

## L'enfant/The Child (2005)

### Major Credits:

Direction: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Screenplay: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Cinematographer: Alain Marcoen

Cast: Jérémie Renier (Bruno), Déborah François (Sonia)

### Production Context:

The Dardennes' fourth feature film became their second to win the top prize at Cannes, the Palme d'or, following *Rosetta* (2009). It is also the second to star Jérémie Renier, who appeared in *La promesse* (1996) and would later have featured roles in *Lorna's Silence* (2008) and *The Kid with a Bike* (2011). *L'enfant* was the first film for 18 year old Déborah François. Dardenne favorite Olivier Gourmet also appears in the small role of a police officer. The idea for the film began with a single image: a young girl furiously pushing a baby carriage in the street that the Dardennes observed while making *The Son* (2002). As usual, the brothers shot the story in their hometown of Seraing, formerly the industrial heart of Belgium but now a desolate, economically depressed area. "The landscape is witness to a story that has passed," Luc has said. Filming took three months, with the brothers engaged in their typical practice of multiple takes to capture both the constricted opportunities and the "life force" of the two major characters. Forty different babies were used during the shoot, the brothers taking care to make certain the audience could see they were alive. The presence of a living baby affected the performances of the actors and also enhances the verisimilitude for the audience.

### Cinematic Aspects:

Although they employ professional actors, the Dardennes continue to draw on their early experience as documentarians and the influence of Italian neorealism: location shooting in blighted urban areas, using hand held cameras and tight framing, avoiding non-diegetic music, depicting unemployed or lower class characters, observing without judgment the human struggle to survive. The film's essential "gamble" (following Truffaut's definition of the essential quality in his own cinema) is that the audience will preserve a degree of empathy for Bruno despite his amoral existence and singularly despicable act.

Note, too, how the story is told almost entirely in images rather than words. (Try to recall a single meaningful line of dialogue.) The most powerful moments—Bruno's abandonment of the baby, his walking through the streets pushing the empty carriage, the concluding prison scene—contain no dialogue. The final scene is extraordinary: a single long take that pans between the characters rather than cutting, thereby emphasizing their bond, ending with the Dardennes' signature blackout and silence.

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. The film is structured by a series of repetitions—pushing the stroller/pushing the scooter, visiting the pawnshop, crossing the river, climbing the apartment stairs, carrying Sonia/carrying Steve—that suggest the existential futility of Bruno’s life, a kind of reenactment of the myth of Sisyphus. Is there any meaning to the persistence of his movements throughout the film?
2. Although the Dardennes profess to be atheists, they acknowledge the religious themes that seem to emerge from films like *The Son* and *Lorna’s Silence*. From this perspective, Bruno’s immersion in the frigid Meuse River brings about a symbolic baptism from which he emerges “re-born.” Can *L’enfant* be coherently understood as a contemporary Christian parable?
3. Most viewers regard the film as unrelievedly depressing, although the final scene suggests a theme described by Bernard Malamud (in his novel *The Assistant*) as “an end to the bad and a beginning of the good.” Do the Dardennes offer a positive philosophy despite the constrained conditions against which the characters struggle?