

# Locating the Sublime Between Movement and Action

The Cinema of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

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## ABSTRACT

This essay locates and examines the sublime moments in two films directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne— *L'Enfant* (*The Child*, 2005) and *Le Gamin au Vélo* (*The Kid with the Bike*, 2011). The analysis will reveal a new type of cinematic sublime employing Kenneth Burke's dramatism and specifically the Act/Purpose ratio. In this new cinematic sublime, ordinary movements become acts of transition and change. Through movement and act the sublime emerges as an interaction of levels of existence, united and visible at the same time, giving a new perspective to an otherwise ordinary event. Something that was this, is suddenly that. A moment can only be sublime if we are aware of a boundary that, suddenly, fails to bind us.

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THIS PAPER LOCATES and examines the sublime moments in two films directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne— *L'Enfant* (*The Child*, 2005) and *Le Gamin au Vélo* (*The Kid with the Bike*, 2011). The analysis will reveal a new type of cinematic sublime employing Kenneth Burke's dramatism and the Act/Purpose ratio. In this new cinematic sublime, ordinary movements become acts of transition and change. The cumulative effect is a hard-fought moral and spiritual expansion that exists in the present: the here and the now. Through movement and act, the sublime emerges as an interaction of levels of existence that are united and visible at the same time, giving a new perspective to an otherwise ordinary event that culminates in a "moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to the aim ... that the soul becomes" (Bloom 153). Still film frames will be presented like citations of lines from poetry or excerpts from written text. Sublime moments that emerge from these films highlight the deep vulnerability and resiliency of the human condition. Additionally, this essay references Francois Lyotard's interpretation of Immanuel Kant's idea of the dynamic sublime where "in the circumstance, there is 'something' that leaves thought dumbfounded even as it exalts thought" (68). Lyotard further describes this "something" as a "differend" which "cannot be resolved. But it can be felt as such, as a differend. This is the sublime feeling" (234). A differend is

a conflict between two or more parties or ideas that cannot be equitably resolved.

The idea and location of the sublime can be attributed to a group of varied and dynamic thinkers. Each of the following major critical works overlap in terms of content and method of analysis. The works themselves interlock in three distinct ways: (1) methods of analysis that trace, locate, and identify the sublime (Burke and Gilles Deleuze); (2) the ethics that motivate and emerge from the Dardenne's work (Emmanuel Levinas); (3) the actual sublime itself—how it appears, why it appears, and what it is (Lyotard).

Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) outlines a method of analysis he calls "dramatism" and was written specifically to address, "What is involved when we say what people are doing and why are they doing it?" (xv). The book explores the different ways of analyzing the motives that are present in poetry and fiction, political discourse, advertisements, news, legal judgments, religion, and so on. In investigating this question of what is involved in the motives of works, Burke introduces a method of analysis, dramatism, that consists of five terms: Act (what was done), Scene (when or where it was done), Agent (who did it), Agency (how they did it), and Purpose (why it was done). In finding out what means what and why, Burke suggests choosing two of the five terms contained in dramatism,

forming a ratio (such as Act/Purpose) as “principles of determination.” *The Philosophy of the Literary Form* (1941) concerns itself with the idea of the symbolic act, of “what equals what but also the matter of what to what” (38). Burke collects language, words, and symbols into “associational clusters” that represent and motivate acts: “The interrelationships themselves are his motives. For they are his situation; and situation is but another word for motives” (20).

Burke’s dramatic pentad was developed as a response to the encroaching industrialization and “empirical science” of the 1940s. According to Burke “Our speculations, as we interpret them, should show that the subject of motivation is a philosophic one, not ultimately to be solved in terms of empirical science” (*Grammar* xxiii). The ideas and feelings of the sublime involve a human experience that cannot be measured or accurately quantified. For the purposes of this essay, Burke’s method is useful in identifying “associational clusters” (of what goes with what)—this dynamic interplay between movement and action is highlighted here by the use of film stills as a method to locate moments featuring the sublime.

The seminal books of French film philosopher Deleuze, *Cinema I* (1986) and *Cinema II* (1989), will be a reference for the structure of the selected films and the Dardennes’ cinematic techniques in creating these films. Specifically, Deleuze’s theories concerning action-image (*Cinema I*) and time-image (*Cinema II*) relate to the emergence of sublime moments in the Dardenne brothers’ work. Deleuze’s *Cinema I* was written to “isolate certain cinematic concepts” (concerning the “movement image”) that exist as specific types: the perception-image, the affectation-image, and the action-image. For Deleuze, concepts “are exactly like sounds, colours or images, they are intensities which either suit you or don’t, which work or don’t. Concepts are the images of thought.” (xi). Deleuze’s *Cinema II* reveals the concept of the time-image as “a little time in the pure state” that came about after WWII in a war-torn Europe full of “situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces we longer know how to describe” (xi).

Always collaborating, the Dardenne brothers began their careers as documentary filmmakers, making six documentaries between 1974–1983 that investigated, in Philip Mosley’s words, “relations between ideology, history and personal experience [and] emphasize[d] the stories of individuals rather than those of a group or class” (41). Levinas’s idea that “the necessary acknowledgment of our responsibility occurs in the face to face encounter with (or, more accurately, in Levinas’s language, exposure to) the other” (Mosley 17) was infused in the early documentaries. Dardenne consumed Levinas’s writings during his time as a student of philosophy at the University of Louvain prior to his film career. Levinas’s positions continue to resonate as the guiding motive for the Dardenne brothers in terms of the structure and content of their films.

Levinas’s *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* (1998) will be incorporated to explain the Dardennes’ ethical motives in making these particular films, specifically the idea that individuals can

***The sublime moments in L’Enfant are, in themselves, a culmination of the acts of waiting that create a context—a theatre of action—for the sublime to emerge. The simple common act of waiting in L’Enfant eventually becomes a motive for change and transformation.***

understand, love, and empathize with another primarily through a willful face-to-face encounter with the “other” so that the “other” is no longer categorized as such. Levinas’s treatment of ethics in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other* (1998) implicitly and explicitly informs the Dardennes’ work. Levinas’s notion that “The face to face situation is thus an impossibility of denying, a negation of negation” (34–35) is a catalyst for the sublime moments that evolve and transform the trajectory of the brothers’ films and the relationships of their characters.

Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1991) is an interpretation and extension of Immanuel Kant’s “The Analytic of the Sublime” section of the *Critique of Judgment* (1987) that explores the different inner workings of the sublime. Lyotard’s examination of the dynamic sublime is especially useful in locating the sublime in the Dardennes’ works. Lyotard’s term “differend” is especially useful in pinpointing and revealing the sublime in that its definition is a clear description of the sublime’s emergence: “The differend is to be found at the heart of the sublime feeling: at the encounter of the two ‘absolutes’ equally ‘present’ to thought, the absolute whole when it conceives, the absolute measured when it presents.”

## L’ENFANT

*L’Enfant* reveals a new cinematic sublime through the Dardennes’ portrayals of waiting. The act of waiting changes the context, which changes the meaning of the act. The sublime here is characterized by a sudden, actual change or transformation that places the viewer and the characters in a different theatre of action. Something that was this, is suddenly that. Transition and coming to be, those processes of discovery, have potential power that is the sublime in *L’Enfant*. Through movement and act, the sublime emerges as an interaction of levels of existence, giving a new perspective to what was otherwise ordinary. This new perspective allows for the ordinary motion—waiting—to become a jumping-off point for transition and change. Waiting in *L’Enfant* changes from a passive movement that happens between expectations to an active reflection where, in Burke’s words, “Attitudes are the beginning of acts” (*Grammar* 236).

As with most of the Dardenne brothers’ work, *L’Enfant* explores the lives of characters living on the economic margins and navigating their existence with almost a minimal level of sustenance. The film takes place in the post-industrial town, Seraing, a few miles away from the Walloon city, Liège, a

“left-over space” that, for the Dardennes’ main characters, highlights the “crumpled corners of the city, the river bank or the left-over strips of the forest neighboring the roadway” (Dillet and Puri 370). *L’Enfant* features Bruno [J r mie Renier], a young, free-wheeling, sometimes-homeless petty thief, and his girlfriend Sonia [D borah Fra ois]. She has just returned from the hospital with her newborn son, Jimmy, to learn that Bruno has sublet their apartment for extra cash. When Sonia finally finds Bruno, he is in the middle of a petty theft setup and is disinterested and awkward even as he first meets his newborn son. Throughout the first third of the film, Bruno is all movement and hustle. Everything has a price with Bruno, who always makes himself available for the next hustle. As Jean-Pierre Dardenne explains, “He’s someone who doesn’t relate to other people—or when he does, it’s strictly on a utilitarian basis” (Sklar 20). In spite of Bruno’s ambivalence towards his child, the couple are playful and very much in love. Bruno is focused and engaged whether he frolics with Sonia, eats, or is in the middle of a hustle.

Later, impatient with waiting in line for Sonia to receive her social assistance check, Bruno decides to take newborn Jimmy for a stroll. While out, Bruno decides to take up an offer from one of his shady associates who is connected to a black-market baby enterprise; he sells his son for cash. Later, when a frantic Sonia asks Bruno where Jimmy is, Bruno responds casually, “I sold him.” Bruno tries to comfort a clearly distraught Sonia by the promising her, “We can always make another one.” Sonia then collapses and is subsequently hospitalized. It is the first in a series of shocks for Bruno during the course of the film that leads him to try to get his son back and make amends with Sonia.

Through Bruno’s constant motion and hustle, the Dardenne brothers have created a context where the act of waiting becomes altogether different, a place where, in Burke’s words, “a great variety of things otherwise discordant is promptly brought into unity to serve a common purpose” (*Grammar* 294). There are ten scenes in *L’Enfant* where Bruno is waiting. The repetition of waiting as a movement or action disrupts the repetition of Bruno’s motive of hustle, enabling him to gradually “tear down the walls of that sphere that encapsulates them to go outside” (Guanzini 29). This transition does not immediately happen since it seems to trickle in over a series of accumulative moments for Bruno. The first instance of waiting occurs in the aforementioned scene where Bruno is standing on line with Sonia to receive a social assistance check and grows restless in waiting. The impatience in that scene ironically creates the context for the remaining waiting scenes. The nine waiting scenes that follow all have the camera focused solely on Bruno in isolation with little to no dialogue. The scenes’ running times range from twenty-seconds to a full minute, allowing the viewer to watch and share the wait with Bruno in real time. In these moments, the viewer is given a proximity to Bruno’s circumstance and next plan of action.

The second waiting scene (Fig. 1) occurs on the tram transporting Bruno and Jimmy (the carriage is in the foreground) to the place where Jimmy will be sold. The tram is moving and Bruno is still, highlighting his seemingly casual indifference,

which juxtaposes what is actually beginning to happen. The Dardenne brothers seem to know that there is no identifiable reference point—for most people—about what the transaction of selling a baby looks like. It is part of the scene’s unfathomableness: it tries to identify an event never seen before. The other side of this unfathomableness is the actual act of selling Jimmy for money. The possibility still exists, at this point in the transaction, that Bruno can change his mind. It is one of the rare scenes, so far in the film, where we see Bruno not moving or actively hustling. This scene pauses that way of being.

The next pause/waiting scene (Fig. 2) happens while Bruno is pausing/waiting for the elevator to the adjoining rooms where the transaction will take place. Here, again, there is the possibility (a sustained hope) that this moment of pause for Bruno could also be a moment where his mind wanders and he changes his mind. The elevator never arrives. Bruno then decides to carry Jimmy up the stairs into one of the rooms. There is another moment here, going up the stairs, where the contact between father and son signifies an emphatic paternal gentleness that is willful and instinctual and at the same time sadly temporal and fleeting. In the next moment (Fig. 3), Bruno carefully lays Jimmy down on his jacket, leaves the room to go into a different room across the hall, and then waits for the transaction to proceed, effectively abandoning Jimmy. This last act of waiting during the transaction is extraordinary in that the camera stays fixed on Bruno for a minute (Figs. 4–6); it is motionless Bruno listens to the sounds of Jimmy being carried away—the footsteps going up then down the stairs and the baby cooing. The moment is Deleuzian: “It is like two presents which ceaselessly intersect, one of which is always arriving and the other established” (Deleuze, *Cinema I* 106). As if to emphasize the extraordinary duality of the moment, the Dardenne brothers shoot Bruno in a dim but clearly visible, half-dark, half-light frame. This image is a visual differend that, in Lyotard’s words, “mediatizes (dynamically speaking) the light and the dark. A clear space is drawn upon a dark contrast” (187). This scene also has a literary quality in that the viewer wonders about Bruno’s thoughts. The viewer is now quite literally trying to get inside Bruno’s head, like imagining and interpreting a narrative from a book. This very act by the viewer refers in part to the ethics of Levinas where “Thought begins with the possibility of conceiving of a freedom exterior to my own... [meaning that] the condition of thought is a moral consciousness” (17). Indeed, this act of imagining a freedom outside the viewer’s own is an empathetic response in imagining Bruno’s freedom from responsibility. At the same time the viewer can hope that this emphatic awareness can also take hold in Bruno’s consciousness to better inform his decisions, enabling him to think outside of his own needs and impulses. Burke remarks on a similar scene in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*: “The communication between the inner and outer is conveyed by the contrasting of two situations: his listening outside the door before the murder; and his listening outside the door to the sounds without, just after the murder” (*Grammar* 308). The motion that is heard outside Bruno’s room starkly contrasts



Fig. 1 | On the tram, 29:21, Les Film du Fleuve, 2005.



Fig. 4 | Waiting, 35:02, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 2 | By the elevator, 31:12, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 5 | And waiting, 35:30, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 3 | Jimmy abandoned, 34:06, LFF, 2005



Fig. 6 | More waiting, 36:02, LFF, 2005.

Bruno's motionless stance inside the room. We see that Bruno is a different man who, accordingly, will now experience the world differently. As Burke points out, "It is the Grammar of rebirth which involves a moment wherein some motivating principle is experienced that had not been experienced before" (*Grammar* 306). Rebirth here means a fundamental change of consciousness, and for Bruno, each existential strike, however small and incremental, will be painful.

The second half of *L'Enfant* follows Bruno trying to retrieve his son and making amends with Sonia. Each scene that isolates

Bruno in waiting holds a potential that Bruno will discover some motivating principle that will give him a sense of ethical clarity. As mentioned earlier, each scene of waiting is punctuated by a lack of dialogue, with ambient sounds taking the place of spoken words and their meanings. It is as if the viewer is also waiting, expecting some outward sign of Bruno changing in some way or internalizing a sense of right and wrong. Bruno gets his son back and returns him to Sonia. She still wants nothing to do with Bruno and rebuffs him at every turn. Bruno sees the result of his misdeed, but does not feel its magnitude as if getting Jimmy



Fig. 7 | Steve apprehended, 1:22:40, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 8 | Bruno's burden, 1:24:39, LFF, 2005.

back, in Bruno's mind, is equal to a this-for-that transaction; it is a transaction that, when completed, like the repetition of all the other transactions in Bruno's life, becomes a punctuation mark before he move on to the next transaction. In Jean-Pierre Dardenne's words, "Bruno resonates with today's world because of his lightness; he lives in such lightness, with formidable liberty, where nothing has any importance. Everything has the same importance, which is the same as none ... he lives in the moment with no perspective" (Badt 66). Sonia, though, will not forgive him. What the viewer hopes to detect in Bruno during these scenes is explained by Burke: ethical baselines. Burke says they can be "established by the individual and external things or other people; since the individual learns to anticipate their attitude towards him. He thus, to a degree, becomes aware of himself in terms of them (the other). And his attitudes, being shaped by their attitudes as reflected in him, modify his ways of action" (*Grammar* 237). Each scene of waiting that follows in the film reveals Bruno, in terms of movement and act, as the same Bruno who is on the hustle: Bruno waiting outside a school for a young boy to plan a theft while eating a sandwich, or Bruno waiting by the river, splashing the water with a stick before his next scheme. But much has changed for Bruno even though it is hard to tell by his behaviour in these scenes. The hustle now involves paying back the black market baby traffickers for the money they lost in returning Jimmy. Bruno has to be the same hustler to satisfy the traffickers' debt.

The Dardenne brothers have set up the waiting scenes in a measured, repetitive way—they are continual shots focused

primarily on Bruno. The repetition of the act of waiting is a way of keeping the viewer's mind open so as to become familiar with Bruno's circumstance, rather than to judge or empathize with it. As mentioned earlier, the repetition of waiting also disrupts the repetition of Bruno's utilitarian hustle in terms of movement and act. The connection between pause, wait, and reflection has not quite formed in Bruno's consciousness, at least not in any visible way. The waiting scenes also add weight and contrast to the scenes where Bruno is not waiting and is in motion. There are a series of scenes where Bruno is pushing the empty baby stroller around the streets of Seraing, like an albatross on wheels; it is a constant reminder of Jimmy's absence and Bruno's misjudgment and also as a physical impediment that slows him down and disrupts his daily routine. These moments lead to the film's last two waiting scenes, which contain sublime moments that seem inevitable and surprising in their clarity of transformation and transition. Burke would refer to such an event as "The mystic moment, the stage of revelation after which all is felt to be different" (*Grammar* 305).

In an effort to pay off his debt, Bruno sets out to snatch a random purse, aided by his young teenage accomplice, Steve. Soon after snatching the purse in broad daylight, Bruno and the boy are riding on a scooter, pursued by the police. Bruno and Steve ditch the scooter and hide in an icy river. The young boy, in the water for a few minutes, is close to freezing to death and nearly drowns. Bruno does his best to comfort Steve, carrying him to a dry place and trying to warm his extremities. While going back to get the scooter, Bruno watches the police



Fig. 9 | Waiting to see Steve, 1:25:40–1:26:08, LFF, 2005.

apprehend Steve and take him away (Fig. 7). For the next few minutes, the camera follows Bruno pushing the now inoperable scooter along the roadway sidewalks of Seraing (Fig. 8). The action refers to earlier scenes when Bruno pushes the empty baby carriage. This burdensome action is inexplicable until he reaches a police precinct. Bruno goes into the precinct and waits (Fig. 9). Again, the camera is only trained on Bruno. What had looked like blankness and ambivalence in Bruno's demeanor now looks like (or is coming to look like) focus and introspection. Bruno is then led to Steve, his young accomplice, and the arresting officer. Bruno confesses to the officer in front of Steve, "It was me." (Fig. 10). This three-word confession becomes sublime for it brings forth a new motivating principle, a selflessness, that Bruno has unexpectedly internalized. "It was me" can also refer to Bruno's acknowledgment of selling his newborn son days earlier. Paradoxically, saying the words, "It was me" can be translated in light of their transformative power and Bruno's experiences as, "This is me."

The last waiting scene occurs while Sonia visits Bruno in the common visiting room of the prison (Fig. 11). There is a look on Sonia's face that seems to understand that Bruno is, at this moment, a different man, that being in prison was Bruno's choice and a selfless act. Sonia asks Bruno if he would like some coffee, a simple, casual, and generous gesture (Fig. 12). Bruno responds yes. While Sonia is retrieving the coffee, the camera once again focuses on Bruno waiting (Fig. 13). Similar to the previous waiting scenes, Bruno's expression is inscrutable. Through witnessing Bruno's past movements and acts and their effects and repercussions, we can have a better idea of what he could be thinking. Sonia comes back with the coffee. Bruno asks how their son Jimmy is doing. Sonia replies "He's well." As Bruno is about to drink the coffee, it seems as though he feels the weight of his misdeeds, so he breaks down and weeps (Fig. 14). Bruno and Sonia's sparse dialogue contains a shared history and now a shared selflessness, for it seems that Sonia has accepted Bruno for who he is now and for who he once was. Burke speaks to this moment: "When a person is thinking hard and long about something, in purely internal dialogue, words addressed to him by another seem to happen twice, as though there were a first and second hearing. The words being heard first by an outer self who heard them as words, and then by an inner self who heard them as meaning" (*Grammar* 239). In hearing himself ask about Jimmy and then hearing Sonia's response, the words and their meanings have revealed to Bruno what he was and what he has now become. The waiting has now become an act (Fig. 15).

Through the Dardenne brothers' cinematic lens, the idea of the sublime is extended into the movement, act, and purpose of transition and transformation. The sublime moments in *L'Enfant* are, in themselves, the culmination of the acts of waiting that create a context—a theatre of action—for the sublime to emerge. The common act of waiting in *L'Enfant* eventually becomes a motive for change and transformation. In Bruno's case, we have witnessed an expansion of his perspective that is the cumulative



Fig. 10 | The confession, 1:28:12, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 11 | Prison visit, 1:28:12, LFF, 2005.

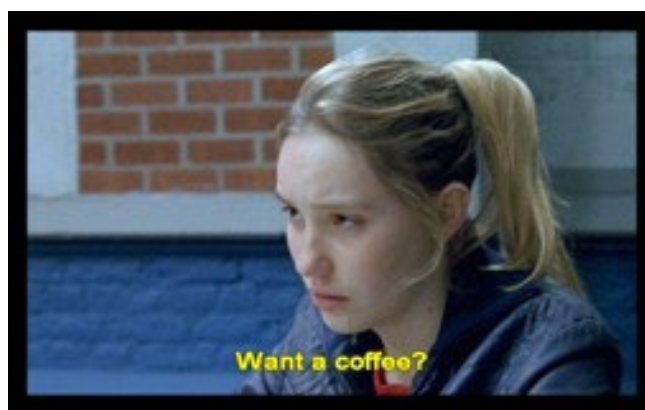


Fig. 12 | Sonia's gesture, 1:29:17, LFF, 2005.

***In hearing himself ask about Jimmy and then hearing Sonia's response, the words and their meanings have revealed to Bruno what he was and what he has now become. The waiting has now become an act .***



Fig. 13 | Waiting as introspection, 1:29:41–1:30:06, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 14 | Bruno hearing Sonia's response 1:30:40, LFF, 2005.



Fig. 15 | The waiting becomes an act, 1:31:18, LFF, 2005.

effect from the repetition of waiting. Upon reflection, we can see that the earlier waiting scenes were moments of pause that had more weight than Bruno was apt or able to show. This realization relates to Deleuze's idea that "The situation must permeate the character deeply and continuously, and on the other hand the character who is thus permeated must burst into action, at discontinuous intervals" (*Cinema I* 155). The power of the sublime in *L'Enfant* can be felt in its anticipatory build-up, in its actual present emergence, and finally in its aftermath of effect and reflection. The power is also felt in "the conditions of a legitimate forgiveness that are realized only in a society of beings totally present to one another, in an intimate society; a society of beings who have chosen one another" (Levinas 19).

### LE GAMIN AU VÉLO

In *Le Gamin au Vélo* the Dardennes frame the actions of cycling (accelerating) and climbing (ascending) through a revisiting of place. The streets, back alleys, and forest paths of Seraing are literal avenues of transport for mundane movements that morph into sublime actions. "The spaces that they occupy reflect their marginalized position in society but they also have an expressivity and autonomy that goes beyond this ... [E]xisting in the realm of the unseen and the unheard, it is only the gesture that can reveal deeper truths" (Dillet and Puri 371). The revisited settings are like shape-shifting containers for the movements that shape and change their meanings. Cyril's (Thomas Doret) pedaling is an action in Burke's sense of embodying a motive, and it is also highly physiological and mechanical. I will refer to

it as a "movement action" which anticipates, triggers, and extends the sublime moments in the film. Jean-Pierre Dardenne further remarks, "The organization of locations obliges the kid's character to keep going back to the same places, to keep making the same trips" (Bonnard 5). In making the same trips to the same places, we also see the same movements and actions repeated that seem to match the settings—a site-specific set of movement actions. Each action and relevant setting are repeated and revisited in a way to create a history of act and place that can be referenced later in the film. The slight variance of repeated movement actions and the variance of revisits to place, creates a familiar visual context, a theatre of movement and action, for a succession of the sublime moments to surface in last twenty minutes of the film. It can be argued that the last twenty minutes are one extended sublime moment. Three such moments will be discussed in this analysis.

*Le Gamin au Vélo* begins with the main character in the middle of a problem or crisis. Cyril is a restless and anxious eleven-year-old boy who has been placed in a children's group home by his single, ambivalent, drifting father, Guy (Jérémy Renier). We first see Cyril in the children's home on the phone trying to get a hold of his father whose number is out of order. After he has tried the number several times, the counselors try to take the phone away from Cyril, who bites them (a recurring action in the film), then runs out and away from the building before being caught and restrained right before he scales the surrounding fence. This sequence happens in the first three minutes. The next day Cyril sneaks out of school and goes to his

father's apartment to retrieve his bicycle, a gift from his father and finds that the apartment is abandoned. There is no sign of his father or the bicycle. His counselors try to catch up to him. While dodging and evading his counselors, Cyril gains entry into a medical waiting room in the same building. Cyril grabs hold of a woman sitting in the waiting room and falls into her lap. "That's ok, he can hold me, just not so tight," she says. The woman, Samantha (Cecile de France), a hairdresser, is struck by Cyril's desperation. The next day Samantha gets the bike back for Cyril. She had to buy it back because Cyril's father sold it to help make ends meet. Cyril does not believe that. When Samantha leaves the orphanage, Cyril follows her on his bike and asks her if she could adopt him on the weekends. Samantha says that she will think about it and eventually agrees, the first of many selfless acts she performs on behalf of Cyril's well-being during the course of the film.

"The utterance of the question begins in the silence of the quest," Burke contends. He is emphasizing the visceral purposes of the body as condition for subsequent symbolic purposes (*Grammar* 303). And, in fact, the first half of the *Le Gamin au Vélo* is structured by a series of painful questions that emerge for Cyril as he desperately, viscerally, seeks his father on his bicycle: Where is my father? Why has he abandoned me? What will happen when I find him? In this way, it seems that the utterance of Cyril's questions and his quest are happening simultaneously. Cyril's quest is silent in terms of his agility, resilience, and resourcefulness, qualities all connected to his mobility, a series of unspoken movement actions. On his bike, Cyril is constantly in motion, apparently free with a sense of control and independence. The last question that Cyril might ask himself is: what do I do after finding out the answer to the previous questions? This scenario for the viewer speaks to Burke's idea about "immensities" which can also be applied to *L'Enfant*, for "The sublime resides in moral and intellectual immensities" (*Grammar* 325). The moral immensities in most of the Dardennes' works are springboards or triggers for the intellectual immensities. The intellectual immensities are the how and why grapplings of facing the moral immensities. The sublime is the in-between unsteadily residing between the two.

During Cyril's quest we get our first glimpse of the repeated movement actions and the spaces that will be revisited through the course of the film. Samantha, who is now a part-time guardian, tries to help Cyril find his father. As she becomes more a part

of Cyril's life, her motives, like Cyril's, seem closely aligned with her movement actions. Of Samantha's motives Luc Dardenne remarks, "Kindness has a mysterious aspect ... kindness isn't rational" (Bonnard 4). In this regard, Samantha is selfless and her unexplained kindness is what Cyril needs but has a hard time appreciating or acknowledging during his obsession with reconnecting with his father. In a way, she serendipitously becomes an answer to Cyril's ever-shifting needs and priorities, embodying Levinas's mantra, "In the call, I am sent to the other person whom that appeal signifies" (132).

The answers to where, why, and what come to Cyril simultaneously in two scenes that happen in succession. The first scene occurs when, after finally contacting his father, Cyril and Samantha schedule a day and time to meet with him, only to be stood up. Seeing the effect of another disappointment for Cyril, Samantha consoles Cyril and decides to help him further. Later in the same day, they track down Guy while he worked at a restaurant prepping food. Here is where part of the setting triangle begins. Samantha and Cyril have to go through an alley to a side door in order to meet Guy. After repeated unanswered knocks on the door Cyril decides to scale the wall, with Samantha's help, to see his father (Fig. 16). When Guy sees his son he asks, "What are you doing here?" Cyril ignores this foreboding sign. Cyril goes into the restaurant, but Guy is awkward and uncomfortable. Guy tries to give excuses about his negligence, but Cyril forgives him, twice. Cyril asks, "When were you going to come for me?" Guy does not answer directly, but then says, "It's hard for me." Guy then says he cannot see Cyril until he earns enough money to rent an apartment. Guy is getting the restaurant ready to open and allows Cyril to help him stir the sauce; it is a brief, touching father-and-son exchange (Fig. 17). Cyril tries to extend the stay (he could stir the sauce all day) but Guy insists that he should go and that he will try to see him again. As they leave Guy tells Samantha, privately, that he cannot take care of Cyril and he cannot see him again. Samantha quickly learns that Cyril does not yet know this and walks Cyril back to his father to hear it from his own mouth. The father finally confesses to Cyril a plain and clear rejection, and shuts the door. Devastated, Cyril tries to hurt himself on the ride back—Samantha stops the car and holds him, at once soothing, consoling, and empathetic (Fig. 18). This scene has answered all of Cyril's questions concerning his father, ending with his father's rejection.



Fig. 16 | Cyril finding his dad (Guy), 28:26–28:38, LFF, 2011.





**Fig. 17** | Cyril helping his dad prepare, 32:36–33:07, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 18** | Samantha consoling Cyril, 37:51, LFF, 2011.

Cyril's precarious social position—and his father's—are central to the film's structure and aesthetics. As his father casts Cyril off, so modern Europe casts off millions like Cyril's father. Cyril's movement/actions represent a formal technique for responding to Europe's cruelty. "Not only do these films open up spaces of resistance within what are otherwise the discarded remnants of modern cities, the cinematic space of the films itself becomes a space of alterity and resistance" (Dillet and Puri 378). The streets of Seraing become a medium through which Cyril's alterity can be expressed and agentic. We see him on his bike on the streets traveling between the triangle of places—the

restaurant, Samantha's apartment, and the woods—that Cyril revisits many times during his quest. The places increasingly gather meaning each time they are revisited. The next day Cyril is on his bicycle again, with scratches on his face from trying to hurt himself in Samantha's car the day before. Like Bruno, Cyril is inscrutable as we try to imagine what he might be thinking (Fig. 19). The places that Cyril revisits creates a context for his movement actions, implying possibilities of meaning, and giving us an idea of what Cyril could be thinking, however indeterminate it may be. Cyril then stops to watch a pick-up soccer game and is asked to play. Cyril agrees but goes to Samantha's first to

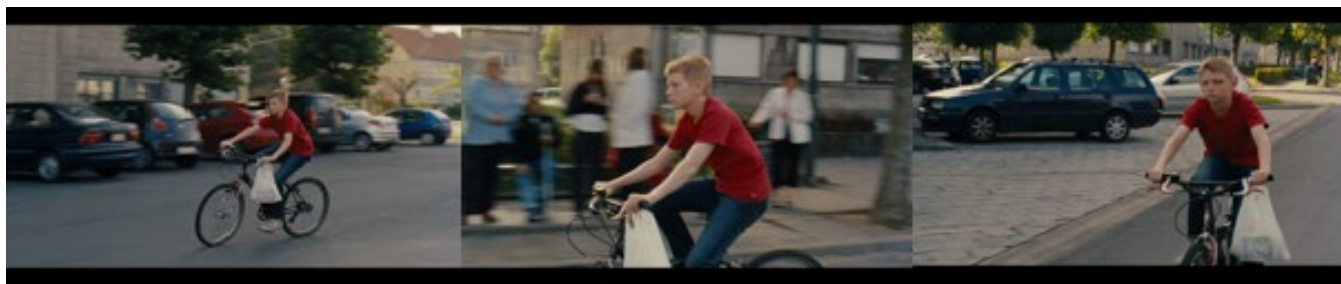


Fig. 19 | Cyril riding in the streets of Seraing, 38:00–38:20, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 20 | Bike confrontation, 42:07, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 21 | Getting the bike back, 42:21, LFF, 2011.

drop off some items he bought at the grocery store. When Cyril leaves, he notices a young boy (Romain Clavareau) riding off on his bike (again) and gives chase. The boy he chases pauses in spots, taunting Cyril to keep chasing. The pursuit ends in the woods next to a tree house with Cyril confronting the boy then wrestling him to the ground (Fig. 20). Suddenly, a group of boys spill out the tree house to cheer on and encourage the fight (Fig. 21), which is soon broken up by Wes the leader, who is noticeably older than the rest of his crew (Egon Di Mateo). It turns out that Wes orchestrated the whole adventure to lure Cyril into their gang and criminal mischief. Wes nicknames Cyril “Pitbull” for his biting prowess and insists that the others in his gang give him respect (Fig. 22). This interaction is followed by Wes inviting Cyril to his house to play video games. Cyril gradually ingratiates himself with the other boy. Samantha finds out about this connection and reprimands Cyril while warning Wes to stay away. Both gestures of concern prove ineffective as Wes and Cyril meet once again the following day. Wes plans, demonstrates, and choreographs a mugging and robbery of a local newsstand owner (Fabrizio Rongione) later that day after dark, setting up the first sublime moment of the film.

“The brothers Dardenne are absolutely captured by the question of what the body is capable of by the ensemble of the infinite possible interactions and connections among bodies,” says Isabella Guanzini, and I would add among places (19). The physicality of Cyril is central on a number of occasions. As mentioned earlier, Cyril’s agility is a resource, a corporeal where-withal that variously helps him seek, dodge, elude, find out,



Fig. 22 | Acceptance, 43:11, LFF, 2011.

return to, earn temporary relief. Samantha’s consoling comes to mind as well, especially in relation to interactions with other characters. These corporeal skills sustain Cyril through attacks and rejections. Aside from cycling and climbing, Cyril can also kick, bite, tackle, trip, juke and stab when he feels the instinctual need and is in a way feral in his strategies of self-preservation. Deleuze remarks, “What is called action, strictly speaking, is the delayed reaction of the center indetermination” (*Cinema I* 64). Indetermination for Cyril in this context is uncertainty and rejection, as well as the feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and panic that ensue. In Cyril’s case, the reaction is not delayed so much as it is an echo of indetermination. As mentioned earlier, Cyril’s movement actions are directly connected to his thoughts and



Fig. 23 | Over the wall, 1:06:16, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 24 | Outside looking in, 1:06:47, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 25 | Cyril's offer, 1:07:39, LFF, 2011.

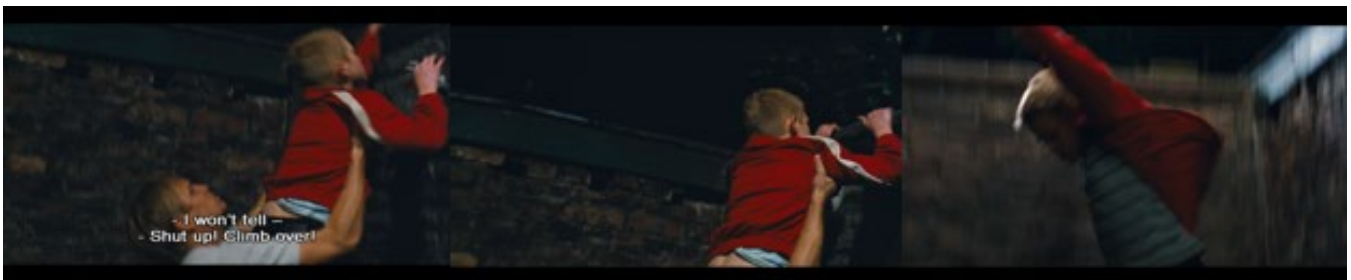


Fig. 26 | Over the wall again, 1:07:52–1:07:58, LFF, 2011.

motives. Each time Cyril accelerates on his bicycle or climbs a tree or fence, his movement is directly connected to a desired outcome becoming an act. Cyril's motion speaks directly to what he is thinking and feeling and is on full display during the three sublime moments in the last scenes of the film. He tries to answer the last question of his quest: what do you do when your father rejects you again?

The setup for the first sublime moment occurs at night. Sensing that something is not right, Samantha plans a night at the movies for Cyril with one of his friends. Cyril wants no part of it, having already planned to do the nighttime robbery with Wes. When Cyril decides to leave, Samantha tries to stop him and a struggle ensues. Cyril bites then cuts Samantha on the arm with a pair of scissors and escapes on his bike into the night. Samantha is clearly shaken and starts to quietly weep. We then see Cyril attacking the newsstand owner and his son, Martin (Valentin Jacob), with a baseball bat, beating them unconscious and robbing them. Wes quickly picks Cyril up from the scene and drives off. In the car, Wes yells at Cyril and berates him for possibly being identified and threatens to kill Cyril if he speaks of his connection to the robbery. Wes gives the stolen money back to Cyril then drops him off alone on the desolate outskirts of Seraing. Cyril then makes his way to his father's restaurant where the first sublime moment begins to unfold. Cyril approaches the side alley to the restaurant and uses his bicycle to scale the wall as he did earlier in the film with Samantha's help (Fig. 23). Once over the wall, Cyril sees his father at work, very much like the earlier visit when Cyril helped stir the sauce (Fig. 24), only this time Cyril is outside looking in. When Guy comes out Cyril tells him that he has money for him (Fig. 25), presumably remembering that Guy told him he needed money in order to take Cyril back into his care. There is a pause and Guy is beckoned to go back into the restaurant to complete an order. When he returns to the back door, he tells Cyril he needs to go and that he does not want to be arrested. Guy then hoists Cyril onto the top the wall and tells him to jump, throwing the money over the wall as well (Fig. 26). When Cyril lands, Guy asks about his condition—an odd thing to ask after rejecting him—and then tells Cyril to never return. About the wall, Jean Pierre Dardenne adds, "Hence the wall. We make physical cinema: we love having our characters go through doors or walls" (Bonnard 6). For Cyril, the wall



Fig. 27 | Second rejection, 1:08:00–1:08:22, LFF, 2011.

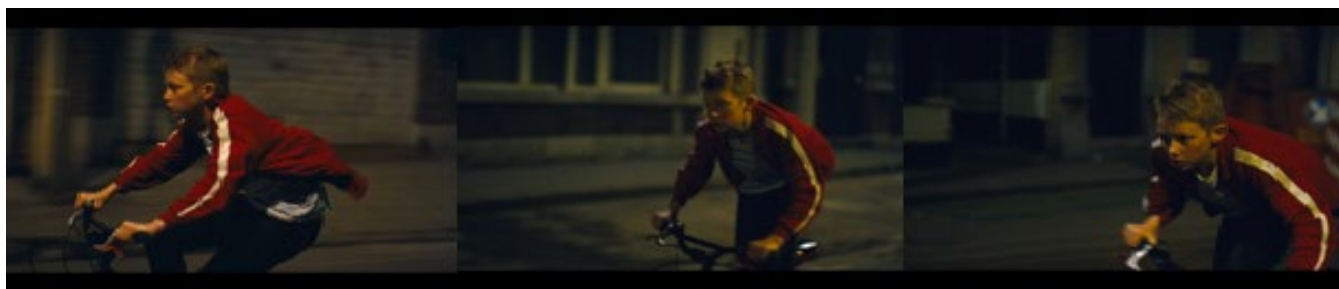


Fig. 28 | Freedom in abandonment, 1:08:27–1:09:41, LFF, 2011.

is a barrier that he has now scaled with the aid of Samantha, Guy, his bike, and finally on his own when he jumps. For Cyril, the landing is the beginning and an ending, and the next sublime moment, which immediately follows, feels like an extension of the first sublime moment wherein time and place exists between a beginning and an ending (Fig. 27).

Richard Rushton describes the next scene of Cyril on his bike: “So we see him riding his bike as he is riding to nowhere, fleeing ... and there is a sense of stepping back, of reaching a crossroads, of recoiling and reflecting, of becoming detached and seeing things in a new light ... [A]ll of these conflicting thoughts and feelings, a simultaneous embodiment and reflectiveness, immersion and specularity, are at play in this shot” (315). As Rushton understands it, this extended shot, almost a scene unto itself, is like most of the Dardenne images that come to accumulate and swirl within a sublime moment: like the scene of Bruno waiting for Jimmy to be taken away in the next room in *L’Enfant*, the literal series of moving images, in addition to their resonating implications, is a visual differend, a marker and a boundary. This series of images comes in one shot immediately after Cyril is rejected by his father for a second and seemingly final time. Because the shot occurs at night on a long dark stretch of street in Seraing with Cyril pedaling furiously on his bike, there is a strange in-and-out-of-light visualization that makes Cyril look like he is free falling or floating in outer space—it is a kind of horrifying freedom in abandonment (Fig. 28). This lighting effect is both a visual differend and the psychological one; it looks and feels unresolved. To Rushton’s point, this long shot shows Cyril still pedaling with a severe focus that implies a sense of control and doggedness. The fact that Cyril can still pedal and accelerate speaks to his resiliency. The pedaling for Cyril also seems to be a way of trying to think things through;

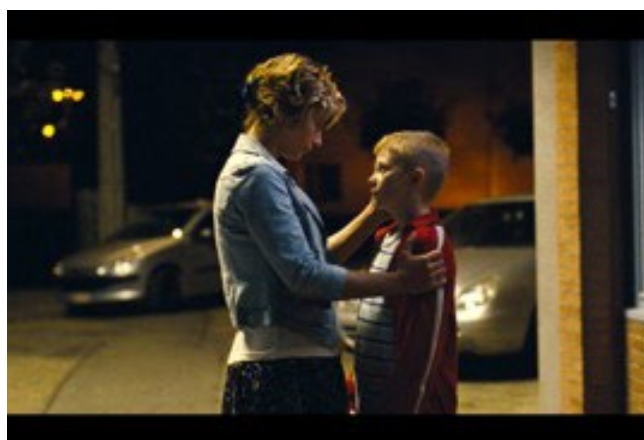


Fig. 29 | Samantha’s acceptance, 1:11:18, LFF, 2011.

like the other scenes containing pedaling, this scene has an unspoken component, like a hidden motive or purpose. Paul Schrader remarks, “Duration can peel back the social veneer of an activity. Duration can invoke the wholly other” (6).

Cyril’s final stopping place is outside Samantha’s hair salon where she has been waiting up for him. Samantha tells Cyril that the police were looking for him regarding the robbery. It is soon after this moment that Cyril apologizes for cutting Samantha’s arm and, without missing a beat, he tells her that he wants her to be his guardian. Standing face-to-face with Cyril, Samantha consents (Fig. 29). This image and gesture embody Levinas’s crucial observation: “Where the uprightness of the face that asks for me finally reveals fully both its defenseless exposure and its very facing” (131).

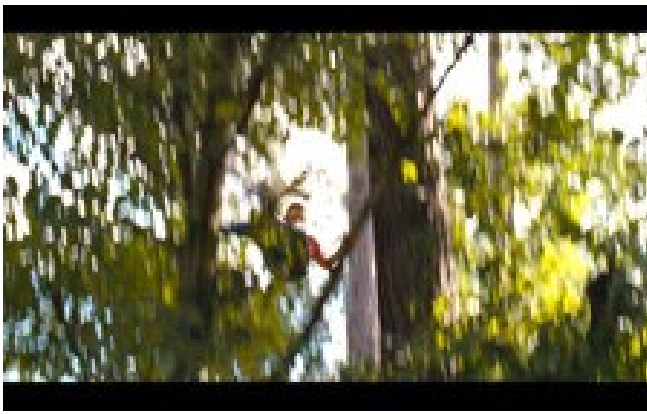
The next day is a bit of a reprieve for Cyril, though he nears the final sublime moment of the film. Samantha and Cyril go through a formal legal process with the newsstand owner, with



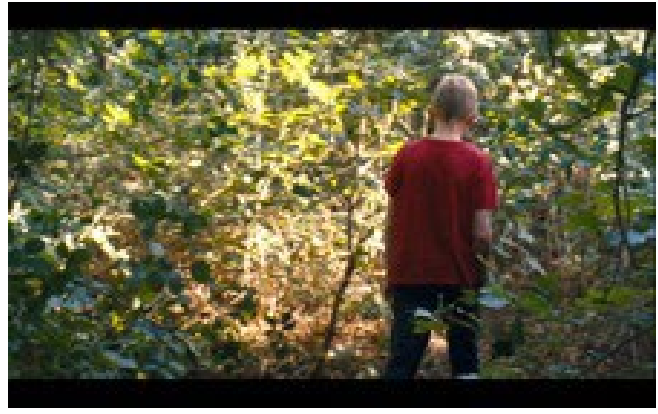
**Fig. 30** | The climb, 1:14:15, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 33** | Up, 1:22:15, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 31** | The fall, 1:19:22, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 34** | And out, 1:22:40, LFF, 2011.



**Fig. 32** | Down, 1:19:52, LFF, 2011.

Samantha agreeing to pay for the damages caused by the robbery in return for Cyril's apology. Martin, who was also assaulted, is absent, since he refuses to accept Cyril's apology. We then see Samantha and Cyril riding their bikes along the Meuse riverbanks before stopping for a quick picnic. Samantha makes plans for an early evening barbecue. Later Samantha sends Cyril out to buy charcoal for the barbecue, setting the scene for the film's climax.

After picking up the charcoal, Cyril encounters the newsstand owner filling his car with gas. Martin exits the car, then runs

after Cyril and knocks him off his bike. Cyril fights him off and runs into the woods to the same place where he first encountered Wes. The agile Cyril evades Martin by quickly climbing a tree that is connected to the tree house (Fig. 30). Martin starts throwing rocks at Cyril, then hits him with a well-aimed throw, and Cyril falls (Fig. 31). The stunned Martin rushes to where Cyril is lying, motionless (Fig. 32). The father soon arrives and they both assume Cyril to be dead, going so far as to make up an alibi of how Cyril fell on his own, freeing them of any blame. A few moments later Cyril's phone rings; presumably, it is Samantha wondering where he is, and suddenly Cyril comes to and sits up (Fig. 33). This moment feels transcendent in the way that Cyril seems to come back from the dead. When the father and son get over their momentary shock, the father tells Cyril he suffered a great fall and asks him if they should call an ambulance. Cyril declines the offer with a simple "No" as if to imply "we're even" and then slowly ambles out of the woods (Fig. 34). The casual back-and-forth is quite breathtaking, and it is almost holy as if Cyril has been anointed after a miracle. The sublime moment occurs when Cyril picks up the charcoal and climbs onto his bike, heading back, apparently, to Samantha (Fig. 35). As Cyril rides away, noticeably shaky and wobbly, the Dardennes capture the moment in one shot lasting twenty-four seconds, having a profound effect, as Schrader observes: "Time allows the



Fig. 35 | Riding home, 1:23:13–1:23:37, LFF, 2011.



Fig. 36 | Riding and ascending, 1:23:33–1:23:37, LFF, 2011.

viewer to imbue the image with associations, even contradictory ones” (5). In this twenty-second shot, many contradictory associations come into play: we can marvel at what Cyril has just survived, we can worry if he will make it home, we can wonder if Samantha will ask Cyril about the cuts and scrapes and the

for possibility. The fact that a hope or a sense of a beginning can happen in the endings of *L'Enfant* and *Le Gamin au Vélo* is quite an achievement and sublime (and almost comical) in itself considering the particulars of how each film ends. In *L'Enfant*, Bruno and Sonia reconcile after Bruno is in jail for admitting to

***Cyril's movement actions are directly connected to his thoughts and motives. Each time Cyril accelerates on his bicycle or climbs a tree or fence, his movement is directly connected to a desired outcome becoming an act.***

dirt on his shirt, and we would wonder how would he answer, and if would she believe him. All of these associations conjure the past, present, and future as it concerns Cyril as he slowly accelerates on his bike, ascending up a slight incline out of frame (Fig 36). Lyotard adds that the sublime “must be represented as affecting thought in a way that is double in fear and exaltation” (157). In the last moments of the film, both movement actions come together, acceleration (cycling) and ascension (climbing), thereby propelling Cyril out of our view towards an unknown hope, something that can only be imagined.

The Dardenne brothers are expert at telling stories whose narrative endings leave open possibilities for future change. “A faculty which is inherent in action like an ever present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin” (*Arendt* 246). Faculty can be another word

selling their infant son Jimmy. In *Le Gamin au Vélo*, we see Cyril wobbling away on his bicycle after being unconscious for several minutes from a nearly fatal fall from a tree. The hope found in these selected films is the residue of strife, anxiety, hardship, and catastrophe endured. Lyotard remarks, “Various sublime feelings, whatever their particularities may be, are all of a ‘strenuous’ courageous type” (152). Lyotard’s discourse can be applied to both of the films discussed in this essay, but they especially ring true for *Le Gamin au Vélo*. The strenuous courage in *Le Gamin au Vélo* arises out the dire intensity of Cyril’s circumstance: being abandoned by his father and then trying to recognize and accept what can occupy the father’s place. Cyril finding his father and attempting a reunification, and only to be rejected twice shows the limits of courage. It is a resource that emerges (or not) in times of adversity, and it is a quality that can only

be acknowledged and identified as such in its after effects. For Cyril, courage comes from and through his movement actions, guiding him through an existential, metaphysical labyrinth before he accepts Samantha's love.

## CONCLUSION

A moment can only be sublime if we are aware of a boundary that, suddenly, fails to bind us. Tarkovsky describes this condition in the context of film: "What you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction but a pointer to something stretching beyond the frame (to infinity)" (Tarkovsky 117). Locating the sublime moments in the Dardennes' works reveals the ideas and writings of Burke, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Levinas that stretch beyond the frame, making these films compelling, original, and worthy of analysis. As Deleuze points out, "A very slight difference in the action, or between two actions, leads to a very great distance between two situations" (*Cinema I* 162); I would add, a very slight difference in movement, or between two movements, leads to a distance between a bare movement and a moment that becomes an act containing purpose and motive. The reception of movement actions in the context of the Dardennes' films leads to a disruption of the repetition and seeming inevitability of their characters' circumstances. The sublime is the disruption. In the disruption there is a hang in the balance uncertainty, a suspension that is disorienting and expansive, a differend (in Lyotard's words) that does not really resolve as much as it darts, penetrates, shoots through, and lingers.

The marginalized and distressed characters of *L'Enfant* and *Le Gamin au Vélo* navigate the broken world of Seraing—a world characterized as a "left-over space" that "is not a neutral space, but the result of a social fabric" (Dillet and Puri 376)—that reflects their marginalized existence and contextualizes their different acts of waiting. Waiting in both films is a coping and navigational mechanism. In *L'Enfant*, waiting is a passive act that hovers between blankness, pause, and reflection. In *Le Gamin au Vélo*, the act of climbing and biking is an active form of waiting in its mutually restless and anticipatory hopefulness and anxiety.

Both films explore the effects and repercussions of abandonment concerning father-son relationships, scenarios that are sublime in themselves and, in the Dardennes' hands, inherently dynamic in their possibilities. In *L'Enfant*, a young petty thief sells his new born son, only to try to get him back again. In *Le Gamin au Vélo*, a young boy tries to locate his father who abandoned him at a nearby orphanage. Each scenario is possible, unbearable, and unpredictable. They are scenarios that mirror reality but are hard to fathom and recognize because they are not familiar. The Dardenne brothers do not present easily identifiable visual tropes to make the comprehension of these scenes immediate or straightforward. Instead, they unleash a profusion of associative clusters of movements and acts that keep the viewer as unbalanced and disoriented as the main characters they watch. In turn, this motif creates a degree of empathy

***In L'Enfant, Bruno and Sonia reconcile after Bruno is in jail for admitting to selling their infant son Jimmy. In Le Gamin au Vélo, we see Cyril wobbling away on his bicycle after being unconscious for several minutes from a nearly fatal fall from a tree. The hope found in these selected films is the residue of strife, anxiety, hardship, and catastrophe endured.***

and shared unfamiliarity that the viewers and characters experience simultaneously—a shared reflection. Moreover, these films complement each other in examining issues concerning complex ratios of, in Burke's sense, act, scene, and purpose, while avoiding judgment and empty moralizing. But like the characters and viewers of their films, the Dardennes try, as stated by Luc Dardenne, to go beyond their original intentions and motives. Sometimes, this motive takes the form of trying to read the characters, or trying to imagine what they may be thinking. Other times, the viewer could be trying to imagine what they might do in that particular situation. In Luc Dardenne's words "It is up to film to bring spectators in contact with the world around them ... I have a great faith in the amelioration of the human being" (Badt 71). ■

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