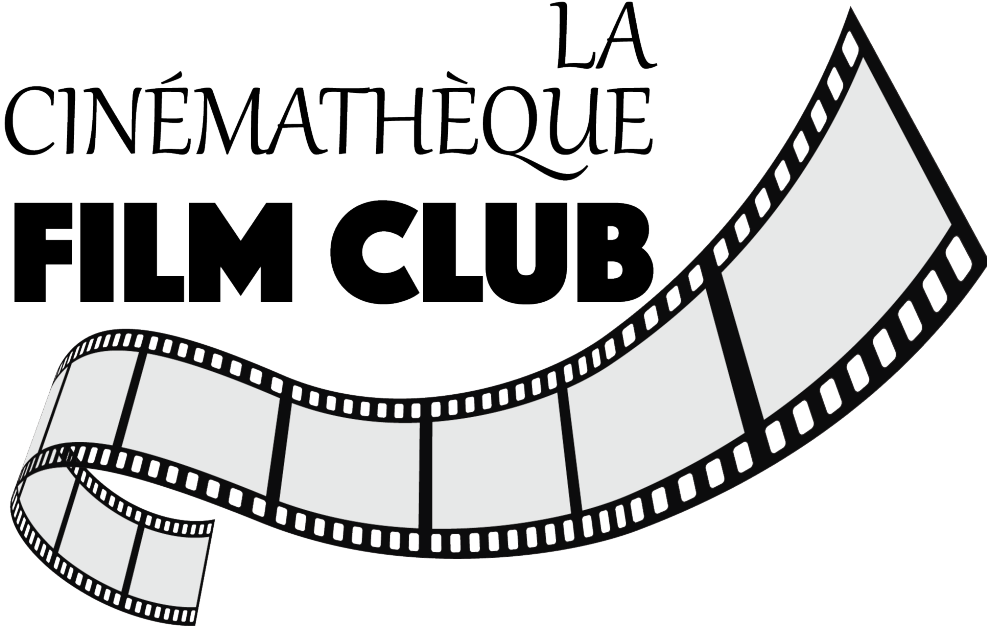


LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



Fall 2018

Jean-Pierre Dardenne b.1951
Luc Dardenne b.1954

La Promesse
1996

La Promesse (1996)

Stephanie Zacharek

Article sourced from TCM: <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/518236%7C0/TCM-Imports-for-December.html>

La promesse was the breakthrough film of the Belgian directing duo Luc Dardenne and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, but it was hardly the brothers' first picture: By the time **La promesse** was released, in 1996, the Dardennes had been making documentary films, and the occasional fiction feature, for nearly 20 years. Perhaps that's why **La promesse** feels so vital and spontaneous. As the critic Christine Smallwood has noted, "The Dardennes' method stresses immediacy. Their films open with someone standing on a staircase, or being fired from a factory assembly line, or dialing a phone. Revelations and critical confessions erupt as unexpected blurts. The final scenes break off ambiguously. By withholding information, the Dardennes replace judgment with implication."

The implications - deeply moral ones - are clear from the first frame of **La promesse**. Fifteen-year-old Igor (played by Jérémie Renier, a young actor who would go on to appear regularly in the Dardennes' films) lives with his tough, gruff, lumbering father, Roger (Olivier Gourmet, another Dardennes regular) in Seraing, an industrial town in eastern Belgium. Igor has an apprenticeship at a local garage, but he's rarely there -- mostly, he assists his father in running various scams. Chiefly, Roger uses illegal immigrants as cheap labor; he allows them to live in a building he owns, but deducts exorbitant amounts for rent, heat and fake papers.

Igor looks up to Roger and doesn't see anything wrong with the way the two of them rustle up a living. But one day an African worker named Amidou (Rasmane Ouedraogo) dies after falling from scaffolding. With his dying breath, he asks Igor to promise to look after his wife, Assita (Assita Ouedraogo) and the couple's infant son. Roger, having ignored Igor's pleas to get Amidou to a hospital, buries the body in cement. That leaves Igor, a kid who has been raised with virtually no moral underpinning, to make a choice between honoring his promise to a dying man and continuing on the crooked path his father has laid out for him.

La promesse played various festivals and earned a great deal of acclaim for the Dardennes, who until then had been virtually unknown outside of Belgium. In the years since, all of the brothers' films -- among them *Rosetta*(1999), *The Son* (2002), *The Child* (2005) and *The Kid with a Bike* (2011) - have been included in the Cannes Film Festival's main competition, and each film has won one of the festival's two major prizes. (*Rosetta* and *The Son* both won the Palme d'Or.)

All of the Dardennes' films focus on working-class life, often telling stories of disenfranchised individuals or immigrants, and most of them are set in Seraing, where the brothers were born and raised. The city is virtually a character in the films; as shot by the brothers' regular cinematographer Alain Marcoen, it's a slightly melancholy landscape, a patchwork of blocky concrete and nondescript but purposeful-looking roads, though it's not wholly unwelcoming. The Dardennes never let you forget that this is a place where people live and work, but also sometimes laugh and play - sometimes having a casual drink at the end of the day can make all the difference.

Though the Dardennes' work shows the influence of Italian neo-realist cinema, the brothers have honed a distinctive style that can't be traced to any single source. As Jean-Pierre Dardenne told interviewer Geoff Andrew in 2005, "We read Toni Morrison before **La promesse**. And one thing that impresses us about her writing...is how a reader is drawn into the story - you're never sure where you are, but little by little, clarity comes through."

The Dardennes' mode of storytelling is bracingly straightforward, dedicated to placing characters in a specific time and place, allowing the moral complications of these characters' lives to unfold gradually. But even if the Dardennes allow their stories to move slowly, their characters are never at rest: In a Dardenne Brothers' movie, people are always in motion, moving from point A to point B decisively, generally driven by inexplicable human restlessness. As the critic Kent Jones notes, "The drama of [**La promesse**] is played out in the beautiful Renier's face and slim body, his darting movements and slight hesitations, his small resistances to the always unspooling dictates of Roger, whose rolling energies are devoted to keeping all the particulars of his trafficking business (transport, payments, heating the rooms, hiding all the occupants when the inspectors arrive) as buttoned-down as his son's affection and obedience."

Igor is manipulated and controlled by his father; he seems to expect nothing more out of life. That's why his gradual moral awakening makes for such a moving and distinctive coming-of-age story. There's no sentimentality in **La promesse**; terrible things happen, and there are moments when you wonder if Igor will ever be able to escape the life that seems to have been laid out for him since the day of his birth. But if the Dardenne Brothers are fixated on realism, they have no use for fatalism. **La promesse** may end ambiguously, but it doesn't end unhappily. This movie offers its characters something harder and more complicated than abject misery; it offers them hope.

Producers: Hassen Daldoul, Luc Dardenne, Claude Waringo

Director: Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne

Screenplay: Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne

Cinematography: Alain Marcoen

Music: Jean-Marie Billy, Denis M'Punga > Film Editing: Marie-Hélène Dozo

Cast: Jérémie Renier (Igor), Olivier Gourmet (Roger), Assita Ouedraogo (Assita), Jean-Michel Balthazar, Frédéric Bodson (The garage boss), Katarzyna Chrzanowska, Florian Delain (Riri), Hachemi Haddad (Nabil), Alain Holtgenm (Le postier), Geneviève Joly-Provost (Geneviève), Sophie Leboutte, Rasmane Ouedraogo (Amidou), Norbert Rutili

C-92m.

Moral Rebellion at Heart of 'La Promesse'

Kenneth Turan • May 30, 1997

Article sourced from The Los Angeles Times: http://articles.latimes.com/1997-05-30/entertainment/ca-63754_1_la-promesse

Morality is a given in the movies; everyone, even the worst of creatures, knows if they're bad or good. In "La Promesse," an exceptional film from Belgium, all of that is reversed as a sense of right and wrong struggles to emerge in a young man who never knew there was a difference. The conflicts involved are intense and absorbing, proving that compelling moral dilemmas make for the most dramatic cinema.

An exciting discovery at both last year's Directors' Fortnight at Cannes and the New York Film Festival, "La Promesse" makes being politically relevant and philosophically thoughtful so simple and involving that the story seems to be telling itself. Written and directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, a pair of filmmaking brothers, it is made with such unobtrusive sureness that it's able to exert great power without forcing anything.

Though relatively new to features, the Dardenne brothers have 20 years of documentary work in Belgium behind them, and their use of hand-held cameras and probing close-ups gives "La Promesse" the urgency and immediacy of total authenticity. Toss in unknown but persuasive actors and characters whose reality is unmistakable and you get an idea why this film is as bracing as it is.

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"La Promesse" is set on the outskirts of the Belgian city of Liege and centers on a 15-year-old apprentice auto mechanic named Igor (Jeremie Renier). An opportunistic sneak thief and smooth liar, Igor is like a small animal with dirty blond hair, casually amoral because in his world the opposite has never been presented as an option.

Igor's universe is completely controlled by his father, Roger (Belgian stage actor Olivier Gourmet). A pudgy, bearded and petty despot, Roger has a lie or a threat or a beating for every occasion. Hot-tempered, violent, a master of casual betrayals, Roger puts together scams without end, but he also cares for his son and values their almost symbiotic relationship.

Roger's business is dealing in illegal immigrants--Turks, Ghanaians, Romanians and Koreans--who sneak into Belgium looking for a better life. Roger hides them in a clandestine rooming house, charging them exorbitant fees for false identity papers while collaborating with the police when a raid is needed to satisfy the local politicians.

In all of this, Igor, made in his father's image and hardened by sharing his lifestyle, is a willing second-in-command. Part man, part boy, he spends the spare moment when he's not conniving with the old man putting together a go-kart with his young friends.

Igor's life begins to change when Assita (Assita Ouedraogo) and her small child arrive from Burkina Faso to join husband and father Hamidou (Rasmane Ouedraogo) in Roger's boarding house. Assita's individuality intrigues Igor, and then a jolt of fate shoves their lives closer. Hamidou has an accident working illegally, Roger refuses to take him to the hospital, and he dies after making Igor agree to take care of his wife and child, the promise of the title.

It's difficult to do justice to how subtly the film develops from here, how unflinching it depends on documentary-style realism and expressive faces to make its points. Though the question of romance never arises,

Igor becomes increasingly protective of Assita, which puts him in conflict with his father, the only person who's ever cared about him. It's a predicament that is as difficult as it is compelling.

"La Promesse's" actors have differing levels of experience, with Jeremie Renier, an impressive natural, having the least and Assita Ouedraogo (whose first trip to Europe was to make this film) having appeared in three films of fellow countryman Idrissa Ouedraogo. But they all work so seamlessly here we feel we're eavesdropping on a moral rebellion that is being played out for the highest possible stakes.

Among the many things it does right, "La Promesse" refuses to even consider glib solutions. This film understands that moral choices are a painful, troublesome business, that decisions to do the right thing are not simple to take and hardly make things easier. Nothing in life takes more courage, and no kind of filmmaking offers greater rewards.

La Promesse

Article sourced from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Promesse

La Promesse (lit. "The Promise") is a 1996 drama film by the Belgian brothers Luc Dardenne and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. The plot involves a father, Roger, who traffics and exploits illegal immigrants coming into conflict with his teenage mechanic-aspiring son, Igor, after them covering up the accidental death of one of the immigrants results in Igor trying to help out the dead man's family.

Cast

- Jérémie Renier as Igor
- Olivier Gourmet as Roger
- Assita Ouedraogo as Assita

Critical response

La Promesse received mostly positive reviews from critics. Review aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes gives it a 95% approval rating, based on 21 reviews, with an average score of 7.8/10. At Metacritic, which assigns a normalized rating out of 100 to reviews from mainstream critics, the film received an average score of 82, based on 17 reviews, indicating "universal acclaim".

Awards and nominations

- **Belgian Film Critics Association** (Belgium)
 - **Won:** André Cavens Award for Best Film
 - Nominated: Grand Prix
- **César Awards** (France)
 - Nominated: Best Foreign Film
- **Los Angeles Film Critics** (USA)
 - Nominated: Best Foreign Film
- **National Society of Film Critics** (USA)
 - **Won:** Best Foreign Language Film
- **Online Film Critics Society Awards** (USA)
 - Nominated: Best Foreign Language Film
- **Satellite Awards** (USA)
 - Nominated: Best Motion Picture – Foreign Language
- **Valladolid Film Festival** (Spain)
 - **Won:** FIPRESCI Prize (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne)
 - **Won:** Golden Spike (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne)

Filmography as Directors

- **Ahmed** (pre-production)
- **The Unknown Girl** (2016)
- **Two Days, One Night** (2014)
- **The Kid with a Bike** (2011)
- **The Silence of Lorna** (2008)
- “Dans l’Obscurité” segment in **To Each His Own Cinema** (2007)
- **L’Enfant** (2005)
- **Rosetta** (1999)
- **La Promesse** (1996)
- **Je pense à vous** (1992)
- **Falsch** (1987)
- **Il court, il court, le monde** (1987) short
- **Regard Jonathan/Jean Louvet, son oeuvre** (1983) documentary
- **Leçons d’une université volante** (1982) documentary
- **R... ne répond plus** (1981) documentary
- **Pour que la guerre s’achève, les murs devaient s’écrouler** (1980) documentary
- **Lorsque le bateau de Léon M. descendit la Meuse pour la première fois** (1979) documentary short
- **Le chant du rossignol** (1978) documentary

The Dardenne Brothers: On Hard Work, Patience & Mentors

Ariston Anderson • Feb 7, 2011

Article sourced from 99U: <https://99u.adobe.com/articles/6987/the-dardenne-brothers-on-hard-work-patience-mentors>

Acclaimed Belgian filmmakers the Dardenne Brothers share lessons from 35+ years of putting ideas into action and "learning by doing."

Few things compare to the quiet, concentrated experience of watching a film by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. Amidst gritty landscapes, they track the day-to-day lives of working class Belgians living on the outskirts of society – a tenement owner, a carpenter, a petty thief – in a unforforgiving, naturalistic style. In Europe, the Dardenne Brothers' work has garnered the highest honors; they belong to the exclusive club of filmmakers who have won Cannes' Palme d'Or, twice – once for *Rosetta*, and once for *L'Enfant* (*The Child*).

By the time the Dardennes earned their first Palme D'Or in 1999, they had been honing their craft since the mid-'70s – writing, producing, and directing more than 60 documentaries before they turned their attention to narrative film in the late '80s. During the Marrakech International Film Festival, I sat down with the brothers at Es Saadi Palace, where we conversed through a translator. Drawing on their 35+ years of filmmaking, the Dardennes shared their advice on why it's invaluable to get another point of view, how to work with the sounds around you, and why every creative needs to have a spiritual father in their life.

Do you have any specific rules you live by in filmmaking?

Jean-Pierre: It's not something mathematical. But during the shooting, one of us is on the set and the other one is in front of the video monitor and maybe after the first shot we change our roles. But despite all of that, sometimes we think if one of us is not there, we can't do the movie, because I'm not sure that we can do the movie that we would like to make. I think that we need the point of view of the other continuously. There will be something missing if one of us is not there.



Why is there so much focus on work and labor in your cinema? Do you feel like this is an element that's missing in art?

Luc: Well, probably because work is enabling a body to live. Our characters are people who used to work and then they lost their jobs, are unemployed now, and this has had a great impact on them. We were raised in Seraing, a big industrial city at the time, a little Detroit.

We manufactured lots of things that enabled the construction of the buildings of New York, with all this big steel equipment. We used to produce that in our city. So work labor has always had an important role in our cinema – the visible work, the manual work, it has played a role in our life.

I think one of the big wishes of the human kind is to transform things, to work on things to construct, to destroy, to sometimes construct again. And not only to look at the world, let's say, passively. I think that's the aim of humankind, being a man, a woman, is to change things. And cinema is about showing things that are changing.

One of the big wishes of the human kind is to transform things, to work on things to construct, to destroy.

Even if the change is internal in *Le Fils (The Son)*, we showed a man that is teaching the boy responsible for the homicide of his kid. So we also shoot the work of a carpenter, and by shooting these little movements, we are shooting something that we don't see necessarily, which is the transmission of a work profession. The kid who is learning this profession feels he's becoming recognized, feels more important, he has more self esteem. He's not only the killer, he's also this kid who is able to work on the wood, etc. And then we shot *Rosetta*, which features a character looking for a job. I think she's looking for some kind of dignity, and some critics of the movie said it's too reactionary because dignity is not only found in labor. It is true on the one hand, but those who do not work today say they feel they're completely put aside, marginalized, because they feel they're not useful anymore to society. And maybe because we come from that region, we believe, that being useful through the work we do is very important.

How is film, for you, a conversation?

Jean-Pierre: It only exists because you have people who come and see the movie and share that experience. When we make a movie, and when we offer it to the audience, it's like sharing a journey or a trip where everyone is going to find his way and not necessarily just ours. It's also an object of encounters, which does not mean that we all have to have the same opinion. But at least it's exposed dialogue, and it helps you think and reflect and share with others and even to talk to yourself. It's a quiet kind of conversation.

Several of your movies, for example, *L'Enfant (The Child)*, end very abruptly. What does it mean to you to end in such a jarring manner?

Luc: In *L'Enfant*, we have a main character, Bruno, a man who cannot be a father, who is never able to be a father, and it feels like at the end of the movie he at last became a father. Well, I'm not sure things will be OK afterwards. But it seems like when they're in the prison, where people can speak with their families, I think he

says, “how’s Jimmy, how is he doing?” Well, he never said the name of the kid before. It means that he has changed. Because of the kid that he has saved from the water, Steve, he became someone else. It takes time. So we felt that it was the right moment to end the movie. Our movies are like portraits.

Why don’t you use music or soundtracks in your films?

Jean-Pierre: It’s not a dogma. We haven’t found any place or room for music in our movies. Maybe because we are not able to find the right music, I don’t know. And when we’re shooting, I think that’s where things happen actually. When we’re building our plans, etc., the rhythm of that construction is partly based on the sounds, not only the dialogues, but touching the objects. And rhythm is based on the sounds that we can hear on the set, the noise of the bodies moving, the breathing of the characters, that’s our music. We just don’t see the need for music. When we’re shooting we just don’t think about it. Maybe it’s going to change one day, I don’t know.



For you, what is the biggest challenge of being artists?

Luc: You just have to maintain the same point of view, to keep on believing what you believed in the beginning. It’s not because someone says today cinema is this or should not be that. Today, we should shoot like this or that. I don’t think that’s how things should be done. It’s difficult because remaining with the same ideas can drive us crazy, remaining loyal to our ideas. But one day you say something, you don’t know necessarily why, but you feel that it’s right, it’s the right thing for you, for us, and that’s it, and you keep on working.

Then the audience may come, may not come. It’s better when they’re there, of course. We do the movie for the audience, but at the same time, sometimes you have to admit and accept the fact of not having any

audience. We may have missed something, but one should not say OK, because of that I'm going to change my style completely, or my way of doing movies. You have to wait. Sometimes it never comes, but that's another problem. I think one should be patient and loyal to what you feel, to what you think, and to the message that you'd like to convey to your audience.

Remaining loyal to our ideas can drive us crazy. Do you feel like cinema is a learning process for you?

Luc: Maybe it's easy to say that, but we learn by doing and we've always worked like that. He's never had a camera before. I never had a camera before making our portraits of people. And we never wrote any script before. So we really learned by doing.

People have been important, of course. We have had interesting encounters. We have met our spiritual father, [Armand Gatti](#), a moviemaker, and we also met [Jean Gruault](#), the screenwriter of Truffaut, and then we worked alone. Of course, we've read books on the cinema. We've been learning by ourselves. We have not been to any school.

Can you tell me a bit more about this spiritual father?

Jean-Pierre: He's a man who is 86 now. He's originally from Italy, but has always lived in France. He comes from the scattered areas of Monaco. I think he's someone who always wrote things. During the Second World War, he joined the Resistance. At the age of 16, he did the [Ardennes Offensive](#) with the British army, so he's someone who was very committed during his youth. At the end of the war, he became a journalist and then he would write for theatre. He's been very important as a theatre writer in France, and he made several movies. We met him, like, 40 years ago.

I was a student at the theatre school, and he was a guest professor to show one of his works and that's how it happened. Then I started working with him, and then Luc came over and I would say that this man, he helped us discover many things: the political commitments in general terms. He made us discover art, literature, lots of writers.

Luc: That's what we call the spiritual father, the man that gives you the desire to discover new things. And that surprises you while also giving you confidence. So he's someone who has played an important role in our work. Without this encounter, we wouldn't have been doing what we've been doing all these years.