

Committed Cinema

Committed Cinema:
The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne;
Essays and Interviews

Edited by

Bert Cardullo

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Committed Cinema: The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne; Essays and Interviews,
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PREFACE

Jean-Pierre Dardenne trained as an actor and his younger brother, Luc, studied philosophy; but they have dedicated themselves to filmmaking since the 1970s. After earning a reputation in their native Belgium for directing socially and politically conscious documentaries, they directed their first fiction feature, *Falsch*, in 1986. They have also been active as producers and in 1975 founded Dérives, a company with more than sixty documentaries to its credit. A second company, Les Films du Fleuve, was formed by the Dardennes in 1994. The brothers hail from Wallonia, the southern, French-speaking region of Belgium that provides the gritty, postindustrial landscape so omnipresent in their films.

In the decade since their third fiction feature, *La Promesse* (1996), became an international success, the unassuming but highly determined Dardennes have ascended to the forefront of a newly revived socially-conscious European cinema. At a time when filmmaking in Europe, however distinguished, seemed largely unmoored from the social changes wrought by the end of the Soviet empire, *La Promesse* offered a modest but profound view of illegal immigration and worker exploitation, anchored in the moral complexities of the relationship between a Belgian contractor and his teenaged son. Two prizes at Cannes (the Palme d'Or and Best Actress) for *Rosetta* (1999)—which conveys the obsessive extent to which a teenaged girl demands a job, a home, and a normal life—consecrated the Dardenne brothers as leading international cineastes.

Rosetta was followed by three similarly socially realistic films that are at the same time intimate character portraits: *The Son* (2002), *L'Enfant* (2005), and *The Silence of Lorna* (2008). In *The Son*, the father of a dead son must learn how to father the delinquent who killed his own child. In *L'Enfant*, the young father of a newborn son with his girlfriend sells the baby to a criminal adoption ring—only to relent and retrieve the child, thereby placing himself in debt toward, and danger from, his criminal confederates. (At Cannes, *L'Enfant* was awarded the Palme d'Or, marking the fourth time that a filmmaker—or filmmakers in the Dardennes' case—has won the festival's top prize twice. The previous two-time winners are Bille August, Francis Ford Coppola, and Emir Kusturica.) And *The Silence of Lorna* revolves around the machinations forced on illegal

immigrants attempting to grab a morsel of the world's wealth—in this case through fake marriages, and even murder, for citizenship.

In each of their five feature films since 1996, the Dardennes' rigorous, handheld camerawork and highly selective framing merge with physically intense acting (often by nonprofessionals or virtual unknowns) to evoke a realistic tradition infused with philosophical and spiritual depth—one that hearkens back to both Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (1947) and Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959). Naturalistically shot, impeccably constructed, ethically uncompromising, and emotionally searing, the Dardenne brothers' films give voice to a population often despised or ignored: illegal aliens, shameless slumlords, corrupt officials, smalltime criminals; and they invariably center on the world of work, in the lowly precincts of illegal construction labor, in demeaning entry-level clerical jobs, or in subsistence-pay apprentice training. To such characters the brothers bring a compassionate view born of the understanding that this underclass has, in part, been created by society's higher-ups. These are figures of limited material and social means who, under the most dire circumstances, must grapple with life-and-death decisions. And the films that feature them suggest an ingrained Christian vision through insisting on the transformative possibility of the most debased being.

The power of *La Promesse*, *Rosetta*, *The Son*, *L'Enfant*, and *The Silence of Lorna* in the end, however, lies in the spontaneous edginess of each scene, the frenetic energy of characters as they confront each other through physical and verbal assault. Indeed, the Dardenne brothers reinvent the notion of character so that we are not among stereotypes of the downtrodden, we are with fumbling, faulty human beings who are trying to survive as best as they can. Rather than confronting notions of good and evil in these works, we get a sense of lost and found. What we have here, in sum, is a new formula for storytelling, with unadorned subjects, unaffected cinematography, and only, in the brothers' words, "the music of the street"—a formula which, while recalling Italian neorealism, is its inverse in the sense that the Dardennes' films contain no explicit critique of "society." Their pictures are finally a search to acquire dignity, to achieve redemption, for oneself as well as for others.

Committed Cinema: The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne is the first book in English to treat the work of the Dardenne brothers, and features the best essays and interviews published to date on the two brothers' memorable films. These essays and interviews, by such notables as Robin Wood, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Gerald Peary, and Robert Sklar, are supplemented by a chronology, a filmography, film credits, a bibliography, and a thoroughgoing index. Welcome, then, to this banquet of words

(alas, not of images)—outstanding among them the directors' own—about the cinematic achievement of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne.

B. C.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1951: Jean-Pierre Dardenne born, in the Engis suburb of Liège, Belgium, on April 21st.
- 1954: Luc Dardenne born, in the Awirs suburb of Liège, Belgium, on March 10th.
- 1969-74: Luc studies philosophy at the Catholic University of Louvain, Jean-Pierre dramatic art at the Institut des Arts de Diffusion (I.A.D.). There they make the acquaintance of Armand Gatti, a theater director, poet, playwright, filmmaker, and committed humanist. He involves the brothers in two of his shows: *Le Colonne Durutti* and *L'Arche d'Adelin*.
- 1975: The Dardenne brothers found their own production company, "Dérives," which will end up producing roughly sixty documentary films (only the major of which will be listed below), which sometimes call self-conscious attention to their form in a way that the Dardennes' later fiction films do not.
- 1978: *Le chant du rossignol (The Song of the Nightingale)*, a documentary.
- 1979: *Lorsque le bateau de Léon M. descendit la Meuse pour la première fois (When Leon's Boat First Sailed Down the River Meuse)*, a documentary.
- 1980: *Pour que la guerre s'achève, les murs devaient s'écrouler (For the War to End, the Walls Had to Come Down)*, a documentary.
- 1981: The Dardennes work with Armand Gatti on the film *Nous étions tous des noms d'arbres*, with Jean-Pierre serving as chief camera assistant and Luc as assistant to

- the director. *R . . . ne répond plus* (*R . . . Doesn't Answer Anymore*), a documentary.
- 1982: *Leçons d'une université volante* (*Lessons from a University on the Fly*), a documentary.
- 1983: *Regarde Jonathan* (*Look at Jonathan*), a documentary.
- 1986: *Falsch* (*False*), adapted from an autobiographical play by the Belgian writer René Kalisky, and co-written with Jean Gruault (François Truffaut's screenwriter), signals the Dardennes' switch to fiction filmmaking, though it retains the quasi-Brechtian mode of their documentaries.
- 1987: *Il court, il court le monde* (*The World Is Racing*), a short.
- 1992: *Je pense à vous* (*You're on My Mind*), a fiction feature, bombs. The brothers had no control over the shooting of this film or of the final cut.
- 1996: The Dardenne brothers found "Les Films du Fleuve," which will be the production vehicle for all their future fiction films, as well as the films of other writer-directors (like those of Solveig Anspach [*Stormy Weather*], Eugène Green [*Le Monde vivant*], Bruno Podalydès [*The Mystery of the Yellow Room*], and Costa-Gavras [*Le Couperet*]). *La Promesse* (*The Promise*) showcases at the Cannes Film Festival during the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs. *La Promesse* wins the National Society of Film Critics Award for Best Foreign-Language Film.
- 1999: *Rosetta* wins the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. For her role in this film, Emilie Dequeenne wins the Prix d'interprétation féminine at Cannes. Cahiers du Cinéma Livres publishes the scripts of *Rosetta* and *La Promesse* in one volume.

- 2002: *Le Fils (The Son)*. For his role in this film, Olivier Gourmet wins the Prix d'interprétation masculine at the Cannes Film Festival.
- 2005: *L'Enfant (The Child)* wins the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Editions de Seuil publishes the Dardennes' working diary, *Au dos de nos images, 1991-2005 (On the Back of Our Images)*; the scripts of *Le Fils* and *L'Enfant* are published in the same volume.
- 2007: *Dans l'Obscurité (Darkness)*, a short.
- 2008: *Le Silence de Lorna (The Silence of Lorna)* wins the Best Screenplay Award at the Cannes Film Festival.

ESSAYS

BURIED CLUES, TRUE GRIT:
ON *LA PROMESSE* AND *ROSETTA*
(*CHICAGO READER*, 22 AUGUST 1997 & 14 JANUARY 2000)

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

I'd never heard of Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne before I saw *La Promesse* (1996), an important and highly involving movie playing at the Music Box this week. But given that they're regional filmmakers working in an unfashionable country, this isn't surprising. Based in Liège—a city in French-speaking western Belgium—the two brothers, both in their mid-forties, started out in the '70s as assistants to Belgian director and playwright Armand Gatti. They then made leftist videos about local urban and labor issues, followed by documentary films for TV about local anti-Nazi resistance, local workers' struggles in the '60s, and a history of Polish immigration between the '30s and early '80s. In 1986 they turned to fiction, filming a play called *Falsch*, and their film made the rounds of a few international festivals. In 1991 they did a more experimental feature, *Je pense à vous (I'm Thinking of You)*, co-written by the distinguished New Wave screenwriter Jean Gruault, that apparently sank without a trace after playing at a few French festivals and being slaughtered by the Belgian press.

They finally made a splash with *La Promesse* at the directors' fortnight at Cannes last year, then at thirty-two other festivals, including Toronto and New York. Their favorite movies include Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*, Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, Pialat's *L'enfance nue*, Coppola's *The Conversation*, Téchiné's *Thieves*, Loach's *Kes*, Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, Kieslowski's *The Decalogue*, Straub-Huillet's *Not Reconciled*, and Oshima's *Cruel Stories of Youth*, and they also have kind words for Cassavetes, Kazan, Mizoguchi, and Pasolini. *La Promesse (The Promise)*, shot on the outskirts of Liège in Seraing, centers on a boy of fifteen named Igor (Jérémy Renier)—the son of a single parent named Roger (Olivier Gourmet), a slum landlord who rents to recently arrived immigrants, some of them illegal. (We never learn anything about Igor's mother, but this is one of the movie's key structuring absences.) Igor works as an apprentice at a garage and filling station whenever he isn't

called away to help his father, but he's called away so often that he doesn't hold the job for long. In the opening sequence he's pumping gas for an old woman, then stealing her wallet from the front seat of her car while pretending to check her ignition; he buries the wallet after removing the cash. Then his boss shows him how to use a soldering iron, until a honk from Roger's van calls him away.

He and his father go to pick up a fresh batch of immigrants and their belongings, including a woman from Burkina Faso (Assita Ouédraogo) and her baby son; her husband is already one of Roger's tenants (Rasmane Ouédraogo; no relation to either Assita or director Idrissa Ouédraogo). On the way back, Roger stops at a hospital, gets out, and pushes through a long line of patients saying his son has just had an accident. Why he needs to stop at the hospital may have been clarified by a subsequent detail in the plot, but if it was I missed it. Yet this ambiguity isn't so much a flaw as a cornerstone of the film's method, because the way we arrive at most of the story information given above is through inference, not through a didactic laying out of plot points.

The film is easy to follow, but it doesn't proceed by narrative spoon-feeding. It's here that the Dardennes' documentary background pays off. Like Rossellini, Pialat, Cassavetes, Loach, and Kieslowski, they often proceed as if they were investigative reporters, plunging into the thick of a situation and trusting us to figure out the basic facts for ourselves (including, for instance, the intricacies of laws governing Belgian immigration). At the same time, they have a compelling sense of narrative and dramatic rhythm that carries us along while we're picking up clues. In *Cahiers du cinéma* Jean-Marc Lalanne aptly notes, "Through the mastery of its narrative effects, its capacity to describe the functioning of a microcosm and to fictionalize it, *La Promesse* almost has the attractions of a superspiffy American movie"—though when he later compares the moral testing of Igor to "a breathless action film . . . with a cadence as infernal as Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*" I part company with him.

Amidou—the husband from Burkina Faso, an illegal immigrant, unlike his wife and son—has gambled away part of the month's rent. Roger, who doles out under-the-table jobs to illegal immigrants, puts Amidou to work on repairs in an adjacent building, planning to deduct the rent from his wages. A labor inspector is about to turn up, and Igor, who's just lost his garage job, warns every illegal immigrant to vacate the building before he arrives. Then Amidou falls from the high scaffold he's working on. Close to death, he asks Igor to promise to take care of his wife and child, and Igor agrees. Igor wants to take him to the hospital, but Roger, fearing reprisals by immigration authorities, hides Amidou's body instead, and

later gets Igor to help bury him under cement. It's the second burial in the movie (the wallet was the first), and in every respect the movie's turning point, because afterward Igor proceeds in every way he knows to honor his promise to Amidou.

Long before Amidou's accident we see Igor spying on Assita in their room, but whether he's later honoring her late husband's wish or shifting his allegiance from his father to an unlikely mother surrogate is one of the many issues the film leaves open. The complex accommodations between Igor and Assita as he both lies to her about her husband's whereabouts and refuses to abandon her (as Roger insists he do) provide the compelling drama of the film's second part.

In explaining Igor's change of heart, which ultimately leads him to reject his father, the Dardennes cite an exchange between the character Marcel and his mother in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: "How," asks the mother, "can you be guiltier than anyone in the eyes of all? There are murderers and brigands. What crimes have you committed to blame yourself more than everyone else?" "My dear mother, my deepest love, know that everyone is guilty in everyone's eyes. I do not know how to explain it to you, but I feel that is so, and it torments me."

Rightly or wrongly, the standard idea we have about most left-wing narrative art is that the storyteller has a thesis to propound and that the story shapes that thesis. But the Dardennes view Igor as mostly a mystery—as they do Assita when she picks through the entrails of a chicken or visits a seer trying to discover where her missing husband is. The filmmakers treat both characters in a matter-of-fact way, but they don't claim to know much more about them than we do. Part of the excitement of *La Promesse* has to do with the way they share their curiosity with us.

The drawback of this approach is that they can take their lack of knowledge only so far. For one thing, I find it impossible to imagine what transpires between Assita and Igor after the final shot, which suggests that the film ends at the precise point when its imagination reaches its limits. However, this approach does make possible a kind of comparative anthropology that combines compassion with a lack of sentimentality and allows us to discover each character in relation to the other. The Dardennes also seem to know and understand like the back of their hands the world both characters live in, including the factors that force them together and ultimately make them both pariahs. Inviting us to share this knowledge as well as their curiosity about two isolated individuals, they discover a world where conversation gradually becomes possible, not only

between these two characters but between us and the film—a conversation about these still in the making.

As for *Rosetta*, let me first offer you the following email message from the film critic Nicole Brenez:

I saw *Rosetta* three weeks ago, and haven't recovered from it since. In fact, I didn't see any film since the Dardennes', except films for work. It moves me to the heart of my heart, this film about the necessity of life, the impossibility of morality, the soil of human experience. [A teaching colleague] told me that he couldn't watch it because he thought too much about [Robert Bresson's] *Mouchette*, but precisely, it's at last *Mouchette* today, our *Mouchette*, the one we deserve, without any heaven and any transcendence. Her scream, "Mama! Y'a d'la boue! Y'a d'la boue!" ["Mama! It's full of mud! It's full of mud!"] haunts me, I can't forget it, it's exactly the despair of being in life without any pathos, any margin, just real life in the immediacy of the impulse.

The '80s practically ended with the euphoric takeover of Tiananmen Square by more than a million demonstrators led by students, many with access to fax machines, though a brutal government crackdown followed. And the '90s ended with the disruption of the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle by an extremely diverse coalition formed through e-mail. It wasn't a throwback to the '60s—we're living in an era of greater economic disparities, where class is in some ways becoming a more significant distinction than nationality or language—but at least it suggested that people aren't powerless and sometimes can triumph over the designs of multinational corporations. Forms of communication are thus no longer shaped by cold-war prototypes. Products and operations rather than national ideologies have made much of the world kin, and those products and operations function less like the front line of an invading army than like a long highway anyone can travel down—which may make them destroyers of national ideologies.

Even the multinationals are changing. Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's outlets in Japan aren't simply or necessarily promoting the American way of life. They sell corn soup at McDonald's in Tokyo—which means they're using American décor to sell a Japanese product and thereby promoting the Japanese way of life. Which isn't to say that way of life hasn't changed; who's to say what is the Japanese way of life anymore? Hot cans of corn soup and of Pokka espresso are sold everywhere in Japanese vending machines. Pokka is brewed in American Canyon, California (though if you want to buy it in Chicago you have to go to an Asian supermarket), and the Pokka people can hardly be said to be promoting an Italian way of life.

All of this is a roundabout way of underscoring my point that it's silly for the mainstream American press to go on assuming that foreign movies are neither relevant to American audiences nor important. *Rosetta*, a Belgian film that's starting its second and final week at the Music Box, won the top prize at Cannes, the world's top film festival, and its eighteen-year-old lead, Emilie Dequenne, shared the best-actress award. Its story, subject, and heroine are probably more relevant to the lives of most Americans—and have more physical presence and pack a bigger emotional punch—than the story, subject, and characters of most current Hollywood films. Nevertheless, most American critics have refused to give this current American release even a fraction of the attention they lavish on any American movie.

An American friend who recently returned from Europe told me *Rosetta* has already inspired a new Belgian law known as “Plan Rosetta,” which prohibits employers from paying teenaged workers less than the minimum wage (a Belgian news source on the Internet reports this passed on November 12). But the American press hasn't, to the best of my knowledge, considered this fact worth reporting. What can we conclude from the passing of this law? One person at a discussion following a preview thought it meant that European moviegoers are more serious than their American counterparts, but I disagree. I think the different impact a movie like *Rosetta* has in Europe is mainly a consequence of how it's treated by the press. For instance, Dequenne appeared on the cover of France's leading rock weekly late last September, but she could never conceivably appear on the cover of *Spin* or *Rolling Stone*.

The film's reputation and therefore its power in Belgium are easy to account for. Local pride at winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes gave the movie a high profile—and helped it avoid being swamped by the millions of publicity dollars spent by Hollywood studios to ensure that Belgian moviegoers were more aware of the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger and James Bond shenanigans. In this country there's practically nothing in the press to prevent it from being swamped by even more millions of publicity dollars. It's therefore understandable that American audiences often wind up confusing promotional presence with cultural importance, since promotional presence seems to be the only gauge the mainstream media have for determining cultural importance. It's meaningless to claim that American audiences “prefer” *End of Days* or *The World Is Not Enough* to *Rosetta* given that most Americans have been bombarded with advertising for those profoundly inconsequential movies but haven't heard a word about *Rosetta*. Moreover, the very fact that millions had to be spent advertising *End of Days* and *The World Is Not Enough* actually helps

demonstrate that the media bias in favor of dumb big-budget entertainment doesn't suffice to sell it to the masses.

From its opening seconds, *Rosetta* makes it clear that its heroine is angry—before it tells us who she is or what she's angry about. Alain Marcoen's virtuoso handheld camera, which will stay close to her throughout the film, follows as she slams a door, strides through the industrial workplace where she's just been laid off for obscure reasons, and then assaults her boss when he insists that she leave. After taking the bus back to the trailer park where she lives with her alcoholic mother, Rosetta stops briefly in the woods and methodically takes off her shoes and puts on a pair of boots hidden behind a large rock in a drainpipe. This ritual is repeated throughout the film, marking the transition between her work and her even more solitary home life, where most of her time is spent keeping her mother away from booze and sex (her mother's principal method of acquiring booze), fishing in a nearby muddy creek, and soothing her stomach pains, usually by warming her belly with a hair dryer.

After Rosetta meets a teenaged boy named Riquet (Fabrizio Rongione) who operates a waffle stand and has romantic designs on her, the plot thickens, but not predictably. Riquet finds her work for a brief spell, but she regards him more as a competitor than a friend; when he accidentally falls into the muddy creek trying to help her, she almost lets him drown because she wants his job.

Rosetta is a grim character in a grim set of circumstances, yet the film's writer-directors, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, are so ruthlessly unsentimental, uncynical, and physical in their approach to her life that we experience it viscerally before we get a chance to reflect on its meaning. Toward the end of the film Rosetta has to carry her mother across the trailer park, and it's extraordinary how much Marcoen's camera style makes us feel the weight of her body. The physicality of the film as a whole often becomes overwhelming; it's as if the Dardennes had converted the physical facts of Rosetta's existence into something resembling a theme-park ride. To a lesser extent, this was also true of their previous feature, *La Promesse*.

Perhaps what's most distinctive about the Dardenne brothers—middle-aged leftists based in Liège, a city in eastern, French-speaking Belgium, with a background in political videos and TV documentaries—is their utter lack of didacticism about their characters combined with a curiosity about them that gives them a novelistic density, ambiguity, and unpredictability. One comes away with the impression that Igor and Rosetta are both volatile and vibrant works in progress, existential protagonists in the

purest sense. The Dardennes also seem to know the working-class locations in and around Liège like the backs of their hands, so their stories almost always seem plausible.

These stories are edgy in part because the Dardennes never seem to know more about their characters than they show. The moments at which *La Promesse* and *Rosetta* end appear to be precisely the moments at which the filmmakers choose to stop imagining what comes next. Yet it's fascinating that it's impossible to guess what Igor will do or say five seconds after *La Promesse* ends, and the same thing is true of *Rosetta* at the end of *Rosetta*. Some might consider this a limitation, particularly given the depths of the characterizations found in, for instance, Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*. But I regard it as a strength that the Dardennes' instinct for fiction closely parallels their instinct for documentary and that they refuse to claim more knowledge of their characters than they're ready to impart. Their work with Dequenne suggests that she operates the same way, with the same tight focus; interviews with the three of them have revealed that they have somewhat different interpretations of portions of the story that were deliberately left in the dark: the identity of Rosetta's father, the source of her stomach pains, the significance of the final scene.

Nicole Brenez and her colleague aren't the only critics comparing *Rosetta* to Bresson's *Mouchette*, and the parallels in terms of plot and character are hard to ignore. But there are substantial differences in style and philosophical meaning, and the stories end in drastically different ways. The Catholic context lurking in the background of Bresson's film and, I strongly suspect, Georges Bernanos's source novel couldn't be further from the social coordinates of the Dardennes' universe, and it's no slur to say that *Mouchette* could never have changed the labor laws of France. Moreover, the Dardennes' rigorous adherence to their heroine's viewpoint is a world apart from Bresson's more distanced compassion. Significantly, one comes away from *Rosetta* with almost no firm physical or emotional recollection of the heroine's mother (Anne Yernaux)—not because the camera ignores her, but because one feels that the Dardennes, like Rosetta, have given up on her. *Mouchette*'s invalid mother, who dies over the course of the film, leaves a much stronger impression.

For that matter, the profound sense of mystery evoked by Bresson's characters, including *Mouchette*, can't be equated with the curiosity provoked by Igor and Rosetta, especially because Bresson's characters always register as fixed essences and never as works in progress. When Rosetta rejects Riquet's offer of a beer, then suddenly asks him for one and drains it in a single gulp, we're led to believe that her previous avoidance of both liquor and sex might be motivated by a fear of

becoming like her mother—and by a desire to succumb to both temptations that frightens her even more. In this wonderfully observant and beautifully performed comic sequence, Riquet's clumsy attempts to show off first his skill at gymnastics and then his skill at drumming, followed by his efforts to get Rosetta to dance, are met by her with amusement, then bravado, and finally clunky gestures. This scene gives us a sense of the wonderful things the Dardennes can do with actors, which are a far cry from Bresson's own formidable yet very different accomplishments with nonactors.

Rosetta is alive with a sense of urgency as well as currency, even though there's nothing remotely preachy about it. American reviewers who insist on treating it as minor and then treat something like *Dogme* as a heady challenge seem to be implying that we're all such infantile escapists at heart that we can't possibly be interested in a movie that concerns anything as real as finding a job.

I've heard that one critic has attacked *Rosetta* for not being Brechtian. I'm tempted to counter that the veritable theme song of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*—"First comes bread, then comes morals"—could easily serve as one of Rosetta's rationales for her behavior. But then I recall Hannah Arendt's gloss on how this line was received in pre-Hitler Germany: It was "greeted with frantic applause by exactly everybody, though for different reasons. The mob applauded because it took the statement literally; the bourgeoisie applauded because it had been fooled by its own hypocrisy for so long that it had grown tired of the tension and found deep wisdom in the expression of the banality by which it lived; the elite applauded because the unveiling of hypocrisy was such superior and wonderful fun. The effect of the work was exactly the opposite of what Brecht had sought by it."

I don't think it's possible to misread *Rosetta* in any of the ways outlined by Arendt, so perhaps I'm misreading the film critic. Clearly *Rosetta* isn't esoteric or cerebral or difficult to understand; it isn't remotely boring or even slightly pretentious. Its only crimes are that it isn't in English (though it doesn't have much dialogue anyway), it has something powerful to say about what's happening right now across the planet, and millions haven't been spent promoting it.

TROUBLING QUESTIONS:
THE DARDENNES
(CLOSE-UP FILM, 2006)

MIKE BARTLETT

Two troubling questions raised in recent months: The first from the BBC4 program, *Lefties*, which recalled the golden age of radical TV drama in the '60s and '70s. *Play For Today* and other institutions allowed writers the freedom to explore current social problems, often in raw, provocative style, and this freedom spilled over into British cinema where portrayals of the working class became more commonplace. But where are those left-wing polemics now? Where are those works that attacked the status quo in order to make a better world?

And then there is that awkward yet haunting film, *Munich*. Yes, it's more liberal hand-wringing from Mr. Spielberg, come to tell us about the ills of naughty terrorists and vengeful states. And yet . . . the insistence on "home," the way this idea is articulated through meals and the breaking of bread together, and how violence comes to warp and overshadow this most basic of shared pleasures. And the character of Michel Lonsdale, the French paterfamilias, whose home is an idealized portrait of civilized life, but who has become bitter and amoral. And who, over dinner, bemoans the waste of men's lives to replace "Vichy scum with Gaullist scum" and the concurrent rise of a younger generation stuffed with so-called liberal platitudes learnt from popular culture, not experience. Before we forget Spielberg's film altogether, let us admit that, in this figure alone, he has created a formidable metaphor of modern Europe, grown cynical in the face of compromise and self-serving on both sides of the political spectrum. In Blair's Britain, for example, where is the place for the man on the Left who believes in patriotism, heritage and the tradition of beauty? Where the place for the man on the Right who is concerned with human rights and the freedom of speech being slowly but surely eradicated? Where, in short, does the European who falls in the interstices between the vulgar and outdated concepts of Left and Right find a voice?

The answer to both questions, I believe, lies across the Channel in Belgium—brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. After working in a cement factory to raise money, they began filming strikes and union meetings in the '70s, then graduated into documentaries for television. Their first fiction feature *Falsch* appeared in 1986, but they have said that the first film where they successfully achieved what they wanted was *La Promesse* (1996). This, and the three films that have followed, have placed them at the apex of modern cinema, and it's these four works that I'd like to concentrate on.

Let's start with the titles—*The Promise*, *Rosetta*, *The Son*, *The Child*. Bold, emphatic, unambiguous. But on closer examination, they yield different interpretations. *The Promise* is that given by a teenaged boy to a dying immigrant worker to look after his wife, but it's also the promise of a young man being wasted because of his attachment to a father who preys on such immigrants. *The Son* is a child killed by a joyrider, but the joyrider himself takes his place when he enlists at the father's carpentry workshop. *Rosetta's* name implies that she is a code to be broken, her uncompromising behavior and marginalized, trailer-trash lifestyle a foreign language for most viewers. And *L'Enfant* is not so much the baby that a poor couple share, but the unruly, petty criminal father who can blithely sell that child for a quick fix of cash.

Their films bear no little resemblance to British social realism—stories of downtrodden people, on the breadline, inhabiting grim estates and grubby streets. But, at this point, I should admit that I've never much cared for that strain of "kitchen sink" drama—the collected works of Ken Leigh and Mike Loach (or is it the other way around?) Why, then, do I rate the Dardennes so highly? Is it just because I want my working-class strife in French accents, the exoticism of another country in place of a Sheffield car park? After all, their plots are only basic melodramas—bad boy makes good, girl realizes error of her ways—just as their British counterparts are heart-warming stories of triumph over adversity.

The difference lies in that last title, *L'Enfant*. Whereas we're used to the "ignorant folk with a heart of gold," the Dardennes present a tougher message—that poverty makes children of us all. Their characters are grasping and desperate—ready to betray a friend for a job at a waffle store, ready to sublet their own flat and put their wife and child out of a home. There's no need to present a caricatured vision of yuppie wealth—à la the landlord in *Naked* (1993)—or hide the truth of working-class life—that they were among the first to purchase mobile phones and satellite dishes—to make us sympathize with the plight of their protagonists. Leigh and Loach stack the cards in their victims' favor—they're made utterly

destitute and utterly noble. They don't challenge their liberal audience but serve up to them their own fantasy of "gritty reality"—in other words, preaching to the converted. But the Dardennes' is a tough love—it shows that the very systems that the Left rail against make people shrewd, calculating, ruthless. They want the audience to earn their urge to change society by showing people as they really are, not by flattering pre-ordained ideas and mollicoddling them through the film.

In this sense, there's one British director who *is* close to them in spirit: Alan Clarke. Clarke's films are as grim and as gritty as you could wish for, but crucially, they put liberals as much as conservatives on the back foot. By following the fortunes of a racist skinhead (*Made in Britain*, 1983) or a violent borstal inmate (*Scum*, 1977, 1979) and making them as articulate as their opponents, Clarke, too, forces us to test our views, not indulge them.

And he shares a similar cinematic style with the Dardennes, particularly in the filming of actors. Fascinated by SteadyCam, Clarke found that he could show the antagonism between his characters merely through long tracking shots of them walking, their nervous movement signaling hidden fury. This is translated into the opening of *Rosetta* where the handheld camera almost chases a young girl down a flight of stairs before having a door slammed in its face. No film starts more urgently, nor intimates so immediately the uncompromising energy of its protagonist. In *The Son*, Olivier Gourmet is constantly filmed from behind, the bulk of his shoulder filling the screen as the camera tries to peek round at the object of his curiosity.

Throughout the Dardennes' work, the field of vision is limited. In a genuinely thrilling car chase in *L'Enfant*, the viewer seldom sees beyond the motorbike of the pursued—there's no cross-cutting, there are no exciting overhead shots. The Dardennes do not want us to have any more information than their characters—that way, we are brought into greater empathy with them but we're also made to see how the deprivations they suffer prevent them from seeing the wider picture. That's why their stories are not placed in any social context. The urgent necessities of life—food, money—keep them on a merry-go-round of activity that precludes them from the luxuries of debate. Just watching their lives played out as realistically as possible should be enough for the audience to understand their case.

Hardship is signaled through little details—Rosetta using tissue paper to fill the cracks in her caravan window, a father having time to take his child for a walk because the dole queue his wife's waiting in is so long. Simple metaphors suffice—whenever someone crosses a road, it's to the

“other side,” the margins of society that most of us don’t see, a river shelter or a trailer camp. And there’s no music—even the end credits arrive in stark, black silence. The Dardennes want to factor out anything that doesn’t belong to the story they’re telling, either within or without the narrative. Once the movie is over, there’s no concept of how it might go on afterwards—the off-screen world is not so much unimportant as non-existent. This has led to comparisons with Robert Bresson, who ruthlessly purged his films of what he called “screens,” easy generators of emotion like soundtrack music, baroque camera movement, expressionistic performance. Indeed, the Dardennes have stressed that they share his interest in producing a story with an “economy of means”. But they’ve also admitted that they’ve come to “detest” the comparison because it obscures their own agenda.

True, the conclusion of *L’Enfant* clearly recalls that of *Pickpocket* (1959) where a young man kisses his girl through the bars of a prison cell. But in Bresson, the focus is on the man’s redemption, a very Catholic sense of grace permeating the endings of his films. But the Dardennes simply show a couple crying and making up before brutally cutting away. There’s no indication that they can or will change, but it’s a more human resolution, the accent being on their mutual affection for each other, not any abstract concept of justice. French critic Nicole Brenez has said of *Rosetta* that it is “*Mouchette* today, our *Mouchette*, the one we deserve, without any heaven and any transcendence.” She says that with an air of despair, but I would argue that this is something positive. The characters are no longer archetypes, trapped into representing a particular concept, but real people. They’re frustrated, often angry, but they’re also warm, boisterous, funny, not the impassive zombies of Bresson’s world. And all they’re trying to do is make a connection.

It’s instructive to make another comparison, this time with a contemporary European filmmaker, Michael Haneke. He, too, offers a superficially ascetic vision of modern Europe, riddled with racism, violence and greed, again framed in silent, black credits. But Haneke’s approach is to observe the action from a distance, a cool objectivity being implied. There is no sense of empathy or closeness with his characters, either in the storylines or use of camera. In other words, he detaches himself from the drama, his absence denying any kind of guiding personality to the film. Some might say this is Haneke’s strength and, indeed, I think he prides himself on his directorial coolness, to the point where he refuses to offer his audience any answers, or intimations of where these answers can be found. But, this way, the filmmaker doesn’t have to get his hands dirty, doesn’t have to wade in and show his hand. It’s

as if he sits back, arms folded, as the lights go up, pompously expecting a response from his audience, assuming by implication a position of superiority.

The warmth of the Dardennes, by contrast, comes from the clear identification they have with both their protagonists and the world they inhabit. It's no surprise to find that they always film in and around local town Seraing, with inexperienced actors or friends, and using stories that they've come across in everyday life. Their films feel informed by real experience in much the same way as the documentaries of Humphrey Jennings. There is a new cinema of the Left—still harsh and biting, but infused with a genuine curiosity in human nature and fellow feeling. And it's a part of a burgeoning movement in film, one that has taken lessons from the old masters like Bresson but planed away their severity to produce a softer but no less committed humanism. Think of Nuri Bilge Ceylan in Turkey, whose *Uzak* (2002) pays homage to Tarkovsky and Kiarostami, yet brings their style home to a simple tale of two cousins who can't get on. Or in the UK, and admittedly at a lower level of achievement, Shane Meadows' *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999), which brings us back to where we came in, the "kitchen sink" drama, but done with freshness, vigor and a pleasing lack of portentousness. It's a new kind of cinema for a new kind of Europe.