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## Fetish, Sacrifice and Tragic Freedom in the Dardenne Brothers' *La Promesse*

Andrew Small

*Al Faisal University*, [andrewsmall305@gmail.com](mailto:andrewsmall305@gmail.com)

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# Fetish, Sacrifice and Tragic Freedom in the Dardenne Brothers' *La Promesse*

## Abstract

Fetish, Sacrifice and Tragic Freedom and in the Dardenne Brothers' *La Promesse*

(Abstract)

The purpose of this article is to begin drawing attention to the strong likelihood that Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) contributed important ideas to the creation of *La Promesse* (1996) by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. In the current article, we take note of just two of its most important aspects: animism, and the childlike recurrence of totemism. In *La Promesse*, these concepts are elaborated in relationship to a small African statue present in the home of the West African illegal immigrants, Assita and Hamidou. The sculpture – which Freud would call a *fetish* – is a locus of mysterious spiritual forces (Freud's "animism"), which, together with Assita, contribute to bringing Igor to a greater personal and spiritual maturity. Igor eventually rejects his father's world (which casually includes the Christian God, whenever it suits the father's needs), and freely accepts affiliation with his new pseudo-mother Assita and the blend of African spirituality which is part and parcel of her world. The film's narrative is given considerable depth due to the inclusion of complex echoes of the sacrifice of Abraham from Biblical culture, and the oedipal structures of tragic self-discovery from Ancient Greece. The directors skillfully empower the West African statue as a catalyst activating all these layers of meaning.

## Keywords

Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne, *La Promesse*, Freud, Totem and Taboo, animism, Spirituality, Oedipus, shaman, Tiresias, Abraham, Isaac

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## Author Notes

Andrew Small, Ph. D., has special interests in the relationship between literature and the visual arts, including cinema, and the French and Francophone traditions. He has published widely in the United States and in Europe.



Arguably their best scenario, the Dardenne brothers' *La Promesse* (1996) is a brilliant and moving film, with outstanding performances by actors both European and African. Yet one of the most central protagonists of the film receives no acknowledgment in the credits whatsoever: a wooden statue from West Africa, in the apartment of two illegal immigrants from Burkina Faso working in Belgium's industrialized area along the Meuse River. This statue contributes an intangible element (spirituality) which, ironically, protects our adolescent protagonist from his own father Roger, while simultaneously drawing the young man closer to his new-found (pseudo) mother, Assita.

\*

*La Promesse* tells the fictional story of a father and son team of survivors in an urban jungle of our post-industrial world, focused in the micro-cosmic setting of contemporary Seraing, Belgium. The father (Roger) and his son (Igor) are middle men in the constant flow of workers seeking better lives. As the plot begins to unfold, we see that Roger's and Igor's only real allegiance to anything is to one another, and they make their living by shamelessly exploiting these helpless transients as they try to find a new home beyond Seraing. Of the two, the son Igor (15 years old) is a good looking kid who is as quick to lie as he is to steal (which is very quick indeed), but he gives everything to his Dad. The father, Roger, is less bright and more blunt – he does not shy away from using muscle to keep his dirty little world in order.

The film soon comes to focus on an African family: the father Hamidou, the wife Assita, and their baby Tiga (less than 1 year old). They are no different than the other workers except that one day, while trying to flee the labor and immigration police, Hamidou falls to his death at Roger's construction site, and no one is there to help him except Igor. With some of his final breaths, Hamidou gets Igor to *promise* to care for his wife and child. Here then is the central crux of the plot and the title of the film: Igor's allegiance has very suddenly shifted from his father's interests to those of the African mother Assita and her child, immigrants whom he barely knows. We will see that this moment is the birth of a moral conscience in this boy-becoming-a-man.

Roger soon arrives and refuses to save Hamidou's life, for fear of having his underworld discovered by the authorities. In so doing, he commits a form of un-premeditated murder, and draws his own son squarely into it. Roger then buries the body at the construction site, and sets out to be rid of Assita by whatever means possible – at first subtle, and then increasingly coarse, including attempted kidnapping leading to sex slavery. Throughout, Assita thinks that Hamidou has simply disappeared due to gambling debts; and Igor's moral dilemma is crystalized by his

struggle to tell her of Hamidou's death, or not, often lying very cold-bloodedly right to her face. Igor finally realizes that he cannot have two allegiances here, and surprisingly he chooses to honor himself and his promise to help and protect the African woman, rather than his own very corrupt father.

The rest of the film follows Igor and Assita, pursued by Roger. Just as our two protagonists are about to escape safely to Italy, Igor finally musters the courage to tell Assita that Hamidou is not just missing: he is actually dead and buried in a concrete grave. These two finally look one another in the eye, in the truth-telling moment which defines their entire encounter. Assita now declines to go to Italy, electing instead to stay in Seraing for the time being. Based on her previous statements, we assume that she will go to the police, but the film ends here.

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Nearly all critics approaching the film thematically have mentioned the film's focus on the "face-to-face" moment (following Levinas),<sup>1</sup> and the various socio-cultural conflicts arising from the economically depressed environment and individuals in the rust-belt city of Seraing, Belgium. But what has not yet been explored by critics seems also to be patently true; the presence of Freudian structures in this film – in particular ideas from the essays in *Totem und Tabu* (1913), and secondarily the well-known myth of Oedipus.

It can hardly be a coincidence that all four of the essays in *Totem und Tabu* have a vital presence in *La Promesse*: the horror of incest and the use of totems (represented by the tattoos shared by father and son); taboo (one is made explicit by father to son concerning his actions with regard to the African woman Assita); animism (the "fetish" or power object of magic and/or faith); and the totemistic beliefs of youths coming to terms with death and what lies beyond, including material on how brothers had to kill the alpha-male father in pre-historic societies in order to have

access to the females of his harem. Because of constraints of time and space, *the current article addresses only the topics of “fetish” and “animism,” and only as a means of access to understanding the complexities of this film.* The use of the term “fetish” here does not endorse the Eurocentric view it has come to symbolize, but rather refers to this specific aspect of Freud’s book and its ideas, which this article asserts are central to this particular film.

One of the essays in *Totem und Tabu* discusses the presence of “animism” in the so-called primitive societies. Here, Freud catalogues various ways in which people and things are seen to have “power” or not, based on a society’s or a person’s view of what happens after death. Some spiritual individuals might be able to wield these forces for good and/or evil; other societies however came to believe in the transmigration of the soul, such that all things, living or not, partake in spiritual presencing. An individual object might therefore be a locus of such spiritual power; such an object came to be called (in Freud’s day and vocabulary) a *fetish*, especially when its origin was a Western African country, such as today’s Mali, Senegal or Burkina Faso.

The fourth and final essay in *Totem und Tabu* (*Die Infantile Wiederkehr des Totemismus*, The Infantile Recurrence of Totemism) relates theories about how children and adolescents come to grips with these various social and spiritual forces. Here, Freud clearly distinguishes between “totem” and “fetish” when he states,

What distinguishes totem from fetish is that totem is never considered as an isolated thing, but always as a species, generally a sort of animal or a plant, more rarely a class of inanimate things, and even more rarely as a class of objects of artificial fabrication.<sup>2</sup>

Because other terms have proven to be far more accurate, we will use the term “fetish” (in quotation marks) only in a very limited sense to refer to the Freudian concept. Before going

further, it should be made clear that Freud's concept of "fetish" and its use as an anthropological or religious term is outdated. Already at the time of publication, it was rather dubious, and Freud spends most of his essay justifying and documenting his rationale for how this phenomenon of so called "primitive" belief systems came to be acknowledged in the West. In the century since that essay's publication, we have come to understand these different cultures and beliefs *as the practitioners of these religions themselves describe them*, rather than through the lens of a European bias, as Freud clearly did.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this paper is certainly *not* to investigate any such differences between "fiction" and "reality;" its purpose *is* to begin investigating how some ideas from Freud's seminal book may have found expression or interpretation in *La Promesse*.

### ***I. No Passport Necessary: The Oneness of Human Aspirations***



In many ways, the journey of the central protagonist Igor takes place by and through his budding sense of morality and justice, which is linked to the presence and influence of this small wooden statue. It, together with its owner Assita, lead Igor to a state of self-knowledge, until he has gathered the courage to tell Assita the truth about the death of her husband Hamidou. Igor's

passage into understanding and bravery occurs slowly through the film, until these qualities ripen climactically in the film's penultimate scene in the garage (which we will examine later in this paper), and in the revelation of the face-to-face truth as the film comes to its conclusion.

When Assita first arrives in Seraing, Igor has a voyeuristic fascination with her. He observes her through a storage room window, partially veiled by cloth; she of course has no idea he is watching her.<sup>4</sup> The camera pans into the room and (as noted by Pennisi<sup>5</sup>), these voyeuristic moments are the only times when we (the audience) see exactly as Igor does. It is veiled and eerie, as though looking through a glass darkly.<sup>6</sup> Here, for the first time, we see the statue, a wooden sculpture of perhaps 12-18" tall, of a child sitting cross legged, with arms raised in an open and yet embracing gesture. Sitting on a table against the wall, the sculpture is framed so that it appears as central to the small living quarters of the African family.





Assita circulates in the room wearing nothing but a dressing gown, but none of her private parts are exposed or even visually suggested. When there is a knock on the door, Igor's attention is pulled away, and so is the camera.

The image is certainly occulted, and the viewer does not know what Igor is thinking during the peeping episode. Many have suggested sexual arousal in the adolescent voyeur.<sup>7</sup> I think this might be partially true but not completely; if so, Igor might be smiling or showing more excited interest. Rather, the other-worldliness of the footage here suggests a fascination for unknowns (the spiritual world, which becomes central to the plot); for the mother, something absent from his life altogether (indeed we almost never see Assita without her baby); and for the baby itself (Igor has friends, but siblings are also absent from his life). Because Igor goes to great lengths later to protect Assita from being sold into prostitution by his father, I lean towards a non-sexual or very lightly-sexual view of this early moment in the film – especially as it still precedes what can be called the sexual consciousness-raising of the tattooing scene, for example.

Whenever Igor is alone in the apartment with Assita (or other members of her family), the directors bring the statue into our vision.



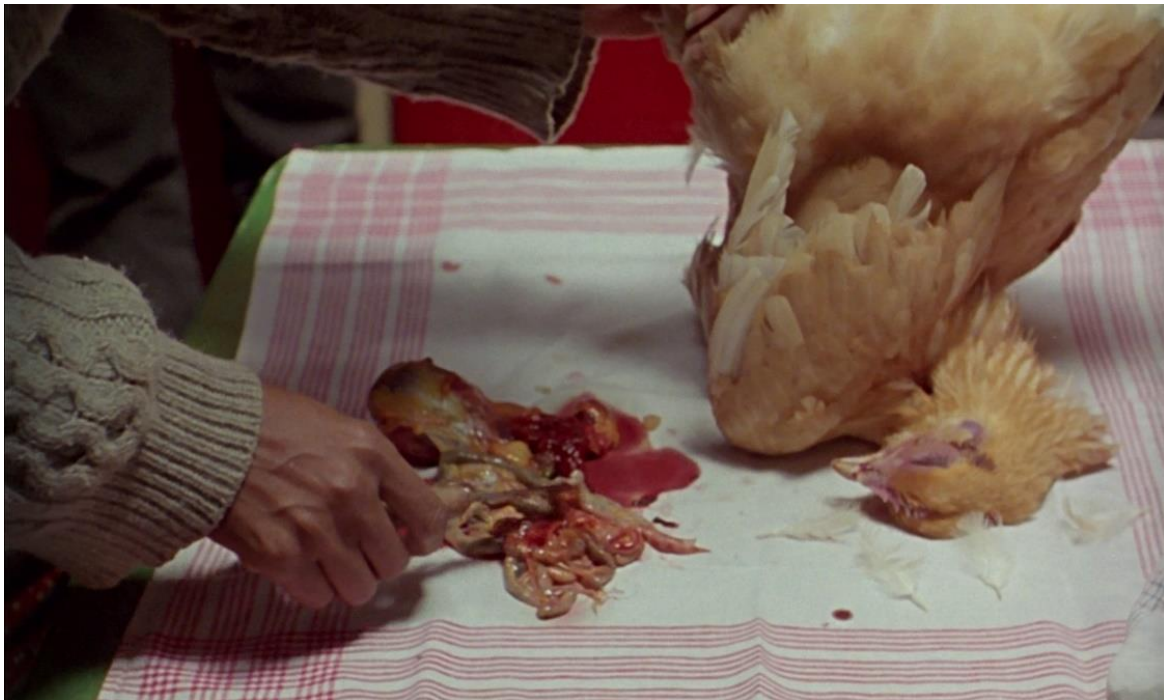
The object is inscrutable: mysterious and potentially powerful. For instance, when Igor gives Hamidou's radio to Assita – at that moment when he literally crosses the threshold of his father's explicit taboo of going to her home again – the directors bring radio and statue into close proximity.



The tempo here is slowed, expressing the sense of a powerful moment occurring, and the apparent otherworldliness of this face to face encounter from beyond the grave. But when others suddenly enter the scene (such as Roger or in an earlier scene, the untrustworthy Arab, Nabil), the statue is excluded from the frame.<sup>8</sup> In short, the film creates an especially close relationship between these three: Igor, the statue, and the family. The statue therefore serves to usher Igor into a larger view of life, and bears meaning related to a complete family, not a truncated one like his own. At this stage, the statuette can be understood to symbolize Igor's own childhood, and its mystery refers to what his own family life could have been like, under better circumstances. Hence

its visual presence for us symbolizes potential: those moments of transition into greater growth and maturity – those which are longed for, and those which are about to come.

Considering the statuette now from a more spiritual angle (Freud’s “fetish”), we should note that genuine spirituality seems absent in this environment; or perhaps it is just one where there are so many different belief systems – almost all practiced poorly, if at all – that no spirituality is felt or influential. As Luc Dardenne says in *Au Dos* about this film, “It seems to me there is a material destitution which manages to foster spiritual helplessness. Conceive of the setting as a desert.”<sup>9</sup> One reason why Assita stands out here is that she is genuinely different: she performs purification ceremonies in her new home once arrived (this is what Igor first sees through the “*soupirail*”); she quickly procures a young ram for the annual sacrifice; and she is herself a diviner – specifically a *haruspex* (to use the Eurocentric word), a person trained in the divination of truth through reading the entrails of a sacrificed animal, namely sheep or poultry. We see her do this in an abrupt cut in the middle of a later scene.



The information Assita gleans from reading chicken entrails is shockingly accurate, which certainly must have impressed young Igor. It cannot therefore be denied that part of Igor's unwary attraction to Assita is due to her mystical qualities and that a budding sense of curiosity and spirituality is at work in him, through her. As such, these factors relate directly to the third and fourth of Freud's essays of *Totem und Tabu*: animism, the "fetish," and the childlike return to totemism.

## ***II. Of Human and Animal Sacrifice; or, The Dignity of the Oppressed***

Although the main character of the film is Igor and his crossing of the threshold from adolescence to adulthood, the young man's mentor Assita is dignified, even noble. Luc Dardenne writes the following in *Au Dos de nos images* (during the creation phase of *La Promesse*); it is not specifically linked to Assita, but nonetheless applies well to her, and explains prime motivations of the filmmakers.

Film a human being who is not a victim, who will not be reduced to being the living support of suffering, who refuses that pity overtake him, filming this being has become an act of cinematographic resistance against the disdain of man, who dwells in the morbid pity of images of this esthetics of victimhood.<sup>10</sup>

The spiritual dignity indicated here by Luc Dardenne – one that defiantly cries “you can torture my body but you can't take my soul” – is inherent in Assita; and Igor's intuition of this undoubtedly constitutes part of his initial attraction to her.

The ultimate expression of oppression is unwilling sacrifice, perhaps even of one's own life. Animals of course figure among the oppressed beings of the earth. A brief but very potent



message is passed to us through the presence of a young ram (first appearing clearly near minute 36:00), which Assita explains has been procured for the annual sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> Bert Cartullo<sup>12</sup> incorrectly states that the sacrifice of the lamb is for the end of Ramadan (Eid al-Fitr), which it is not. It is specifically for Eid Al-Adha, the celebration at the end of the Hajj, or pilgrimage to the holy mosque at Mecca. All Muslims celebrate this feast, whether they have performed the Hajj or



not. More specifically, Eid Al-Adha celebrates, by sacrificing a ram, the mystical moment when Abraham, on the verge of sacrificing Isaac, is stopped by the angel Gabriel from performing the slaughter, and a ram miraculously appears and is offered instead.

One of the particular gifts of the Dardenne brothers is their handling of myths (or in the case of Abraham and his son, of actual historical events which have attained mythic proportions). Luc Dardenne takes a long moment to meditate on this in *Au Dos*, right when the scenario for *La Promesse* is coming to fruition (20 January 1993):

The child, his absolute ignorance of the plot. Isaac, the wood on his shoulder, accompanies his father. No doubt he walks behind him, sees his back, and the knife in his hand..."Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?..." Those who participate in the plot know but he does not.

God knows, He who is the instigator. Abraham knows, he who is the burdened servant. Isaac does not know and can ask the true question, the innocent's question, of he who does not know the plot.

Maybe that is what being innocent is: being outside the plot. The very innocence of Isaac's question seems able to dissolve the plot, to say that the sacrifice will not take place. Abraham feels this power of the innocent's question. Caught between the word of God asking him to sacrifice the child and the word of the child asking him where the lamb is for the sacrifice, he responds: "God will provide the lamb." These words announce that the sacrifice will not happen, that the sacrifice will be that of the plot itself; they came out of Abraham's mouth without him understanding them, as if he had said them only to reassure the child. Abraham could not give a different response. He did not know it yet but he has just heard God and responded to him. God speaks via the innocent. God has only created the intrigue in order to dissolve it.

Contrary to the Biblical text, the story will pit innocence against a godless plot, a plot where he will have to deal with the Adversary, the Plotter who ridicules the question and will kill him. In a world without God, no one is outside of the plot, except the innocent one. Alone, he continues to ask his question, the true question, the one by which the human survives.

How can we “inherit” meanings from our childhood Biblical readings when God is no longer in them?<sup>13</sup>

Because of the ram prepared by Assita for the religious sacrifice, and the film’s central focus on the relationship between father and son, it can be said that the Abraham / Isaac / sacrificial lamb narrative is indeed a central axis of this film. However, after the dramatic events in the car garage late in the film, the fixed roles and characters of the three main figures become liberated, and the myth is inverted. The sacrificing father becomes the *sacrificed*, since Igor’s truth telling moment to Assita in the train station amounts to “killing the father,” who will probably go to jail now. The truth telling moment (per Levinas) is here the sacrificial *act*, just as the question of the innocent Isaac is the truth telling moment of Abraham’s faith in Luc Dardenne’s understanding of the Biblical text. Without the fear and constraints of the oppressive and sacrificed father Roger, the “sacrificed” son and the “black sheep” Assita are the *survivors*, freer to orient their lives according to their own needs, not Roger’s.

While the ideas put forth here skip elliptically between the early parts and the closing sequences of the film, we would do well to examine more closely how this sequence of events came to be born, because this potent retelling of the sacrifice of Abraham is further enriched by elements of Greek tragedy, which we should now examine.

### ***III. Prophecy and Birth: Maieutike Techne***

However crass the world that Roger has created for his progeny may be, there is nothing mysterious about it. The relationship between Roger and his son Igor might be described as “honor

among thieves,” and although they have a certain kind of love for each other, they are petty territorial princes in a universe of material and interpersonal use and abuse. Once things go wrong, however (by the death of Hamidou), the world between them slowly decays and crumbles from the inside out. Because of the wooden statue, Igor begins to see connections between the material world (Hamidou is *really* dead and he, Igor, is *really* partially responsible) and the spiritual one, where truths are apparently known to more than just those who were present at the time of the act. For instance when the African occult specialist explains to Assita that her child is sick due to an aggrieved forefather’s unavenged death and far away burial, Igor begins to get sick. It finally hits home to Igor that *he* is complicit in something very reprehensible for which *he* could actually be busted and have to face serious consequences. It might be called the moment of Sartrean *nausée*, or less euphemistically a visceral response to the adolescent’s apprehension of the very limits of his own personhood. When the diviner next says that he has no indication whether Hamidou is actually *dead* or not, Igor vomits.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Igor at this point wishes that someone – *anyone* – would tell Assita about her husband’s death so that he will not have to face her and the truth alone. This moment which he so fears is of course the moment when he eventually passes into social adulthood by speaking a truth no one else can or will. Even the African diviner, who might know, unwittingly contributes to the great charade being perpetrated upon Assita. Later when Igor asks Assita if she believes the diviner, she responds *Pourquoi pas?* By that time, she has become a central figure in his life – not a “wife,” but an influential friend to whom he is bound, and a guide: indeed, a mother figure in the cinematic world of the Dardenne brothers which has (accurately) been called *maieutic*: not in the Socratic sense of knowledge gained by dialogue, but rather in the original meaning, as she plays the role of a spiritual and personal *midwife* to the nascent new Igor who is about to be born.



Igor's violent birth scene where he proves his adulthood stands in close proximity to the dramatic climax of the film, which brings all these elements – and more – brilliantly into play: the scene where Igor begins to repair the broken statue. Symbolically, this act conveys a genuine desire and willingness to repair his lost childhood and confess his (witting or unwitting) crimes: a striving for wholeness and wholesomeness, of which spirituality has been (for so many) an important part. Igor now accepts and respects the spiritual forces which the statue represents and perhaps even embodies – a huge step in his maturation, as he now has some sense of a larger universe; he cannot endlessly con whoever he wants or needs to, free of consequences, as planned. Freud states:

The belief associated with the original taboo, according to which a demonic power concealed in the object avenges touching it or its forbidden use by bewitching the offender is still an entirely objectified fear. This had not yet been separated into the two forms which it assumed at a more developed stage, namely repulsion and respect.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, just as Igor is repairing the statue, his father enters the workshop, angry, and ready to sort this out once and for all, wreaking his vengeance. As they struggle and Roger gets the upper hand, Assita intervenes with a weapon. Since her entry was unannounced, we are stunned when she hits Roger over the head with a pipe. Here, like an African *deus ex machina*, the owner of the statue intervenes to defend the person who is repairing and protecting it.

Once Roger is neutralized, Igor moves quickly to bind his father's foot by means of a chain from the block and tackle at the auto shop. Roger now supplicates Igor to help him "in the name of God" (*nom de Dieu*). This is not the first time that Roger has brought the name of the Christian divinity into play in pleading with Igor, but it will be the last (as far as this film is concerned). The

Christian God will now become – at least temporarily – a part of the entire corrupt culture of the father which Igor rejects wholesale. When Roger then calls Igor his son, Igor erupts, “Shut up!” (*Ta gueule! Ta gueule! Ta gueule!*), and he eventually escapes this dangerous context by running off with Assita to the train station (the movie’s final scene).

Roger is helpless to stop them because he cannot see without his glasses and he is bound by the foot.



One should recall that Oedipus’s name means “bound feet,” and that he indeed had his feet bound when, as an infant, he was abandoned on the mountainside above Thebes. At the other extreme of his life, Oedipus can no longer see (he has blinded himself), a state of affairs represented here by Roger losing his glasses. Any doubt that an oedipal structure is at work in *La Promesse* should by now be as driven out as the blinded Oedipus himself was (in Sophocles’ version), once he understood what taboos he had unwittingly broken.

The prediction of Tiresias in the Greek tragedy is that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother, Jocasta.<sup>16</sup> While we don't know that Igor will marry Assita, he is acting as an adult companion to her, guiding her in the ways of the Western world, just as she is guiding him in the ways of the spiritual world. The taboo of the Oedipus story is that he has intercourse with his mother, Jocasta (and in fact they do have children together); but the prediction is only that he will marry her, and this is not impossible in the future for Igor and Assita – but if so, it is still some ways off. It might even be an innocent sort of *marriage blanc*, of which we see the much darker side in the Dardenne's later film, *Le Silence de Lorna*. So while the exact oedipal structure found in Sophocles is not found here, the Dardenne brothers' film interpretation of it is every bit as potent as modern day water from that ancient river bed. As Philip Mosley says quite correctly, Igor “kills his father symbolically by telling Assita the truth about her husband's death.”<sup>17</sup> Killing the father is one of the great and original taboos; but the new relationship to the mother Assita is what casts a strongly oedipal light on *La Promesse*.

Among the aspects which make this film so compelling and indeed a genuinely great work of art is that the film's climax deftly weaves (as do so many great works of European humanism) Biblical elements (here, the Old Testament narrative of Abraham and Isaac) together with aspects of Greek antiquity (the story of Oedipus). The one is about sacrifice, servitude and faith – and the resultant blessing of a family lineage. The other is about investigating events of the outer world leading to self-recognition and self-sacrifice; of fear and pity by its awful punishment of an “innocent;” and the damnation of offspring even for a *parent's* unwitting crimes. What they have in *common* is most potent for us as viewers of *La Promesse*: that is, *prophecy*, at the behest of which a path of faith and intuition on the one hand, or outer investigation leading to self-recognition on the other, both accomplish *freedom via expiation*. Due to forces beyond his control,

Igor inherits powerfully from both these traditions. The single bearer of meaning for these apparently opposite narratives is here none other than the very improbable symbol of the African statuette or “fetish” (to use Freud’s word one last time), who guides the viewer of *La Promesse* through the film’s narrative to its multifarious meanings, just as it has led Assita and Igor out of ignorance and into knowledge and wisdom; for her, to truths of the material world; and for him, to those of the spiritual one. This understanding is itself “prophesied” in the opening shot of the film. Igor is working a gas pump which indicates *debit* and *amount to be paid*. In other words, the filmmakers foreshadow in the film’s opening shot that, like Abraham on the one hand and Oedipus



on the other, Igor’s day of reckoning is near. *Débit* here means both *debt* (the financial, or moral/ethical term) and *flow* (the rate at which output occurs). The poetic ambiguity of this term, and the numerical values indicated, call attention to the fact that justice in our world is not always equal to its corresponding crime.

***IV. Social Change Which Can't Be Exploited; or, Why Plato Cast the Poets Out***



*Anagnorisis: Igor first recognizes his father's nature, and its implications for his own.*

We see from what has preceded that Roger's destiny is ignoble but not tragic, since he is a petty prince of a criminal fiefdom. It is Igor's character which is tragic (if also often ignoble) because – except for forces beyond his control – his life could have been altogether different, altogether better.

David Walsh criticized the films of the Dardenne brothers strongly for not showing the actual material causes which could effectively bring about real social change, the very need for which fills their films.

There is an unresolved dualism in the Dardenne's films which weakens them artistically. The filmmakers create hardened or bitter characters and then present



their startling metamorphoses outside of any objectively driven process, simply as the result of certain cumulative internal psychological processes.<sup>18</sup>

But the Dardennes are not revolutionaries, as Walsh would like; they are artists; and change at the individual level does not always occur as a result of a material cause-and-effect sequence, similar to the massive historical dialectics to which Walsh vaguely refers. On the contrary, personal change often occurs because the irrational erupts in an individual's life – love or the need for love; a spiritual awakening or indeed a conversion; a death in one's life, or the sudden advent of a situation leading more or less swiftly to one's own death or dying sequence. Certainly this awakening to various forms of love can be said to be at the root of change for other protagonists of Dardenne brothers' films: for Bruno in *L'Enfant*; for Lorna and her presumed child in *Le Silence de Lorna*; for Cyril and Samantha in *Le Gamin au vélo*; and for Sandra in her final heroic decision of *Deux Jours, une nuit*. Such is also assuredly true for Igor here, whose life of difficulty is far from over, but whose own awakening and emotional development occurred through the catalyst of a spiritual agent – a small West African statue, its owners, and his own surprisingly mature promise to carry out a dying man's last wishes, even at the expense of sacrificing his entire tragic world.

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<sup>1</sup> « Dans toutes les scènes Igor/Assita au cours desquelles ils se regardent, Igor est toujours celui qui, le premier, détourne son regard. Igor ne peut regarder le regard d'Assita car il y a presque le commandement moral auquel il ne peut répondre. Sauf dans la scène finale. (pg. 5 in Luc Dardenne, *Au Dos de nos Images 1991-2005*. Paris: Seuil, 2005.

This book is a wonderful patchwork, rich in the directors' ideas and orientations (Levinas, Freud, Greek mythology, Shakespeare, Biblical commentary, as well of discussions of dozens of films). A later book by Luc Dardenne, *Au Dos de nos images 2: 2005-2015* (Paris : Seuil, 2015) is more oriented to being a diary of the struggles and triumphs in the creation of their films. It is far less specific to *La Promesse* (because coming 10 years after), and it will not be cited in this study. Hence all references to *Au Dos de nos images* will be to *Volume 1 (1995-2005)*, and abbreviated hereafter simply to *Au Dos*.

<sup>2</sup> *Der Totem unterscheidet sich vom Fetisch darin, daß er nie eine Einzelding ist, sondern immer eine Gattung, in der Regel eine Tier- oder Pflanzart, seltener eine Klasse von unbelebten Dingen und noch seltener von künstlich hergestellten Gegenständen.* My translation from “Die Infantile Wiederkehr des Totemismus.” Page 126 in *Totem und Tabu*. 9. Band, *Gesammelte Werke*. Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag / London, Imago Publications, 1940.

<sup>3</sup> We wish to draw attention specifically to the fact that there may be differences between the West African religions themselves, how the present author describes them, and the ways in which the Dardennes portray them in this film. The Dardenne brothers made many documentaries before turning to fiction to express their views. Hence they make realistic films, but their later films such as *La Promesse* are not documentaries of reality. The stories are fiction, and so the filmmakers may and do exercise freedom to use symbols as needed.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, the original title for the scenario was *Le Soupirail*, a small basement window, and given the downwards facing perspective of some of these shots, this may well be the locus originally intended. See *Au Dos* op. cit., page 18: « Le titre du nouveau scénario n’est plus *Le Soupirail*, mais *La Promesse*. » Assita does not however appear to be living in a basement apartment, as the name would suggest; the scenario calls this window a *lucarne*, a skylight or roof window, which it clearly is not either.

<sup>5</sup> *Per la prima e unica volta il nostro sguardo coincide con quello de Igor.* (p. 99, Sebastiano Pennisi, « *La Promesse*, Lo Sguardo e(sc)luso. » 97-117 in Sebastiano Gesù, ed., *Etica ed Estetica dello Sguardo : Il Cinema dei Fratelli Dardenne*. Cantania : Maimone, 2006). *For the first and only time, our gaze coincides with that of Igor* (my trans). Pennisi is not exactly right as it is not the *only* time; it actually happens *every* time that Igor observes her from this vantage point.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Mai (following Alois Reigl and Laura Marks, and I think correctly) describes the eeriness of scenes like this one as *haptic*, a visual process or procedure intending to imitate the sense of touch. See pp 58-60 in Mai, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Most scholars agree with Joseph Mai here (in *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), but I do not. Mai states: “When Assita arrives at the house, [Igor] hides in a storage room next to her and peers at her undressed body through a peephole. This initial gaze might be interpreted as a fetishistic imagining of differences as erotically charged” (pg. 49). I side rather with Jonathan Rosenbaum, “...in [Assita’s] undressing, for example (which the curious, not prurient, young Belgian observes)...” in Cartullo, Bert, ed., *Committed Cinema: The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. Essays and Interviews*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009.

We cannot, however, rule out the interpretation of Mai and others altogether. When the father Roger goes to see his “boss” Müller, he passes in front of a storefront for peep shows. Hence it is possible that this is a part of young Igor’s sexual awareness, potentially an erotic habit for him. Moreover the oedipal structures suggested later in this article give credence to a budding sexual desire in Igor, evidenced as early as this point in the film.

<sup>8</sup> « *Ne point tant encadrer l’image que cacher ses alentours.* » Luc Dardenne, *Au Dos*, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> « *Il me semble qu’il y a un dénuement matériel qui parvient à faire exister le désarroi spirituel. Penser le décor comme un désert.* » *Au Dos*, Op.cit., pg 25.

<sup>10</sup> My translation of « *Filmer un être humain qui ne soit pas une victime, qui ne se réduise pas à être le support vivant d’une souffrance, qui refuse que la pitié ait prise sur lui, filmer cet être est devenu un acte de résistance cinématographique contre le mépris de l’homme qui se tient dans la pitié morbide des images de cette esthétique victimaire.* » (page 37, *Au Dos*, op.cit.)

<sup>11</sup> Many West Africans practice elements of Islam and indigenous religions side by side, as was and is common throughout the world. For instance, Europeans have and continue to practice several “pagan” rites and rituals alongside or in combination with Christianity (Christmas trees, knocking on wood, throwing salt over the shoulder, and so forth).

<sup>12</sup> “Lower Depths, Higher Planes,” page 33 in Cartullo, Bert, ed., op.cit., 2009.

<sup>13</sup> *Au Dos*, p. 19. 'L'enfant, son ignorance absolu de l'intrigue. Isaac, le bois sur l'épaule, accompagne son père. Sans doute marche-t-il derrière lui, voit-il son dos, dans sa main le couteau... « Où est l'agneau pour le sacrifice ? » Ceux qui participe à l'intrigue le savent mais lui ne sait pas.

Dieu sait, lui qui en est l'instigateur. Abraham sait, lui qui en est le serviteur accablé. Isaac ne sait pas et peut poser la vraie question, la question de l'innocent, de celui qui ignore l'intrigue.

C'est peut-être cela, être innocent : être en dehors de l'intrigue. L'innocence même de la question d'Isaac semble pouvoir dissoudre l'intrigue, dire que le sacrifice n'aura pas lieu. Abraham ressent ce pouvoir de la question de l'innocent. Pris entre la parole de Dieu lui demandant de sacrifier l'enfant et la parole de l'enfant lui demandant où est l'agneau pour le sacrifice, il répond : « Dieu se pourvoira de l'agneau. » Ces mots annonce que le sacrifice n'aura pas lieu, que le sacrifice sera celui de l'intrigue elle-même ; ils sont sortis de la bouche d'Abraham sans qu'il les entende, comme s'il les avait prononcés seulement pour rassurer l'enfant. Abraham ne pouvait pas donner d'autre réponse. Il ne le savait pas encore mais il venait d'entendre Dieu et lui répondait. Dieu parle par l'innocent. Dieu n'a intrigué que pour dissoudre l'intrigue.

Contrairement au texte biblique, l'histoire mettra l'innocent aux prises avec une intrigue sans Dieu, une intrigue où il aura affaire à l'Adversaire, l'Intrigant qui se moquera de sa question et le tuera. Dans un monde sans Dieu, personne n'est hors de l'intrigue, excepté l'innocent. Seul, il continue de poser sa question, la vraie question, celle par laquelle l'humain survit.

Comment « hériter » des significations de nos lectures bibliques d'enfance alors que Dieu ne s'y trouve plus ?''

<sup>14</sup> The scenario calls this a *soulèvement de coeur*, meaning to throw up. Page 111, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. *Scenarios : Rosetta suivi de La Promesse*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> *Der dem Ursprunglichen Tabu eigene Glaube an eine dämonische Macht, die in dem Gegenstand verbogen ist und dessen Berührung oder unerlaubte Verwindung durch die Verzauberung des Taters rächt, ist eben noch ganz und ausschließlich die objektiver Furcht. Diese hat sich noch nicht in die beiden Formen gesondert, die sie auf einer entwickelte Stufe annimt: in den Abschau und die Erfurcht.* Page 35, *Totem und Tabu*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> This relationship between Tiresias and Jocasta is on Luc Dardenne's mind during the creation of *La Promesse*; he uses it to explain differences between theater and cinema. See pages 33-34 in *Au Dos*, (op.cit.).

<sup>17</sup> Page 82 in *The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers: Responsible Realism*. New York: Wallflower (Columbia University) Press, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> David Walsh, page 78 in « The Dardenne Brothers: An Argument for a Far More Critical Appraisal, or, What About the 'Extenuating Circumstances'? » in Bert Cartullo, ed., *The Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. Essays and Interviews* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009). Fortunately, Walsh does wise up a bit by the next page when he says that "Mass psychology is not individual psychology extended to the whole of society; it is a qualitatively specific system with its own laws."

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