The Dardenne brothers' L'Enfant: an argument for a far more critical appraisal

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L'Enfant (The Child), *directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne (born 1951 and 1954, respectively) are a well-known and respected film directing team from Belgium. After years of making socially oriented documentaries, they began writing and directing feature films in the 1990s. The brothers have developed an international following with *La Promesse* (*The Promise*, 1996), *Rosetta* (1999), *Le Fils* (*The Son*, 2002) and, most recently, *L'Enfant* (*The Child*, 2005).

The Dardennes created each of these works in their native region of southern, French-speaking Belgium, on a small budget, making prominent use of hand-held cameras and calling on the services of non-professional or unknown performers. Each has treated working class life or particular details of that life—the impact of work or lack of work, relationships between generations—with undoubted seriousness and concern.

All the Dardenne films involve moral issues posed by crises in the lives of their central characters: a teenage boy makes a commitment in *La Promesse* to a dying immigrant worker, killed in the employ of the boy's father, an exploiter of such labor; a young woman, Rosetta, living in a trailer park with her alcoholic mother, is determined, at apparently any cost, including betraying others in her own situation, to find work; in *Le Fils*, a carpentry teacher in a special school for recently released offenders discovers that one of his charges was responsible for his son's tragic death five years before.

In *L'Enfant*, too, a socio-morality tale unfolds. Bruno (Jérémie Renier) is a smalltime thief and fence in the city of Seraing, who splits his time between a dismal apartment and a shack on the banks of the river Meuse. His girl friend Sonia (Déborah Françoise) has just given birth, for which event Bruno did not bother to turn up at the hospital. More than anything, he seems benumbed, his life has made him quite distant from others around him.

Through his contact with a criminal ring, he learns how much money is to be made through selling newborns. One afternoon, Bruno takes his infant son for a stroll and promptly organizes his sale. When he later informs Sonia what he's done ("We can have another one"), she faints. In the hospital she denounces him to the police. He quickly recovers the baby, but the criminals demand that he pay a large indemnity for their lost profits.

Understandably, Sonia, her child restored to her, will have nothing to do with Bruno. He now has no home, no money and no girl friend. He stages a robbery, with his young confederate Steve (Jérémie Segard), but bystanders alert police and a chase ensues. Bruno and Steve are forced to submerge themselves in the river to escape capture. The cops eventually arrest his partner. Stricken by a newfound conscience, Bruno turns himself in to police. In a final scene, Sonia visits Bruno in prison, and he breaks down in tears.

The Dardenne brothers have numerous admirers. They have been greeted with enthusiasm by many no doubt genuinely disturbed by the impoverished state of contemporary cinema. A recent article in *Cinéaste* magazine, for example, bore the somewhat ambitious title "Reinventing Realism: the Art and Politics of the Dardenne Brothers." Critics have not been stinting with their praise for *L'Enfant*, declaring it a masterpiece.

In my view, the Dardennes' films are not satisfying artistic works. I've found each to be largely dull (despite the feverish undercurrent), dramatically unconvincing and strangely unmoving. Moreover, their obsessive attention to the particular (exemplified by the irritating and intrusive camera in *Rosetta*, which hardly leaves the central character for an instant) at the expense of the social and historical context ultimately provides a distorted picture of contemporary life. It diverts attention from the structures responsible for human suffering and creates the impression, inadvertently or not, that the blame for social ills lies at least in part with their victims.

L'Enfant is realistic about some things, less so about others. The film places the viewer squarely in the midst of Seraing, a decaying industrial town, in a region that was one of the birthplaces of modern capitalism. Grim apartments, noisy highways, shops, bars, police stations—one has no doubt about the authenticity of detail. However, while Bruno and Sonia pass before this background of closed factories and run-down housing, are they ever truly situated *in* it? What is the relationship between this social environment and the behavior of the protagonists? Is there any necessary relationship? One senses that the Dardennes, as is too often the case, would like to have their cake and eat it too.

Their depiction of the bleak conditions provides them a certain credibility, but then the filmmakers largely turn their backs on the implications of those conditions. The latter are largely taken for granted; they are not active in the lives of their characters. As though once sprung forth from those circumstances, the young people were free to do whatever they liked.

Bruno's character and progression are implausible. He may very well exist in a state of deep anomie, but he's clearly not unobservant about people. After seeing Sonia's deep affection for the baby, his astonishment at her response to his sale of the child is simply not credible. What did he expect? Or, alternatively, if he is such a brute or so remote from human feeling, why does he experience such a painless transformation? The conversion is unconvincing from every point of view.

The dismissal of Sonia from the screen is all too easy. She would have more things to say on the matter. Dialogue is a part of cinema, too. Permit us the suspicion, at least until convinced otherwise, that the Dardennes shy away from dramatic confrontations because they are incapable of rendering them adequately.

There are many deeply and even fatally damaged people on earth—people capable of selling their children for a few thousand dollars or euros. How does someone like that reject and overcome such a condition? Through a mere quantitative extension of what has come before, no matter how hair-raising? It seems highly unlikely. Why should Bruno develop a conscience? Something from the outside needs to penetrate such a thick hide.

A Bruno, if we take his depraved character at face value, would need to develop a rational grasp of the sources of his own condition and behavior. How could he arrive at such an understanding? Through politics, for example, through contact with a mass movement that challenged the society's foundations. History demonstrates that such movements may reach and transform the most damaged, lumpen elements. The theory of "spontaneous self-regeneration" is simply wrongheaded.

In any case, what are the implications of such a theory? Have the Dardennes worked this through? I hope not. What they are proposing here (and, in one fashion or another, in all their films)—that Bruno face up to his responsibilities as an adult and a father, become more fully human—is preached by countless columnists, politicians, academics and pundits of every stripe on a daily basis. How banal!

And how beside the point! What produced Bruno's behavior in the first place? Wretched social conditions, his own hopelessness and alienation. None of that has changed. Even were a single Bruno to regenerate himself miraculously, in the manner the Dardennes propose, there would be a thousand or ten thousand others. This is fundamentally a social problem, not an individual moral one. For the working class, some degree of scientific consciousness of its own position is the starting-point for a higher moral view; the debasement of its most backward layers is rooted in *exploitation*.

The question remains open whether the film is even especially sympathetic toward its characters. *L'Enfant* proceeds from their individual iniquities toward the broader social horizon; in some unpleasant manner, Bruno and the others become implicated in the decay of the city, and not the other way around. This is not a film that indicts Belgian capitalism for its criminal treatment of the younger generation.

Again, this is not social realism in any oppositional sense. Stripped of its trappings, it amounts to petty bourgeois moralizing about the failings of the most oppressed and beaten down. One feels tempted to repeat after Brecht: "Not the wickedness of the poor have you shown me, but *The Poverty of the Poor*."

The Dardennes roll their eyes, more or less, when the issue of their political views is raised. They are "beyond all that." And in this precisely lies the source of their appeal.

There is no reason to be overly harsh. The brothers are filmmakers, not politicians. They are not leading a political tendency. They are capable of honest moments. Their intentions are probably honorable. But they have a history, they are social creatures, just like everyone else, and that emerges in their work.

Their history plays a role today, unhappily, more in giving the weakest aspects of their work a "progressive" coating than in anything else. Born in Seraing, "a working-class town where daily life revolved around the sirens of steel mills and coal mines," the Dardenne brothers grew up in and had to imbibe an environment with strong left-wing and socialist traditions, extending back more than a century. In 1960, when they were still children, Belgium experienced a bitterly fought general strike, which shook the society to its foundations and had European-wide reverberations.

In recent decades, Wallonia (the French-speaking region of southern Belgium, home to heavy industry), has suffered a severe economic decline. Prolonged recessions in the 1980s brought about the closure of factories and mines, and the growth of permanently high unemployment (officially 18.6 percent in November 2005). As elsewhere, national governments, which often include the Belgian Socialist Party, have responded with austerity measures and attacks on the social safety net.

The Dardennes obviously held radical convictions as young people. In the early 1970s, they encountered writer and anarchist Armand Gatti, with whom they collaborated in theater and video work. Later they struck out on their own. Jean-Pierre Dardenne explains:"We'd shoot strikes, and show the footage at union meetings.... Or we'd go into low-income housing projects and videotape people who'd done something with their lives, who'd been active in the Resistance or the labor movement. On Sundays, we'd find a place in the projects, a garage or an apartment, and we'd show the tapes. We were trying to create links between people through video." (*Village Voice*)

In the late 1970s, they began making documentaries for Belgian television, on the Resistance, on the 1960 general strike, on the conditions of immigrant workers and similar subjects.

They were naturally affected by the ebbing of the radical tide of the 1970s. Moreover, in the intervening decades, globalization, the collapse of the Soviet Union and "existing socialism" (Stalinism), the extended decay of the trade unions, the disintegration of old organizations and allegiances, the disappearance of entire communities, the temporary weakening of the most elementary "fellow feeling"—all this has had an impact.

Jean-Pierre Dardenne told an interviewer for *Cinéaste* several years ago: "The working class is no longer the working class. It is no longer structured as it was at the beginning of the last century. We are truly at the end of an age, of industry, of what we have known for a hundred years. Perhaps in an immediate sense, it is because we have lived a good part of our lives within this time that we choose to film it and to anchor our stories around these de-classed people."

Considering their origins, and the optimism that must have existed in certain quarters about the possibility of social change in the 1960s and 1970s, the Dardennes' is a difficult history, with perhaps more than its share of missed opportunities. One can feel a certain sympathy. However, one cannot afford to be sentimental.

Like everyone else, the brothers had the responsibility to work these complex problems through. Instead, one feels that they have allowed events to wear down their ideological defenses, that they carry their disappointments (in the working class, in radical change) with them, semi-consciously, and insert those in their studies of the present. They maintain their orientation at this point toward the plight of ordinary people, but they don't see that the *content* of that orientation has shifted dramatically.

But it is this, the element that has been worn away, that finds a response.

Emilie Bickerton in *Cinéaste*, in the aforementioned piece, is relatively forthright: "What the Dardennes represent is the way cinema can be political today, their real originality coming from their refusal to be cynical and struggle against what they call the loss of confidence in man. This can't be achieved by making characters mouthpieces for particular ideas or representative of predicaments and struggles. This appeal to class consciousness is an old strategy and it is the lack of such an appeal in the Dardennes's work that makes them so interesting today."

As though anyone with a brain wanted "mouthpieces" of any kind. But rich and serious work must contain a protest against existing conditions and includes partisanship. Neutrality, much less indifference, in the social arena has nothing in common with honesty and objectivity.

Mike Bartlett, writing for *Close-Up Film* in Britain, asks: "Where, in short, does the European who falls in the interstices between the vulgar and out-dated concepts of Left and Right find a voice? The answer...I believe, lies across the Channel in Belgium—brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne." He argues that "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 mollycoddling them through the film."

No one is in favor of prettifying the oppressed, but a modicum of sympathy would be something. One can see in such a case how the Dardennes, perhaps against their will, pick up the support of people who certainly have no intention of "mollycoddling" the poor and the working class. Even the phraseology used is that of right-wing, law-and-order politicians.

In sum, in my opinion, the Dardennes don't offer a way out of the

present artistic impasse; rather, their films are another expression, in an admittedly sophisticated form, of that same crisis. In the final analysis, their popularity within certain circles stems from their ability to combine a “social realist” look and feel to their films, which suggests (and perhaps intends) social criticism and opposition, with quite conformist themes and moods entirely compatible with official moralizing and complacency. The brothers’ sincerity is not at issue here, their art and their ideas are.