

*La Promesse* film response

There is a predictable pattern that many European narratives follow. In a story, we're often given a hero who is in between their greatness. At some point, something happens that awakens our hero, and they must change something about themselves to turn into that greatness in order to stand off against some perpetrator of their awakening. Literary critic Joseph Campbell described this formulaic approach as "The Hero's Journey" in his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and the brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne do not stray far away from this formula. In *La Promesse* Igor experiences a similar awakening that removes him from his child-like state of a boy building go-carts with other boys to a man fulfilling his promises. Igor's awakening begins when Hamidou, an illegal immigrant, falls off a ladder during a labor inspector's visit to a construction site and consequently dies. Igor is the first to find the injured Hamidou who asks Igor to promise to take care of his wife Assita and their baby. It isn't until Igor's father, Roger, buries the man under fresh cement to cover up the death that Igor becomes much more aware of his own father's wanting compassion for immigrants and begin to reckon what might befall Assita and her baby's fate given he fails to fulfill his promise to Hamidou. In small efforts Igor begins to assist Assita and her baby which in turn works toward humanizing her in contrast to his prior callous attitude while working unquestioningly with his father. In a departure from the typical hero's journey narrative, by the end of the film, Igor hasn't completed the quest to a Campbellian fruition. He manages to escape what Joseph Campbell describes as "The Belly of the Whale" (Campbell 2008) by resisting his father's pleas to return after Igor had chained Roger's leg in an mechanic's garage, but this is approximately halfway through a typical hero's story. From here Igor and Assita depart to the municipal train station when Igor finally confesses to Assita the fate which befall her husband. I truly feel as though this isn't the end of Igor's journey. Hamidou asked something of Igor that is both non-trivial in breadth nor something that could be done without radical change on Igor's

part. I contend that *La Promesse* is less about the issues immigrants face in Belgium, and more about the cultivation of empathy and understanding that can change a child into an adult – the real stuff of modern heroes. As Philip Lopate said in response to Igor and Roger’s double-date bar scene:

“...we just see him the next day grimly doing his chores, more determined than ever to resist his seductive father's manipulations and to protect the widow of the African laborer. In this film, becoming a man means something more than losing one's virginity.” (Lopate 1996)

I hypothesize that the reason the Darnenne brothers decided to not depict the remainder of Igor's journey was because it didn't lend anymore to the larger point of lacking empathy for immigrants and non-Belgians in Belgium. Instead, the film concentrated on depicting the changes within Igor slowly by way of very close shots of Igor's reactions to external events. (Kauffmann 1997) Over time, it became clear to him of the contrived segregation between himself and Assita, and eventually his actions began to fly in the face of his father's – and Belgium's – stigma. Indeed, we're shown depictions of very intense moments between primarily Igor and Roger, and Igor and Assita as Igor digested the weighty promise made to Hamidou. In time, Igor begins to see Assita, and the other immigrants, not in the same way he had regarded them while working with his father. The Darnenne brothers used Igor's promise as a vehicle to demonstrate how strong a vow toward another can make someone as disparate as Assita and Igor become much more kindred.

Works Cited

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