

Totem and Taboo in *La Promesse* by the Dardenne Brothers

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Abstract

In a very small number of scenes all close together in *La Promesse* (1996), Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne add a strong factor of Freudian social and sexual prohibition to the plot. These scenes highlight Roger's predatory opportunism, and Igor's subsequent heroic character of principled action amidst chaos. The central question of Igor's virginity is raised; this article asserts that he purposefully retains his sexual innocence, which becomes the source of strength for his adult decisions and behavior throughout the rest of the film.

Keywords: Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne, *La Promesse*, Freud, Totem and Taboo, Igor, Saint Igor.



The moment when Igor realizes that Roger (his father) requires his complicity in murder.

Totem and taboo go hand-in-hand in Freud's landmark assessment of them, as they are both established as safeguards against incest. The totem is a sign or symbol of some kind which serves to mark the family or the clan, with the intent of excluding members for marriage or sexual relations. Breaking this taboo resulted in extremely severe punishments, most often (although not always) ending in death. Individuals violating this injunction became themselves marginalized, as taboo-breaking could be

“contagious.”¹ Taboo was definitely on Luc Dardenne’s mind during the creation of this film, as we see from an entry in *Au Dos de nos images 1996-2005* (26 November 1993):

*Nenen told me a story about a village woman who had a mixed race child with an American soldier, while her fiancé was still a POW in Germany. The village people formed a league against her and her child. One night, she drowned herself in the river. When they fished her cadaver out, they discovered that of her baby against her breast, attached by a cord which she had wrapped around the two bodies.*² (pg. 29, my trans.)

Consider further that one of the strongest prohibitions in primitive societies concerned adolescents: in particular, the relationship between fathers and adolescent daughters was heavily codified, from the onset of puberty until married; but a strong prohibition between brothers and sisters arose as well.

*The dead, newborns, and menstruating women provoke through their special helplessness those individuals coming into the new pleasure which puberty promises. For that reason all these people and all these circumstances are taboo, because longing after them is not to be allowed.*³

With these ideas in mind, let us turn our attention now to issues of character development, because certain circumstances in *La Promesse* ripen our understanding of the film in light of these societal taboos. We have shown elsewhere⁴ that evidence of the tragic oedipal *social* structure exists cinematographically; but we can and should further explore some of the film’s underlying oedipal *familial* and *sexual* issues as well. For this, Freud’s *Totem und Tabu* is again extremely helpful, and in order to circumscribe our investigation, we shall limit our discussion to Igor’s body.

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¹ As Freud says, *Der Mensch, der ein Tabu übertreten hat, wird selbst tabu, weil er die gefährlichen Eignung hat, andere zu versuchen, daß sie seinem Beispiel folgen* (The person who has violated the taboo becomes taboo, because he has the dangerous ability of seeking others who will follow his example.) *Totem und Tabu*, Volume 9 of *Gesammelte Werke*. Frankfurt (Fischer Verlag) and London (Imago Publishing): 1940. Page 43.

² «Nenen m’a raconté une histoire d’une femme du village qui eut un enfant métis avec un soldat américain alors que son fiancé était encore prisonnier de guerre en Allemagne. Les gens du village se liguèrent contre elle et son enfant. Un soir, elle se jeta dans le fleuve. Lorsqu’on repêcha son cadavre, on découvrit celui de l’enfant contre son sein, retenu par une corde qu’elle avait enroulée autour de leurs deux corps.» Page 29 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*.

³ *Der Tote, das Neugeborene, die Frau in ihren Leidenzuständen reizen durch ihre besondere Hilflosigkeit, das eben geschlechtsreif gewordene Individuum durch den neuen Genuß, den es verspricht. Darum sind alle diese Personen und all diese Zustände tabu, denn der Versuchung darf nicht nachgegeben werden.* Pg. 43, *Totem und Tabu*, *op. cit.*

⁴ See my “Fetish, Sacrifice and Tragic Freedom in the Dardenne Brothers’ *La Promesse*,” (*Journal of Religion and Film*, University of Nebraska, April 2016).

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. Together, they have a stash of money almost large enough to pay off their house. 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 (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 there, but refuses to save Hamidou's life, for fear of having his underworld discovered by the authorities. In so doing, he commits a form of unpremeditated murder, and draws his own son squarely into it. Roger then buries the body at the construction site. Soon thereafter in the film, we have the shower scene (as the two attempt to destroy any corporeal evidence of the crime). A few short scenes later, Roger has apparently learned the Igor has taken a considerable amount of cash (for which they have both "worked" so hard) and given it to Assita to pay off her husband's gambling debts. This sends Roger on a rampage against Igor, which we analyze below; and immediately thereafter is the scene of the *café chantant* (also discussed).

Henceforward, Roger 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 now that they have been paid off, Hamidou will soon reappear. For his part, Igor's moral dilemma is crystalized by his struggle to tell Assita of her husband's death, and he often lies very cold-bloodedly about it, right to her face. Igor finally realizes that he cannot have two allegiances, 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 now go to the police, but the film ends here.

I. The Shower Scene

The vortex of the film's plot certainly turns around Igor's transition from adolescence to adulthood (precisely the moment of puberty which Freud indicated as a

danger zone for taboos). But where and when *exactly* does Igor's change of character begin to take place? To answer this question, we must begin with the cover-up of Hamidou's accidental death.

Following those obviously traumatic circumstances, father and son clean up. As the scene opens, we see through strips of hanging plastic into the shower room, where Roger and Igor are in various states of undress. The father appears stripped down to his underwear; the son, shirt on, removes his pants, carefully hiding his underwear with his shirttails. There are a few moments of suspense-building when Rifi (one of Igor's go-cart buddies) knocks on the door looking for his friend, but Roger eventually convinces him to come back the next day. Cut back: once again, Roger is facing Igor, and both are standing in front of the shower stall. Roger undresses Igor as a mother would, pulling his shirt up over the boy's head and, turning on the shower, urges Igor in, placing his hand on his shoulder and patting him on the back. We assume Igor is naked of course, although we only see his head and chest as he showers. Then the father steps between the camera and Igor, as he has noticed that the boy has gotten into the shower with his socks on (**image 1**). It is at this time that we first clearly see the tattoo on Roger's left arm, which is the mark of the family totem here.



For the first time, we see Roger's tattoo, the totemizing element of his "clan".

Is the boy too young to know to remove his socks for a shower? Is he too traumatized from the day's encounter with death to notice this detail at all? Or does he, as the name Igor ironically suggests in a cinematic context, simply do what his father/master tells him, when he tells him, without making considerations of common sense? The response is likely some cocktail of all three of these. In any case the father now removes his son's socks for him, squeezes them out, and instructs the boy to wash away the blood. Indeed, Igor seems to have a vertical wound in the outside upper left ankle and blood is running down. The boy has difficulty washing it away, and there is some resemblance to menstruation from this still somewhat effeminate adolescent body. Then, yet again, Roger appears onscreen with his back to us, between the camera and Igor, and instructs his son to give him the ring (a matching signet ring which father had given to son earlier). He removes it from Igor's hand, and the camera now leaves Igor and follows Roger, still in his underwear, as he carefully washes away all traces of evidence in this accident-turned-crime from both rings.

Some scholarly attention has been paid to this scene. Joseph Mai (2010) states that after Hamidou's death, "Igor's body has changed, become confused and unsure; he cannot seem to adequately wash the blood off his legs in the shower and forgets to take

his socks off.”⁵ There is certainly some truth to this, but rather more convincing is Sebastiano Pennisi’s reading, “The purifying shower signifies Igor’s rebirth.”⁶ This seems somewhat more likely but still does not encompass the entire meaning. The shower is not a baptism or a complete purification. Igor still does his father’s bidding with the Korean “guest worker” who appears later, taking his money without much explanation. Igor is still prone to theft, in as much as he almost certainly steals 10,000 Belgian Francs from his father to pay off Hamidou’s gambling debts,⁷ thereby protecting Assita and the baby, as he had promised. In fact, Igor further commits the serious crimes of breaking and entering into the workplace of his former employer, and grand theft (auto) in order to take Assita to the hospital. In short, *Igor’s moral choices have not yet changed at all*: but rather than doing his dirty work for his father’s (and his own) benefit, he begins doing them for Assita’s (and his own) benefit.

In addition to those two readings, I would like to add that the shower scene adds another, rather more obvious factor, and that is simply the sexualization of young Igor.⁸ The young man has ostensibly reached puberty,⁹ and the father has now plainly seen the truth of this in the shower room. This scene and the following sequence of events contribute to explaining some of the dialogue and scenes to come, as well as to understanding some of the problems which occur in the adult relationships, from social oedipal structures, to the sudden vulgarization of Igor’s language and adult responses (*Fume ta bite!* [Smoke your dick!] he snaps at Nabil, an obvious mouth-to-penis image; **image 2**).



The untrustworthy Nabil asks a question, and the angry Igor snaps back.

⁵ Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010, pg 46. I would agree that an important change has taken place, but it is his mind that is confused, not his body.

⁶ *La doccia purificatoria signa la riniscita di Igor*. 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. (my translation)

⁷ It is possible that it was Igor’s own money, or that he stole the money from somewhere else, because the father, when punishing him for this, does not mention theft, only dishonesty or cheating (“*plus jamais de tricherie entre nous*”). But the terrifying beating he receives would not logically be just for lying, as father and son are both accomplished liars, and understand its importance for their everyday lives.

⁸ Perhaps this has not been raised before due to the actor’s young age. At the time of writing this article, however, Jérémie Renier (according to Wikipedia) is married and has two children of his own. Any taboo about discussing, in an academic context, his body while he was an adolescent should be lifted by this time.

⁹ The viewer never sees any more evidence of this than some teen-age acne; the adolescent has no facial hair at all.

The very name *Igor* is derived from the Norwegian *Ing*, the Scandinavian god of fertility and prosperity, and hence is by its very essence, phallic. Is it merely a coincidence that the young blond actor chosen for this role is quite Scandinavian in appearance?

II. Forbidden Fruit

Certainly the most significant sequence of events in relation to an understanding of totem and taboo in *La Promesse* is the punishment and reconciliation scene, which is highly charged sexually. The scene opens by cutting into Roger on a rampage; we soon discover that he is beating his son, chasing him around the house, trying to catch him. Only the intervention of Maria¹⁰ calms Roger enough for him to relent. We also learn here for sure that Maria is herself a foreigner (if we had any doubts) by her language, as she exclaims in a strongly accented French *Tu vas tuer lui!*, an obvious blunder no native speaker would ever make; and so we now know that the father is shafting these illegals both physically *and* financially. No explanation for the beating is given yet; the filmmakers have hidden the likely fact that a) Igor has stolen money from his father's stash and b) the boy has been subsequently double-crossed for cash by Nabil, the double-dealing Arab and minor co-conspirator at the Residence, who is always bumming cigarettes. This elliptical style of the Dardenne brothers adds to the plot's density: will this film be primarily a crime drama?

Once calmed, the father issues a formal interdiction, making the African woman a full-fledged taboo: *Tu n'iras plus chez la Nègresse! Je m'en occuperai, moi!* (You WILL not go to the Negro woman's apartment anymore! I'll take care of it – myself!), adding an unsurprising note of racism to Roger's (lack of) character. He instructs the boy to get up off the floor, and offers to work further on his tattoo. Igor accepts and, still crying from the physical and psychological abuse, sits on the bed next to his father, who has taken out the tattoo materials. In order to cheer the boy up somewhat, there is some hugging and playful rough-housing on the bed, including the father tickling his son with both hands, and the boy playfully resisting; they roll around on the bed like children or awkward lovers (**image 3**).



The tickling scene on the bed.

¹⁰ Obviously a Christian expression here – but which (or both?) of the Marias is she?

Just before starting on the tattoo, the father pauses and then asks Igor whether he has ever been with a woman. The boy says no, and then the father inquires further: *Téter?* Here both the published scenario and the subtitles lead us astray, as they both indicate *niquer*, a slang word derived from Arabic meaning to screw or fuck; but the word *téter* clearly means to suckle (as a baby who is being breastfed) or more familiarly, to suck. Igor, physically showing his surprise, again responds no.¹¹ The father says he is of age now and should get started. You must have desire sometimes, no? The boy grins and says yes, sometimes. The father then proceeds with the tattooing, and the boy grimaces repeatedly as the needle punctures his arm (**images 4 and 5**).



Igor's tattoo-in-progress will be identical to his father's. Igor winces in pain at the moment of penetration.

One could hardly ask for a better artistic rendering of the very structures about which *Totem and Taboo* was written. The totem, as we have seen earlier, is a sign of some kind, intended to prevent incest by marrying within the clan, or more generally, to prevent sexual relations between members of the same clan. Now it becomes clear that the tattoo images on both Roger and Igor are one and the same: a) we saw it on Roger's arm in the shower scene and b) we see it on Igor in its early stages here.¹² The totem of family and clan membership is being formally established on the very body of the young man.¹³

But the totem is not further inscribed and formalized before the possibility of violating the taboo is raised. Consider the following circumstances: two men together on a bed, one experienced, the other not; the experienced one has seen the younger inexperienced one naked in the shower quite recently; the two have just had the full body contact of playful wrestling on a bed. Now, when the older more experienced one says to the handsome and innocent younger one, "So you're a virgin – how about sucking?", is an offer being made? Most would say so; but not so explicit an offer that a denial could not easily be raised later if need be. There is indeed *ambivalence*, a key factor in respecting, violating and justifying actions surrounding the taboo, as Freud

¹¹ Since the scenario and subtitle track both indicate *niquer* and *screwing*, there is some question in my mind as to whether the directors instructed the father to ad-lib this word, in order to get the "correct" response from Igor. It seems to have worked, and the language – and Igor's reaction – stayed in.

¹² In fact, we first learned of, but did not see, Igor's tattoo earlier, when the mechanic to whom Igor was apprenticed remarked on it in anger at the auto body shop.

¹³ Here I do agree with Mai, who says (p. 46): "[Roger] forges with his son a number of bonds by which he ensures his cooperation. He makes him call him by his first name, makes him participate in the family business, [...] and even inscribes their family intimacy on his skin with a tattoo and a tight-fitting ring to match Roger's own."

points out.¹⁴ When we clarify that the older is the father and the younger his son, we are clearly in the territory of both the strong taboo of incest, and the lesser and more common one of homosexuality. This is precisely what the totems were established to prevent, according to Freud; but like everything in Roger's world, this taboo is not as clear-cut as it would be for us if Igor were a teenaged girl.

It is interesting to note here that the tattoo (which marks the totem of the family or the clan) further serves the other meaning of the word *fetish* in Freud's vocabulary, namely a displacement of sexual desire to another object or body part. Roger effectively penetrates his son's body with the fetish of the tattoo needle, a totemizing act which simultaneously inseminates Igor with Roger's own structures and morals, and those of whatever "clan" he could be said to belong to.

While I do think that the Dardenne brothers deliberately infused Freud into the creation of this scene and film, it is not really clear that the characters themselves understand the psychological and sociological repercussions of what is taking place. I do think Roger is asking for his son's compliance in sex, and that he knows it. The son however may only be experiencing this moment as "tantalizing, but creepy," contributing thereby to the strange bond of trust and mistrust between these two which is at the heart of the film – resulting from Hamidou's death and concealment, and the father's later beating of his son.

If we ask whether Roger is actually sexually interested in his son, the response must be derived from two sub-questions: those of Roger's morality, and of his sexual orientation. One critic has labeled Roger a "homophobe," without justifying this claim at all; but it is presumably based on the confrontation with the male prostitute at the Residence early in the film (since there are no other overtly homosexual incidents elsewhere in *La Promesse*). But if that is the case, then I strongly disagree, because a homophobe would have put an end to the implicit encounter altogether, perhaps violently (and we know that Roger can indeed be violent). Instead, Roger insists that the elder man in the bed of the younger one is the latter's *client*, and therefore, as they *had previously agreed*, Roger is entitled to an additional 5,000 Belgian Francs for using the apartment as a *maison de passe*, or a hotel where rooms are rented by the hour. Roger further declares that they are getting a good deal because in city center it would cost 20,000 francs: a very revealing statement. Moreover, this scene creates a foreshadowing of the scene between Roger and Igor on their bed (i.e., an older and a younger man having sex on a bed), which lends further credibility still to the thesis that Roger has a sexual interest in Igor, and/or that the scene is hermeneutically charged in the way asserted here.

Secondarily, the published scenario includes a scene at the Residence where Roger is having sex with Maria.¹⁵ However, if that scene was ever filmed, it did not make the final cut, although their sexual encounter is hinted at. Lastly, comments about Roger's sexuality and morality should include that he pays Nabil to stage a rape of Assita from which Roger "saves" her. Moreover, he does not shy away from kidnapping Assita and selling her off into prostitution in a foreign country, even when she has a helpless infant in her arms, in order to cover up his own responsibility in the

¹⁴ *Eine Veränderung in den Verhältnisse des grundlegenden Ambivalenz kann allein die Ursache sein, daß der Verbot nicht mehr in der Form des Tabu erscheint.* (Freud, pg. 152, *op. cit.*). Only a change in the circumstances of the fundamental ambivalence can be the cause for the prohibition to no longer appear as a taboo.

¹⁵ Scène 27 – «Roger est en train de baiser la femme que nous avons vue...». In this scene in the film, Roger calls her Maria. Page 77 in Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, *Scenarios. Rosetta suivi de La Promesse*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1999.

death of one of his “prisoners.” These and other scenes lead to the conclusion that Roger is simply *a predatory opportunist*: someone who will take whatever he can get, whenever he can get it (intended to personify, in my opinion, *the amorality of big business practices*). That could well include sex, even with his own son (whom he does love in his own way, as predatory fathers/Fathers often do), especially after having just seen his sprouting puberty in the shower only a few days before. In sum, we see patience in Roger’s character, but not morality; we see indications of sexual interest and activity, but no clear evidence to indicate it is a single orientation.

III. The *Café Chantant*

The film’s very next scene provokes questions that are critical to a full understanding of the ethical values being questioned in *La Promesse*: the scene of the *café chantant*. From the images of Igor wincing in pain as Roger penetrates him with the tattooing needle, we cut abruptly into a scene of Igor and Roger happily singing together (**image 6**).



Son and father performing at the *café chantant*.

The cut is sudden and the new scene is framed very tightly: and since it is held for several minutes, it becomes hypnotizing. We see only their faces as they approach and then distance themselves from a microphone. There is also a sudden increase in volume, as we are brought into the scene just as they begin singing. They joyfully and playfully sing an upbeat song in the popular style about a man who is disappointed in love.

As Pennisi notes, this is the only time in the whole film where the camera is fixed and the scene is completely closed; it is as claustrophobic as a prison.¹⁶ This scene demands the critic’s attention based on that alone, but there is also the additional factor that music is the major event here, which is rare in the Dardenne films, and deliberately so¹⁷; indeed, the only other time we have heard music thus far in *La Promesse* is when Hamidou fell to his death, trying to turn off and recover the radio where he was working. The scene in the *café chantant* is furthermore central to the plot because it is the first time that we as spectators are deliberately drawn into the game of

¹⁶ *L'inquadratura esclude tutti i presenti. E' una prigionia, anche per lo spettatore. Non si sa dove i due si trovino e lo sguardo è costretto in un primo piano claustrofobico.* (Pennisi, pg. 105, *op. cit.*) The framing excludes everyone present. It is a prison, even for the spectator. No one knows where the two are and one’s gaze is constrained in a claustrophobic close-up (my trans).

¹⁷ « *Q* : Pourquoi n’y a-t-il pas de musique dans votre film ? *R* : Pour ne pas vous boucher les yeux. » Luc Dardenne, *Au Dos*, *op. cit.*, page 85

attraction and prohibition with regards to Igor, seeing him as perhaps his father does on a daily basis. The young man is so attractive and his visual foil, his father, so unattractive that the footage is quite stark.¹⁸

And what a performance by Igor! He is all cleaned up and “beautified,” and he performs the song not just faultlessly, but with presence, poise and style. His beauty and grace in action make him very attractive to the viewer, to the public in the *café* – and probably therefore also to Roger. Beyond the mere spectacle however, we see a young man who out-performs his father publicly. This allows everyone to now see Igor truly as a young adult, not merely a boy. There is a magnetizing and perhaps mesmerizing - even charming – effect in this tightly framed sequence, where he projects handsomeness, confidence, joy, and because of his maturity, adult sex appeal.

Any loving parent would be thrilled to see their child presenting and performing so well in public, and indeed the scene continues with Roger and Igor hugging in their usual rough way. The camera now pulls back and cuts to a more open shot; an audience applauds, and we see father and son returning to their table in a *café*. There, Maria is waiting for Roger, and soon we also see that there is a strapping young redheaded girl / woman seated next to Igor. All together, they drink beer, smoke cigarettes and have fun in the sing-along as the next *chanteuse* performs; everyone gyrates (seated dancing) to the music and good vibes. The redhead tries to entice Igor into being as interested in her as she is in him. She kisses him on the cheek, and eventually wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him more. She is practically throwing herself at him, in fact. But Igor keeps his eyes fixed on his Dad, rather like a well-trained and loving dog, ever attentive to his master’s next task or whim (**images 7, 8 and 9**).



¹⁸ Indeed, while both actors are very talented, their pairing as father and son stretches the imagination. Jérémie Renier is much better paired in *L'Enfant*, for example.



Everyone is surprised and pleased at Igor's sudden manhood. The redhead give affection, but Igor keeps his eyes on his Dad. Is this the night on which Igor will lose his virginity?

We get the impression, after these private and public discussions and displays of young manhood that Roger has somehow arranged for Igor to lose his virginity; most scholars of the film agree on this point.¹⁹ We know from previous scenes that Roger has some familiarity with prostitution (he knows the going rate for a *maison de passe* downtown) and we see later in the film that he would gladly sell Assita off into prostitution in a foreign country to be shed of her. Yet the young red-head seems far too joyfully innocent and enthusiastic to be a prostitute, whether or not she is still a virgin, like Igor. The published scenario of the film (which does not always correspond to what is in the film itself) says that she is of the *style entraîneuse*, meaning that she is an employee of the bar, paid to dance with the men and get them to consume food and drink. Unfortunately, this does not really help to clarify if prostitution is involved or not; in some cases yes, in others, no.

In one of the acknowledged sources of this film,²⁰ *Deutschland Im Jahre Null* (*Germany Year Zero*), the women who do this are indeed selling themselves out of desperation. Moreover, the young lead character in Rossellini's film, Edmund (Edmund Meschke) does willingly lose his virginity (though not to an *entraîneuse*, but rather to a casual acquaintance) at about the same age as Igor here (completely off camera of course in 1948). Edmund is however immediately chastised for it by his parents and elder brother, and shows some degree of shame, albeit very briefly (*"Alle tun es auch"*). In Rossellini's film, the audience is incredulous that this big boy in children's clothes, who does business with adults but plays with primary schoolers, has actually had sexual intercourse; but he admits it so we must believe it for the purposes of the film. In *La Promesse*, we likewise do not have any direct visual evidence of Igor's supposed loss of sexual innocence, *but neither are we ever told verbally that this has happened*. Quite to the contrary, we have no evidence at all that he has had sex with the redhead, and ample evidence that he has *not* slept with Assita. Later when Rifi asks Igor if he has been shacking up with a girl (*une nana*) as Roger has been claiming while looking for his

¹⁹ Joseph Mai: Roger "arranges for [Igor] to lose his virginity..." (pg. 49, *op.cit.*); Philip Mosely: Roger offers Igor «the experience of cigarettes, beer and women» (Pg. 80, *op. cit.*); and others. Pennisi, agrees with this reading, but strongly disapproves morally (is he speaking as a father, or as a Father?): "*Roger si gioca la carta decisiva: legare maggiormente il figlio a sé facendolo iniziare sessualmente da un'amica. Ha intuito il bisogno da parte del ragazzo di una presenza femminile. E l'ennesimo passo falso di un padre rozzo e cieco.*" (Pennisi, pg. 105, *op. cit.*).

²⁰ «Encore revu Allemagne, année zero. Toujours la même intensité, le même tranchant. C'est notre modèle.» Luc Dardenne, *Au Dos de nos Images, 1991-2005, op. cit.*, page 33.

missing son, Igor is quite surprised and suspicious, and says *Quelle nana?* (Is Roger talking about Assita like she is a prostitute? Does Roger think Igor and Assita are having sex?) There is nothing like the typical teen-aged sense of pride of accomplishment in having sex for the first time – not even a grin or a chuckle. He then goes along with the story out of expedience, as this is certainly easier than explaining the entire situation to his friend, which must still be kept secret.²¹ Igor, as we know, thinks very quickly and is an accomplished (if not a professional) liar. We know of course that the idea of sex between Igor and Assita is nothing more than assumption or speculation. The directors show us no signs of sexual intimacy between Igor and Assita: in fact, most often, it is the contrary (Assita very nearly slits Igor's jugular), and we can be sure that this is not happening. For one thing, Assita assumes she is still married. Speaking of taboos, the penalty for adultery for a Muslim woman can be death by stoning by one's own neighbors: it is truly a very clear case of a taboo being "contagious" and it must be stamped out publically.

The style of the Dardenne brothers' films is elliptical; major events happen off scene, as in Greek or Classical tragedy. This makes accurate interpretation challenging. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge *that we do not know, and never discover*, whether our young blond hero loses his sexual innocence or not. However, there are far more indications that he *has remained a virgin* than there is evidence that he has not (of which, frankly, there is none – only conjecture).

The question of virginity is a vital unknown factor in the algebra of Igor's personal development. In Rossellini's *Deutschland im Jahre Null*, the main character breaks with social norms and loses his sexual innocence at a young age; then he loses all his innocence, and eventually his life. In *La Promesse*, on the other hand, the father urges his son to lose his sexual innocence, which would seem to be (in contradistinction to the Rossellini film) the last in a long line of lost innocences. Interestingly, however, the final outcome for young Igor is not death; it is, on the contrary, new and real meaning to life, through developing social bonds created by helping Assita, and perhaps becoming a kind of godfather to her semi-orphaned son, Tiga. In short, we cannot assume equivalencies between these two films on this point; on the contrary, there seems to be strong evidence that they are oppositional rather than complementary: perpendicular rather than parallel.

The fundamental purpose of our investigation, then, is this: at what point, exactly, does the *peripetia* or essential change (here, in character) take place for Igor? His greatest act of defiance to his father could well be the preservation of his last shred of innocence, abstaining just yet from sexual intercourse, thereby giving evidence that he is willing to cease shafting others: that is, to refuse his upbringing in Roger's clan, of which the indelible totem-tattoo is the sign, only half inscribed on his arm. Soon Igor will discover the courage and force of character to defy his father and face the possibility of prison. It is here – perhaps in response to the ambivalence on the bed in the previous scene – that Igor begins to make a stand for his own integrity. It is safe to say that this film is about nothing if not the personal integrity of young Igor, and how he asserts and protects that in the face of his father and his father's corrupt society. It all begins with Igor's physical integrity, *le corps d'Igor*, whose virginity cannot really be shown on screen, and which is not otherwise disproved.

²¹ The friend then asks him if he is giving up the go-kart now that he has a girlfriend, and he says no. In the end, however, Igor demonstrates to the viewer that he has passed beyond the adolescent stage by surrendering the key to the beloved go-kart, the very symbol of his independence and boyhood pleasures, with a parental or brotherly word or advice – *attention aux freins* (watch out for the breaks).

Epilogue: Clan Affiliations

The Dardennes brothers express in this film ethical ideas: an ethical body of ideas which (in my reading of the film) is precisely co-extensive with Igor's physical body having retained its sexual innocence. So while the male body of the pubescent young blond is occasionally glimpsed from the chest up, it serves specific structural and thematic purposes: the announcement of Igor as a sexually potent young man. Igor chooses (perhaps unknowingly) to respect the meaning of the totem and its corresponding social taboo, and not to violate it; and in so doing, he sets in motion a series of events which will lead to a change of clan affiliation (to that of Assita, Hamidou, and the baby). Like their characters, however, the Dardenne brothers also had a moral choice: whether or not to shamelessly exploit the body of young Igor on screen (regardless of who the actor may have been). Fortunately the Hollywood public was not the intended audience of this film.

All of this is not to say that Igor is a saint: he is not. But there was / is a Saint Igor, and some celebrate his example every June 5. He was a person deprived of his birthright by his brother, who usurped him and placed him in prison. At that time, Igor of Kiev decided to renounce his worldly ambitions and to become a monk; and he thereby gained his freedom. However, the monk Igor was still considered a threat, and eventually he was martyred. Can we say the same for our Igor of *La Promesse*? Obviously not. But the fact is that Roger has inverted the classical structures between father and son. Our Igor is far more clever and quick-witted than his dad, and his father badly needs him to do his bidding. In the first part of the film, Igor is like a marionette. With time, however, Roger wants Igor to be a junior partner, a fact which is represented by having his son call him by his first name. Whether for reasons of fatigue, laziness or desire (or perhaps a cocktail of all three), Roger effectively abdicates his role as father, in order to make Igor a colleague, a friend – a *brother*. Rather than *usurpation* (as in the case of Saint Igor), we have here Roger's *abdication* of the role of the father, and this can be said to be a major link between *La Promesse* and other Dardenne films, such as *L'Enfant*, and *Le Gamin au vélo*.

Just as in Greek and classical tragedy, some critical events in the films of the Dardenne brothers take place “off stage.” When ellipses do not come to mind for the scenarist, it is because he is narrating without being able to feel, to choose precisely what he wants to narrate.²²

That is the case in *La Promesse*, where we never know for sure whether Igor loses his sexual innocence or keeps his virginity, which – according to my reading – is the source of strength in his character, and his most powerful act of revolt against a father who has abdicated his responsibility in order to prematurely initiate his son in the ways of *his* world. Not unlike *la pucelle d'Orléans*, the integrity of Igor's body becomes a well-spring of his virtues, and his first step of independence in this chapter of his *Bildungsroman*, of this “coming of age” story, of this first act of individuation of heroic potential. Our “Rebel *With* a Cause” takes an individual stand of nearly Sisyphean proportions against the crushingly brutal ways of the world, in order to take a first step towards creating his own “kingdom” where one does not abdicate responsibilities or relinquish one's vows, but rather where one lives in this very tough world of ours according to one's own promise.

²² *Quand les ellipses ne viennent pas à l'esprit du scénariste, c'est parce qu'il raconte sans être encore capable de sentir, de choisir ce qu'il désire précisément raconter.* Page 182 (August 1, 2011), Luc Dardenne, *Au Dos de nos images II, 2005-2014* (Paris: Seuil, 2014).

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