

The Promise and its Ethics: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in the Work of the Dardenne Brothers

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The subject that the writer has chosen is an original and challenging one but, potentially, restrictive i.e. examining a specific film, *The Promise*, principally in terms related to the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. However, the writer attempts to counteract any initial scepticism that the reader might have about such a single-minded study. He justifies his approach, though overstated, successfully, on the whole.

The writer has taken his cue from the statements that the Dardenne brothers have made about the influence the ethical philosophy has had on their films. This is set down in the introduction, with the writer constantly aware of traps such as too much intellectualizing or reductionism. He starts off with a chapter misnamed An [sic!] Levinasian analysis of *The Promise*. This is, in fact, merely a description of the narrative of the first 15 minutes of the film with no mention of Levinas. It is then followed by a necessary, though rather lengthy, introduction to the philosophy of Levinas. The plot and characters of the film are then given a convincing Levinasian analysis.

In contrast, the film is exposed to a Kantian analysis, which puts the Levinasian one in perspective. This leads to a somewhat simplistic definition of a moralizing narrative and an ethical one. There is then a criticism of the ending of *The Promise*, which is deemed a failure. Although a refreshing change from the usual eulogistic studies, it is overstressed and rather repetitious, almost invalidating the praise for the film that came before.

But these are minor criticisms of a thesis that is well researched and lucid. The main criticism is that, despite the sub-title of the thesis being: *The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in the Work of the Dardenne Brothers*, there is hardly any mention of the films that followed *The Promise*. The writer mentions how the brothers' oeuvre improved in the subsequent movies, and refers to three other titles in a few dismissive sentences. While it is clear that *The Promise* is the focus of the thesis, some discussion of how the other films relate to Levinas' philosophy, even in a few paragraphs, is essential to put *The Promise* in context.

Another complaint is that, though free from too many grammatical errors, the text is littered with careless spelling mistakes, which could have been easily corrected by submitting it to be proof read by an English native speaker.

Despite these qualifications, the thesis deserves at least a B+.

In Prague

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Ronald Bergan

