks freely and deliberately in her room, wearing a silky sleeping gown. We see this through the eyes of Igor, watching her through a hole in the wall, a voyeuristic act looking into the life of a character who is seen as a Woman showing her femininity, not through overt sexualization<sup>9</sup>, but through her acts of construction.

She is here twice removed, twice an object, which in turn emphasizes more her Otherness and how it is grasped. She is here a character who we, the audience sees, being seen by another character. We watch her being watched and this voyeurism brings to the forefront how she is seen by Igor, and by extension us the audience. Her as Other in the Levinasian sense is here emphasised, almost caricatured, by her situation as the mysterious and incomprehensible other for Igor. She is everything that he and his world are not, at least in terms of attributes, almost a polar opposite in terms of qualities one would attribute to them, and this is what

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<sup>9</sup> Although, for the teenage character of Igor, a virgin as we later find out, even seeing a woman in a night gown is a sexualized encounter, but this is strongly emphasized in the film nor does it drive the narrative.

draws Igor to her. While the others he interacts with are all portrayed similarly, becoming a group, not individuals but objects in the background to interact with, Assita in her extreme otherness draws Igor and us to her by being so radically different, yet, on our Levinasian reading, she is still being totalized, she is being put into simple categories that Igor can comprehend and interact with. His ethical journey of getting beyond the attributes and accepting the Other as Other is beginning.

The strange paradoxical situation thus being that the film is introducing Assita as different because of her appearance, in a way a complete other, yet it seeks to overcome those differences not to find commonalities, which would be a sociological approach to the film, but, within Levinas' thought, to find a radical Other, which is even beyond the differentiating attributes of Assita. The search is to get beyond the appearances, to get to a more fundamental encounter with her, but this encounter we find is not a joining of minds or a deeper understanding or even acceptance of the other. It is a recognition, or rather, a re-discovery, of the radical Other which is beyond the control of the "I".

Indeed, while through the film Igor comes to know Assita better and they share dangers, there seems to be no moments of coming closer between the two, of understanding each other or recognizing that they are similar in some ways. Assita's actions constantly confuse and alienate him, he never truly understands why she is doing the things that she does. Her rituals and her beliefs always remain mysterious and outside his understanding, even though he might try to understand, or at least believe in the through Assita, she never offers up her world to Igor, she never opens herself up for understanding. She remains herself, the other to Igor, throughout

their journey, through their laughs and tears.

And Igor remains closed till the very last shot of the film. He is even more inscrutable than Assita is, trying to maintain a posture of distance throughout. Even in his emotional outbursts, in what few places he allows them when pushed to the very edge, such as when asked point blank about Amidou's fate, he never acknowledges that he was dead, the central question for Assita. Through helping her, trying to take care of her as his promise to Amidou, and even with his personal attachment to her, he himself remains distant, a mystery to Assita as well. All throughout the film, Igor shows little emotion or interest to anything else<sup>10</sup>, only when he interacts with her does he break his outer layer of show and we see a fading glimpse into him.

It is even with Roger that we see Igor's distance. While Roger is his father, he is rarely called a father in the film. Igor's references are always to *Roger*, not to a father. While Roger is making efforts to make Igor an extension of himself, not through tyranny or abuse but in a more nuanced yet controlling way. He gives Igor the same ring as he has, he encourages Igor to drive the van, take responsibility for collecting money and handling the paperwork of the illegals, and admonishing Igor when he is not honest. There are underlying tensions of exploitation, but it never boils down to it between Roger and Igor. Roger clearly sees Igor has a part of himself, as a continuation of himself, his legacy.

*“For by existing an existence which still subsists in the father the I echoes the transcendence of the paternal I who is his child: the son is, without being „on his own account”; he shifts the charges of his being on the other and thus plays his being. Such a mode of existence is produced as childhood, with its essential reference to the protective existence of the parents.” (Levinas,*

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10 With the exception of building and riding his go kart. His own world building which is constantly interrupted by Roger. Even his friends seem an after thought, just a means to help him build it. And, at the end, there is no hesitation about giving the kart to his friends.

His efforts to keep his son in line are perhaps not what one would call fatherly by any traditional sense, but they have a consistent world view and directness to them. Taking part of dangerous and illicit actions do not disturb Roger, rather they are encouraged, it's what one does to be a man, to take risks and use everything, the system and the people in it, for one's own ends, a world view never explicated in words but in deeds. Roger is a man who takes immediate action, morals be damned. And he instils this on Igor as well, except we see that Igor is not yet Roger. He has met Assita who has set him on another path.

There is a poignant scene where we see Igor's fascination, his attempt at understanding, at trying to become someone like Assita. While Roger tells him to copy the passport they took from the illegals, which Igor does even though this takes him away from working on his go kart, he is left alone to finish his work. When he gets to the passport of Assita, she is on the picture beaming a brilliant smile. Igor is noticeably amused by this, he tries to imitate her, to smile just as brightly but his own noticeably decayed teeth don't allow for such expressions. Undaunted, he takes a liquid paper corrector and whitens his own smile with it, flashing it to his amusement in front of the mirror.

He is trying to take on an attribute of her, to compensate what he himself lacks, in this case beautiful white teeth. Igor wants to appropriate her attributes for himself, things that he finds most intriguing about her. It is not an attempt to understand her any better or to reach a deeper truth about her being. It's not even pragmatically connected with her, it doesn't affect her in the least.

There is here an interesting philosophical failure for Igor, or rather, it sets up a

failure for him. His attempt is to encompass Assita, to make her familiar to him by taking on, in a mocking way perhaps, an attribute of her in order to bring her more into Igor's world, into his domain. And Igor has fun while doing this. It is that rare moment when we see him smiling and enjoying himself, at what first appears to be mockery, but it is more in the thrill of conquest, a thrill of domination<sup>11</sup>. He is now free to go back to the immigrants and give back their passports. Assita is now assumed into the Totality that is Igor's domain. She poses no longer a threat to his will.

Except, her strangeness is not so easily overcome. When he goes to her room to give back her passport, he finds her performing a ritual to cleanse the room of evil spirits and to protect her baby. For Igor, what he thought was under his control is revealed to be defiant of him. His triumph was short lived. The intrigue of Assita carries on. She is not under his domination. He does not understand her. His feeble attempt to assert that there are no evil spirits here is rather pathetic, perhaps even he himself doesn't believe what he says about them, he is so struck by this ritual. His first failure, he has not managed to handle the otherness of Assita and it leaves him noticeably perturbed.

There are several scenes that include Assita performing or being part of a ritual in crucial sections of the narrative. The first is the already talked about cleansing ritual that brings forth Assita's strangeness, her otherness to Igor. The second instance is later, after Amidou has died and been buried at the construction site. Igor finds the radio that Amidou was listening to when he fell and, against the direct orders of his father that he should not see her again, Igor takes the radio to Assita.

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11 Which indeed wouldn't be too far from mockery itself.

When confronted with the question about Amidou, Igor manages to barely lie about what he knows and why Assita's husband has disappeared, responses that she does not believe. She sees through his lies, but in order to be sure she does again something that throws Igor off. She captures the chicken she had been saving for the end of Ramadan and kills it in front of him. Swiftly and cleanly, she guts the bird and looks through its entrails, another of her rituals in order to find the truth about her husband.

Startlingly for Igor she proclaims that her husband is not far. Through some dark arts which are completely beyond the comprehension of Igor and which he indeed believes to be not real, Assita has found a truth of the matter, at least a piece of it, for Amidou's body is indeed nearby, buried beneath the steps outside the house. Was this a lucky guess, part of her wishful thinking, or does she have access to powers that Igor does not understand, and perhaps can't understand? She is here in front of Igor as the dark and mysterious, beyond his power, she is Other in her Otherness, personified in the narrative as one who can't be conquered, who can't be fully comprehended. She seems to have access to powers that are primordial, with which she can see things hidden from her, powers through which she demands truth that has been denied her.

Towards the end of the film, we find that she is not the only one that has these powers, and this leads to the last instance of a ritual which disturbs Igor, and which again forces home the Otherness of Assita, even after a sequence where they seem to be getting closer and start to understand each other.

When Assita's baby falls gravely ill, desperate to save him she runs away to the hospital. She accuses Igor, and all white people, of bringing this disease and



causing nothing but pain and misery to them. In her brief moment of grief and despair she has fallen into broad categorizations and hate, there are no longer individuals but groups of people, one of which is out to destroy her. This despair doesn't last long though. She soon collapses by the side of the road, exhausted and in tears as a concerned Igor running to help her.

After a hospital visit and a chance meeting with another black immigrant woman who is the first to show kindness in the entire film, aside from Igor, they go to a which doctor<sup>12</sup>. Igor watches on as he performs his ritual chants and rites. The diagnosis, an ancestors soul is not in peace, and they are making the baby ill. When the question comes to about Amidou the answer is ambiguous. He is not with the ancestors, but this does not mean if he is alive or dead. Here, Igor has the strongest reaction to all the rituals he has witnessed. He can't stand to look and hear it any longer. They have always been too close to the truth, unbelievably so for Igor. Yet, there is little humanizing about them. They only drive a distinction between him and Assita, through their strangeness, reminding him of her otherness.

When he asks her if she believes what she has been told by the which doctor, it is unclear if he asks truly about the powers, if they are real, or as a worry that she will discover the truth, that the replies have been too close to home for Igor. Indeed, it could be both.

In a curious scene just after, to impress upon us that Assita is a complete stranger as she is, but also as a black woman from Africa in Europe, to remind us of the only shallow otherness of appearance, we see Igor hatching a plan to use the cleaning lady's passport to get Assita out of Belgium. For Igor, they both look so similar

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12 Curiously, the outcome of the hospital visit is left open. We are not told if the hospital helped Assita's child or not, but it appears that there is no longer a medical emergency. There still might be illness, but it is hinted though the visit to the which doctor, it is no longer a medical problem.

that just by changing the headscarf, they look identical enough to get through border controls. He even tests this out on a passer-by, who he asks to identify the person on the cleaning lady's passport, with the result being that Assita is identified there. It's a small scene filmed with laughter as all three involved take it as a joke that the two African women look so alike to Belgians that they can without trouble change their ID's. The approach is curious, as the subject matter is quite serious, both culturally and ethically. The plan to trick border controls with such a naive approach that relies on a cultural blindness of officials as well as the light-hearted approach of the two women in such a scheme and even the easy acceptance that to people around them they look the same is a somewhat hard contrast to the seriousness of the rest of the film where ethical, racial and cultural issues have been dealt with more nuance and thoughtfulness. It is indeed hard to accept that such a plan would be realistic, an important oversight in a film that strives for it. Nevertheless it reminds us of the appearance of sameness of the others. It is the totalization of Assita and the cleaning lady into a category to such an extent that not even their identity is secured. They are not even individuals, they are seen as one, as the same. An easy totalization of an entire group of people. Their strangeness, their otherness is forced into a sameness of a dark coloured skin, into an African decent, into womanhood. Perhaps a naive way of presenting it, but perhaps the horror of the ease of such totalization underpins the horror of it. It is so easy to laugh at it and make it into a joke, especially by the hero Igor and the by Assita herself. The tragedy is made all the more strong by the laughter that covers it.

These failures of Igor to truly recognize the Other in Assita, shown in the ritual of the Witch Doctor as well as, in Igor's eyes, the similarity of her appearance to the

cleaning lady lead the film into its conclusion. After overcoming his father, the ogre Roger by tying him up by the leg at the garage Igor and Assita were hiding at, and selling the ring his father gave him for her trip, they head off to the train station. She will leave to Italy to be with her uncle and be safe. Igor is at the edge of fulfilling his promise to Amidou. He has protected her and her child from his father and illness. In a few minutes, he will have succeeded. Yet, it is not what he must do. He gave a promise to Amidou, it was a connection between them in which Assita and her baby were the objects, passive entities. But during the story, a new connection was formed, between Igor and Assita, and, one could say, a new promise made. Not an explicit one as with Amidou, but an ethical promise, a disproportionate promise of Igor to be responsible for Assita, through a living experience, not mediated by anyone else and eventually not even by a drive for totalization.

In the very final shot of the film, as Assita is climbing the stairs to the train platform that will lead her to safety, Igor finally speaks the truth. He finally fully acknowledges her through telling her the truth of what happened to Amidou. Yet, he speaks to her back, as she is leaving, not to her face. A seeming curiosity, given the Levinasian theme of the face to face meeting, but at this point, we must remember that the face does not literally mean only the face of a person. As Levinas writes: *„The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other, the manifestation, the manifestation of a face over and beyond form.”* (Levinas, 1969/2012, pp 65-66). The face to face interaction is between the Self and the Other without any outside attributes to distract the I. And, it is this encounter and this discourse that Igor finally, at least in theory, achieves here, even while

speaking behind Assita, he encounters her as an Other, without grasping her. He speaks the truth, making himself open in front of her, making himself naked, baring all he is to her. This is the real encounter with the Other. He has been hiding himself from her, afraid or embarrassed so as not to speak openly with her. He acknowledges his responsibility in front of her.

With his acknowledgement of her husband's death and his involvement, he is taking responsibility in front of her. Not merely for his role in Amidou's death, although that is a significant responsibility, but more importantly for our study, he is taking responsibility for her. Again not merely for her well being, but responsibility on an ethical level for her as an Other. The promise made to Amidou is superseded by the new promise of responsibility, complete responsibility without asking for anything in return for the Other. A radical responsibility, where the I is responsible for everything that happens to the Other, to give the bread from one's mouth to feed the Other.

With his telling the truth to Assita, Igor abandons the promise he made to Amidou because, as Assita has made clear before, she will seek justice and go to the police, no matter her illegal status or any consequence this will have on her. She will give herself up to the authorities who will in all likelihood deport her and her baby, while also remaining in the country where she will have made enemies of the smugglers. She doesn't accept mere safety, rather she values truth and justice, even while being an outsider in the society. Igor has, by telling the truth to her, and I would argue knowingly, not delivered her to safety and has not kept his immediate promise to Amidou. But, he has now made a new promise, an ethical promise to Assita herself in which her otherness are accepted. This is the ethical arc of Igor's

journey. It is his encounter with an Other who forces him to set aside his safe and objectified world.

The film is a narrative exploration, in many ways, of Levinas' views on ethics and, I would argue, a kind of philosophical thought experiment that has been put into a narrative. In philosophy a thought experiment is a test of a hypothesis, theory or claim by thinking through logically do its consequences and whether they are acceptable or not. What the Dardenne brothers have done is they have used the character of Igor to go through the encounters and possibilities of an ethical encounter and see if it makes sense or is acceptable in the end<sup>13</sup>.

To that end, the question arises, is the ethical arc of Igor, and especially his action at the end of the movie, that of telling the truth to Assita and it's philosophical consequence, acceptable? Does it satisfy our intuitions about the situation, or are there serious objections that can be levelled at this theory?

## **5. Arguments**

### *a. Kantian*

It would be good at this point to distinguish two types of counter points, first, the philosophical arguments against offering such a Levinasian reading of the text, and second, the film theoretical arguments.

As I have laid out the Levinasian approach in the reading of the narrative of “The Promise”, an argument can be raised as to whether this is a good approach, or is

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13 The film is of course not a very pure representation of a thought experiment, nor even purely of Levinas' thought. There are many philosophical and social ideas that are present and which can be argued for. But for the purpose of this study I have staid manly with Levinas' theory, which I have argued is one of the most prominent underlining theories of the film.

there a better one that would explain the events of the film more adequately. A strong philosophical contender for an alternative reading is a Kantian reading, more precisely to use the Kantian ethics, at the heart of which is the categorical imperative, the Golden Rule in a way.

According to the categorical imperative in its first formulation, one should: act only according to a maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become universal law (Kant, Immanuel, 1785/1993, p 30). This means that when one is in a situation as to what they should do, they should see if their act can be universalized and made into a categorical imperative that all people everywhere have to follow. If they cannot make it into such an imperative, the act should be deemed wrong and not be performed. Kant uses the example of theft, if I wish to steal something, is it possible for me to make it into the Imperative. If I wish to steal, and it is permitted for me to steal, then, if someone, anyone else wishes to steal, it is permitted for them. The conclusion to this is that such an imperative will not work. Society wouldn't be able to work where everyone is allowed to steal.

From the film, we could bring the example from the very first shot, where Igor steals the wallet of the old lady. Can such an act be made universal? The argument would go, Igor wants to steal the wallet. If it is permissible for him to steal the wallet, it should be permissible for everyone everywhere to steal a wallet. This conclusion can't be universalized, as it won't be sustainable if everyone goes around and steals everyone's wallets. These are, quite probably, uncontroversial statements. We could say such things even without knowing of Kant's philosophy, but they are here presented in a philosophically rigorous form. But, there is an addition to this, one which I believe to be quite important, especially to our reading

of the Dardenne brothers film. Namely in regards to the second formulation of Kant's ethics, that one should: act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end (Kant, Immanuel, 1785/1993, p 36) By *ends* here is meant that we should treat others as individuals with their own goals and desires which we have to respect. Others are not *mere means* for our own advancement. I cannot use someone just for my own goals, disregarding their individuality and goals. Now, we will always use others as means for our own end, it is part of human social life, but we cannot use them as *mere ends*. Their individuality and autonomy come before our own desires for them.

This, I believe, is important for our reading of the story, because we can use this Kantian reading of the story as well. If we take the premise that Igor sees everyone as a means to his end and does not acknowledge them as having ends in themselves, alongside the acceptance of the categorical imperative at the end in terms of lying, then Igor is following the dramatic arc of accepting Kantian ethics. While he lies and steals constantly from the very beginning, his final act in the film is of telling the truth. Further, throughout the story he uses everyone to his own end. Each person he meets he disregards their interests and goals, and tries to get the maximum out of them. Even through most of the narrative, when he has given a promise to Amidou and is trying to fulfil it, he is not treating Assita according to her own will or according to what she wants, which is to find out what happened to her husband. Igor is using her for his own ends, as conflicted as he might be. His drive to get Assita to safety is his drive to fulfil his promise. To be free of it. To have Assita be safe, no matter her own wants. Only at the end, when he speaks the truth, does he put Assita's individuality and wants above his. He finally, at the very last

shot, treats her not as a means to his ends, but as someone who has ends in themselves.

This is a strong reading of the film, and it seems to be a much simpler reading. So why wouldn't we accept this reading over a Levinasian reading? Setting aside for the moment the authors intent, is the Levinasian reading in any way a stronger reading than the Kantian reading?

I believe that while the Kantian argument does fit well within the moral quandary of Igor, it fails to deliver an ongoing and challenging guide throughout the story as I have argued for the Levinasian approach. The Kantian model would only be applicable to the larger question and outcome, but it does not help us in the scene by scene encounters and issues that are tackled there. In this I believe that the Levinasian reading is more fulfilling and more informative because it's wider use throughout the narrative and by being used to flesh out the situations and characters more deeply. Something that the Kantian approach does not enable us to do.

#### *b. Levinas and aesthetics*

When talking about Levinas in the realm of film, or indeed any form of art, it's important to at least acknowledge, if not confront, his approach to aesthetics and what it might imply. The issue here is his difficult and somewhat dismissive attitude to the arts in general, *"There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague."* (Levinas, 1989, p 142) Though he didn't spend a lot of time on aesthetic questions, what little there is is somewhat disparaging of



most art forms. Poetry and music, at least certain more abstract and rhythmical forms of these, were the only ones talked about positively.

For Levinas, the crucial question was that of Ethics, of the encounter with the Other. Aesthetics wasn't a primary focus for him, but he does try to approach it in some of his writings. We find here a somewhat similar approach to that of Plato, who was also disparaging of art, as seen in his Republic, where he accuses the poet of appealing to the passions, to the base nature of humans, which should be overcome by the rational faculties.

In Plato, art is described as an imitation of the world that we experience. But, as described in the parable of the Cave, the world that we experience is itself an imitation of Ideas. Thus, in the hierarchy of Platonic worlds, where the world of the Ideas is the highest to which we humans should aspire to, the world of artistic representation is three times removed. It is a flawed imitation of a flawed imitation.

Even in the realm of politics, or rather, in the ideal Polis that Plato describes in his writings, there is no room for artists, or poets as the example there is, for they corrupt the youth and steer them away from the true path of the philosopher, who seeks the world of the Ideas and is not satisfied with a representation, let alone a representation of a representation.

Now, Levinas is not a Platonist, but he has, I believe, the same approach on artistic representation as when he writes that “*the most elementary procedure of art consists in substituting for the object its image*” (Levinas, 1989, p 132) In his ethics, he strives towards the Other, it is the very basis of human interaction and the foundation of our being. But, the experience of the Other is an immediate and a

close encounter. I experience to Other here and now, when the Other is near me in reality. Where I can have the living face to face encounter with the Other. Only such an encounter is for Levinas important.

And, as such, the representation of someone in art is not live. The person depicted, either in a painting, or a novel or a film is static. They do not change. They do not move, except in pre-determined ways, if we are watching a film. But they have no agency. “*A represented object, by the simple fact of becoming an image, is converted into a non-object*” (Levinas, 1989, p 134) They cannot change their situation or take action. They are dead. They are not the Other that Levinas seeks. Thus, the project of depicting a Levinasian Other in film, or any other form of art, is doomed as it is impossible by its nature to be in any way mediated or represented truly. How, then, can we talk of Levinas' ethics in “The Promise”?

The deeper questions about Levinas' aesthetics are beyond the scope of these writings and while they pose serious questions for using Levinas' writings in the real of aesthetics and film theory, I would argue that there is an answer here to the reading of the Dardenne brothers films that I have described. This does not challenge his aesthetics<sup>14</sup>, it indeed ignores this question all together.

My argument here is, that while Levinas talks about the impossibility of experiencing the Other through mediation, thus making art and films not in any way related to ethics, he is talking about the I as the viewer, or the I who experiences the piece of art and not encountering the Other. He has put art as a mediation between the I and the representation of the Other. Art itself here is taken as a (false) connection between me and something that appears to be the Other,

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14 This perhaps should be challenged, but not within the scope of these writings.

while not being the Other<sup>15</sup>. The concern here is that art does not fulfil the ethical requirement of bringing forth the encounter with the Other.

But here, I would argue, the Dardenne brothers films, starting with “The Promise” and Igor's journey, do not have the goal of bringing forth the encounter with the Other. They represent people in their specific circumstances, but they do not strive for the ethical experience in themselves. Rather, they are best viewed as stories for learning, or perhaps more technically, thought experiments in the guise of a narrative film. They show how someone goes through the journey to encounter the Other, but they themselves do not purport to bring this encounter to the I as a viewer. When Igor at the end of the film accepts Assita and tells her the truth, the viewer does not encounter her now also as the Other. There might be emotional and artistic reactions to this event, the viewer might feel happy or sad or a tinge of understanding of frustration, but they themselves have not encountered the Other through it. What they have encountered is the journey of Igor, a representation of a person, who does go through this. On the philosophical side of things, this is an intellectual structure, where we follow our subject and see how one would react in such circumstances. There is little to no psychology needed on this level. Igor just reacts and then acts to the situations. It is a descriptive experience. It is meant to show the viewer how such interactions between people would play out and, hopefully, to show the need for such an approach to Ethics. This is not to say that the film is moralizing. As showing how things or interactions ought to be. It is not normative. It shows one approach and asks us to evaluate it. Does it seem right, does such a stream of events and Igor's interactions and reactions seem acceptable.

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15 This is why the more abstract and rhythmic arts are viewed by him more favourably, as they have no pretence of representing the Other.

At it's best, if the story succeeds, it shows a possible approach the questions and problems we face in our lives.

This argument places the I of the viewer into a different position in regards to the film. The film is not a representation of the Other, which in Levinas is very problematic. Rather, the film is a depiction or a test, whether the Levinasian approach that the characters within the film represent is viable.

As Benoît Dillet and Tara Puri writes: „*All their films avoid a psychological development of the story; they portray from the inside, the gestures, the things, the environments embodying and inhabiting the characters.*” ( Diller, B and Puri, T, 2013, p 370)

. The characters are instruments of reactions and actions. This would make sense in the reading of the film we have so far been looking at. The characters are more agents for the philosophical story told. This is of course not to say they aren't fully developed characters, or that they have no psychological elements to them. But it does show that their position and role in the narrative is more philosophical and, as I have argued, ethical.

### *c. As a film*

As we have approached the film as a type of thought experiment, a narrative and a very complex one, we should ask the question, does it hold up. Does the story we experience in the film deliver on the ethical quandaries we have been discussing, and are they in line with our intuitions? Are we as the audience inclined to accept, or at the very least be willing to entertain the idea of the correctness of such an ethical system?

Here we should also take into account the film language of the Dardenne brothers. While trafficking in serious philosophical questions, we shouldn't forget that it is still a film, with its own vocabulary and artistic approach, one that could enhance, or detract from the larger intellectual themes. It is not a philosophical paper written in academia.

The use of a documentary style cinematography, influenced by their upbringing in documentary film making, does away with trappings of high budget production and its prevalent aesthetic code. There is a distinct lack of establishing shots, while uniquely, they manage to convey a strong sense of location and its atmosphere. But rather than serve up the locations in beauty shots, the Dardenne brothers make the location part of the actions of the character. It is a lived-in world, a place where people live, work and survive. It is taken as by the characters as mundane, what they experience every day, and this feeling is brought across to the viewer as well. The building where Igor and the immigrants work is part of their world. They don't see it in any special way or bring it forth for any reason, and as such, the viewer accepts the everydayness of the location. The dwelling is in the background. We experience it in the background through the characters we experience in focus. We relate to the setting through the actions that the characters take within the setting.

Similarly, in breaking with the traditional way of shooting and editing, we often follow the chaotic movements of the characters with a constantly moving camera. There is no use of common cinematography language. Characters talk and perform actions off screen, they dart in and out of shots, almost being captured by accident by the camera.

The display, often, of just parts of the body, of not showing the action performed,

yet having a distinct presence on screen, and of the off screen voice, sometimes almost as disembodied challenges the viewer to look beyond the expected close up of the face or the full body shots. It forces one to think of characters as more than a face, or as a whole body. It introduces the Face-to-Face relationship, and at the same time reminds us that a face is just an attribute, important to our social and emotional interaction, but there is so much more to a person, and it is a trap to get caught up in the analysis of a face, or to claim that one can say everything just through looking at someone's face. For Levinas, the Face is not a face, but as something that speaks to me, as a discourse. It describes through which the I encounters the Other, where the Other presents itself through the Face.

Similarly it can be argued that this informs the acting as well. Jérémie Renier portrays Igor throughout the film as reserved when it comes to emotions. He rarely shows through emotions or dwells too long on them. He does not invite the audience to wonder about his feelings. We are not invited into his world through his face in a close up. We do not feel what he feels or wonder what he thinks when we see him on frame. We experience these things through his actions. Through what choices he makes and how he reacts to the events thrown at him by the people around him.

Yet, he is not without our sympathy, he does not lose our interest nor do we see him as anything but a fully fledged character. We understand him and follow his journey, but, we understand him through his actions, not his expressions. This again distances us from looking at the face and its expressions as conveying character or his feelings.

This distance, unapproachable acting defines all characters in the film. All actors

portray their character through actions not through their expressions. Olivier Gourmet, the father ogre, is all about action. He goes through the film with the same expression, whether he is taking money or tattooing his son or letting Amidou die. He does not spend energy on facial expressions. We know him through his actions. He is fully realized through his movements, through his body as a whole. And the same can be said for Assita Ouedrago and Rasmané Ouédraoui as well. These acting and directing choices further enforce the notion that we encounter them, encounter the Other, not merely through a face.

There are some sequences that do not work, which seem to be cinematic tricks that don't service the story nor the larger intellectual streams in the film. One such example is in the scene where Amidou has just fallen off the cliff and has been hid by Roger and Igor. Before they can remove the body from underneath the rubble, suddenly Assita runs into the scene chasing her chicken, which she has bought for the end of Ramadan. The chicken lands on top of the pile underneath which lies Amidou's body. All this while Igor look on from the side, caught in the middle of disposing the body of her husband. It is an attempt to raise the tension of the sequence and serves as an ironic showcase as to how close Assita really was to her husband. This would be the first spot where Igor could tell Assita the truth as to what has happened to he husband, which sets off the story. But it fails at this. There is no reason for Igor to contemplate telling Assita the truth now, even though he has grave misgivings about his fathers actions, the tempo of the scene as well as the drive to distance themselves from the body do not allow for the space even to contemplate about telling her the truth. This is evident in the manner it was shot and edited. Full of action and movement, without the pause for contemplation. Igor is passive here, such that we have no way of knowing what he feels or thinks, but

there is not even a hint at his conflict. It fails as a first introduction into the conflict over whether to tell her the truth or not.

It is also a cheap cinematic trick to raise tension in a scene that does not need any more tension. There was already a threat that the rest of the workers will come back, who Roger has to send away for the day. The immediacy of Amidou's death through their inaction is very much present and the question of what to do with the body is in the urgency of their actions. Such a blatant attempt at putting Assita right next to her husband's dead body lacks the nuance that we find in the rest of the film. It adds irony where there it is not needed, and further, it drives it home with full force, which distracts from the urgent tragedy of the scene, that is already present.

Another example of such a scene is later on when Assita is waiting under a bridge for Igor to return with food. While she collects some wire near by, she is urinated on from the top of the bridge by two bikers, who then ride down and harass her on their bikes, riding over her bags and destroying idol. While showing more offensive behaviour by the locals, including the destruction of her possessions, this scene doesn't add anything to their journey. It is as a reminder that more people than just Roger are cruel in this world, but that hardly needs to be a reminder here. It is also shrugged off by the next scene, with only the broken idol as a reminder. But, other than that it seems to have no further reaching consequences.

These two scenes have one thing in common, namely that in both of them, Igor was very passive. In a film where the driving narrative, emotional and, for our purposes, philosophical force is in the actions of the character Igor, a scene where he is passive show themselves to be the weakest. It showcases a weakness of such



an approach. The characters must always be moving, they must take action, even if it's a small nuanced action, but they can't remain passive. They must swim ahead or risk drowning. Whenever passivity is felt, the energy of the narrative slumps and the audience loses the connection with the characters.

And this is exactly what happens at the very end of the film, when Igor tells Assita the truth. Whatever philosophical strength it might have, it is undercut by the passivity in which it comes about. After a flurry of activity before by locking up Roger at the garage, Igor and Assita go to the train station and to her safety, freedom from Roger. All in silence. As she walks up the stairs to the train platform, the camera remains on her back, Igor stops below her on the base of the stairs, out of frame. And he says the truth to her, to her back. Everything that happened, that he and his father did, or rather, failed to do. After a moment, Assita turns around and walks back the way they came, with Igor running after her and they both walk off into the tunnel.

The failure of this event, the final change in Igor, is that it comes from a very passive point. The character, and his portrayal, is strongest when he is active, when there is movement within the dramatic structure of the scene. The rhythm of the film, and one of the reasons it is so compelling, is the use of motion in the shots and the narrative. Even the calmer points of the story there is this activity, the characters are doing something, or reacting to something. They never let themselves be passive, and when they for some reason become passive, it produces the least compelling and effective scenes in the film, highlighting the danger of such an approach. And, this is what the end of "The Promise" suffers from.

Igor's conversion does not come from a point of activity. He might speak up and

say the words, but they are passive words. They aren't a natural progression of the scene, or, for that matter, of the scenes leading up to it. After a period of silence, Igor suddenly speaks. And while philosophically speaking, as I have argued before, the conversion makes sense, it does not make sense within the flow of the film, especially because of the way it was shot and presented to us. The scene sets up Igor's conversion in an almost psychological manner. He is walking alongside Assita deep in thought, even giving her a brief glance. He is perhaps internally struggling with his guilt and deep struggle to tell Assita the truth, even though he has been unable to do so thus far. It is here a very inner struggle for Igor, but, here is its weakness. The film language and characterizations have throughout been externalized. We understand them through their actions, not through their thoughts. No one has shown themselves to be very reflective in the course of the film, at least not nearly to this extent. And, to portray the very climax of the film, the emotional and philosophical point of the entire story, after a brief moment of internal struggle betrays the film language and style of storytelling that has gone throughout the rest of the movie.

Igor's telling the truth has become here an intellectual point. It's something we expect, and need to happen. Indeed it's what Igor needs to do in order to have a satisfying ending. But, its execution fails to deliver on the importance of the event. It feels here more like a box to be checked before the film can end, rather than a natural progression of the story and the underlining philosophy.

Perhaps its fault lies in its intellectuality, as forcing the point to end at a conclusion, rather than exploring a more viable route to it. But then, is it not the underlining philosophy that's at fault? Is it the problem of the storytelling or of the

Levinasian ethics that is being explored?

As I have argued, there are lapses in storytelling quality, especially when considered alongside the rest of the film. “The Promise” was the third of the Dardenne brothers feature films and, importantly, the first where they found their own style and storytelling method. But, it is not without its bumps and issues, as I have indicated. But, from this point onwards they developed and strengthened their skills and style, always evolving and exploring their craft, both in content and style. And I believe that as they have continued to work and make new films, they have become more able to express such situations and make them work both as dramatic moments as well as philosophical situations. Such as the ending of “The Child” (2005), where Bruno at the end confesses his crimes in order to save his young accomplice is a much more successful resolution, as well as the very ending, where Bruno, now in prison, breaks down in tears when faced with Sonia, the mother of his child that he sold. The same can be said for “The Son” (2002), when Olivier finally tells his young student Francis that he knows that Francis killed his son. After a fight between them in which Olivier has Francis by the throat, refuses to kill him, letting him go. This even continues in their latest film “Two days, one night” (2014) where Sandra refuses her job, something she has been fighting for the entire film in order to save the job of another in the plant, an immigrant. All these later examples are more refined and better handled endings both philosophically as well as cinematically.

The Dardenne brothers have stated that the goal of “The Promise” was to find the elusive face to face encounter<sup>16</sup> described in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas. And, as I have argued, the film makes use of many of Levinas' philosophical

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16 Mosely, Philip, 2013 p 77

concepts and ideas as well as his overall ethical and phenomenological themes. Largely, the use of these have been successful, especially when they have been integrated into the narrative and characters as aspects of ethical inquiry. That is to say, the use of these concepts has been to test them, to see if they fit within a realistic depiction within the film and the even question them, to have the audience question them. There is, I would argue, no moralizing in the story. At no point does to movie try do depict categorically what is right and wrong, who is good and who is evil, or how do act in any circumstance. We the audience might deep some acts to be morally good or bad, but within the film, these are stated not as imperatives but as questions. The characters act in the way that they act and we are left to decide do we agree with their acts or not, with either outcome being defensible, or at the least understandable.

And yet, at the end, the encounter with the Other through the face was not achieved. In remained too allusive for this undertaking, something that they managed to correct in their subsequent films.

### **6. Why is this analysis important?**

I have sought to describe a Levinasian analysis of the film “The Promise” with the hopes that the Philosophical and Ethical concepts will become apparent in the film narrative, its characters as well as the film making itself. This is not the only philosophical, or artistic, or social reading possible of the work, indeed there are many different and viable approaches one could take in such a close reading of the

Dardenne brothers film<sup>17</sup>. But I have sought to describe and argue for why the Levinasian reading is important. But, there is still one question that should be addressed about such an approach, especially in the context of film making itself. Why is this kind of reading, Levinasian or other, important or useful when crafting a film? It is surely interesting do the people writing about it afterwards and arguing about it's intellectual merits, or demerits. An often argued point here is that such activity is detached from the actual work of art and the makers of the work of art that it has no relevance to the film itself, it is as if it's in its own world.

With the admissions from the Dardenne brothers that they have been influenced by the philosophy of Levinas, their description of the use of his philosophy as well as the clear philosophical underlining of their film, “The Promise” is a very interesting examination where the intellectual underpinnings of the work are front and center. And while there is still much left to the interpretation of the commentators, there is little question as to the validity of approaching the film with such an intellectual description.

Further, and more importantly, the film shows the benefits of using a developed philosophical system as an underlining structure for the world and characters, even, as I have argued, the central drama of the film. The effectiveness of the story told, the reason that it is so compelling is in no small amount due to the phenomenology of Levinas and the questions it rises. But, crucially, it is not merely the aspect of having a world view shaped by a philosophy, that is, depending on ones attitude to philosophy either ubiquitous or common. For “The Promise” it's the conscious use of the philosophy in the narrative itself that makes it so compelling. It is the use of the questions that it raises. It's the exploration of the

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17 Mai 2011; Dillet, Puri 2013; Crano 2009, Cooper 2007;

themes and concepts within a film framework that brings these themes and concepts to life through compelling characters, and a compelling world with a compelling narrative. It is not merely the world itself that is shaped by the philosophy, it's the story itself, which explores the questions raised in the writings of Levinas and seeks to find answers, whether these ideas and approaches are acceptable, whether the audience even accepts these questions.

It is crucial here to distinguish to ways of approaching the use of philosophy, especially ethics. The first approach is a dogmatic approach, namely that of moralizing. The second one is an ethics based approach, where questions are raised and answers sought.

In the moralizing approach, the philosophical underlining ideas are taken as true, as dogma, and then placed in the world of the story and reinforced by the narrative. Moralizing is by its nature dogmatic, it does not open itself up for refutation. It is taken as true, authoritatively and absolutely. Further, it seeks to bring about conformity by telling how one has to act in order to be moral. It sets out guidelines that one must follow, because if one does not do so, one would fall afoul of the moral teaching and would be immoral. Such an approach is rigid and does not allow itself to be challenged.

The second approach, the approach based on ethics, uses the philosophical concepts to raise questions, indeed questions about the basis of the concepts themselves. There are no set answers given, the purpose is to find the them. The audience might accepts one way as right and the other as wrong, they might find their ethical system within the story, but it's always up for question, always open to challenges. While the moralizing approach starts with answers that then lead to the

narrative, the ethics based approach starts with the ethical questions and seeks answers by the end.

A distinction of the ethical approach is the openness to refutation. While a moralizing approach does not allow for its core claims to be seriously challenged, the ethics based approach opens itself up to challenge and even the possibility that it is refuted by the end.

This is what I have argued happens at the end of “The Promise”. While strongly built up throughout the film, the ending fails to find the elusive encounter with the Other. It fails at its stated goal. And while the Dardenne brother will have more success in their further movies, here it serves as a fascinating philosophical failure by not being able to show what it sought to show. But, I believe this is one of the aspects that make the film fascinating, not just philosophically, but also as a film. It built up a strong case for its existence, it showed the viability of its underlining philosophy as well as the artistic style and approach to film making. Despite its flaws and philosophical shortcomings it is a success.

## **7. Conclusion**

In the thesis I have explored the use of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in the film “The Promise” by the Dardenne brothers. I have argued that this film is a good case study in their use of Levinas' ethics because it is one where it's most blatantly used and where the shortcoming of the approach, intellectual as well as artistic are clearly visible, things that they have addressed in their later films.

I have shown the use of Levinas' concepts and understandings of ethical

encounters between people, between the I and the Other that underlay is philosophy and the problems that the dominant approach in Western philosophy has inherent in it, namely the ontological approach that has led to many ethical failings in the world, primarily for Levinas, it has led to the horrors of the Holocaust.

I have argued that the entire narrative of the film and its exploration of an ethical redemption have used the Levinasian ethics as its guideline, more than a mere world view but as an intellectual exploration of its ideas. As such, the philosophical importance of the work is not merely in expressing a world view but in exploring it and, in a certain way, using the film as a thought experiment on whether the philosophy hold up to the scrutiny of the viewer, something which I have argued it does not, failing at the very end by rushing the face to face encounter and not living up to the rest of the film as satisfying ending.

At the end I argued that despite having several failures, the film can be considered a success in terms of its ethical approach which presents a possible interpretation to ethical encounters which the viewer has to judge and not a moralizing tale which tells what one must do. Thus, while failing in establishing as strongly what it seeks to do, it succeeds as a story and as an experiment in ethical thinking.



## **8. Filmography**

- Le Promesse (The Promise); Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne; 1996; Belgium; DVD
- L'Enfant (The Child); Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne; 2005; Belgium; DVD
- Le Fils (The Son); Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne; 2002; Belgium, France; DVD
- Deux Jours, Une Nuit (Two Days, One Night); Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne; 2014; Belgium, France, Italy; DVD

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