

# Screening Solidarity

## Possible Lives in the Films of the Dardenne Brothers

---

Patrick O'Connor

In this essay I will develop a theory of solidarity as a modal concept. I will use the works of film-philosophers and film-makers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne to show how this modal solidarity is tenable in late capitalism. My goal is to enhance how we can understand solidarity philosophically, and to offer an exemplar of how research can be conducted at the intersection of film-philosophy, film-theory, philosophy itself, and sociology. The Dardennes, I argue, more than just adding colour to concepts through their filmic and philosophical work, also provide indispensable insights into how solidarity can emerge in late capitalist societies in the face of practices which imperil collective experiences, such as globalising economies, outsourcing, privatisation of public interest industries, the defanging of collective bargaining and the dismantlement of old working-class kinship networks.

Solidarity has been studied most extensively in sociology. The most obvious index is Émile Durkheim's classic *The Division of Labour in Society*, which gives us the distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity to which I attend herein. In the first section, I trace the conceptual lineage of solidarity by engaging Durkheim's foundational account. I appreciate Durkheim's argument on the necessity of differentiation for solidarity formation but deviate from his stricter dualist claims. Solidarity, I argue, is a form-of-life, a manner of being, an activity premised on upholding and forsaking differing priorities. In the second section, I proceed to develop the implications of solidarity as a modal concept. By modal, more specifically, I mean that solidarity is intelligible as a type of dispositional attitude, a disposition *towards* acting-upon matters of concern, norms, priorities, things which might and might not be carried out to maintain the practical identity of a group.<sup>1</sup> 'Modal' signifies that solidarity is intelligible as activities between purpose and achievement, ends and

---

1 I am guided here by Robert Brandom's notion of alethic modal relations of incompatibility and consequence. States of affairs of the objective world need to be thinkable as matters of what can and cannot be combined. This is Brandom's version of Hegel's 'determinate negation.' Cf. Brandom, Robert: *A Spirit of Trust. A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2019, 141.

means, and success and failure. Solidarity is necessarily contingent, since any act of solidarity can succeed or fail. A number of implications follow from this. I show that solidarity is connected to a concept of life as an activity of self-maintenance, as not necessarily connected to value, and as contingently formed relations: ersatz groups, as it were. Once I have established these points I turn, in the final section, to an exposition of how the Dardennes screen solidarity in a modal way. The conceptual value of the Dardennes' work, I suggest, is the way their cinema transcends oppositions between communal belonging and individual atomisation without falling into the trap of making either pole of this distinction unintelligible. In short, they do not resort to dualistic platitudes. The solidarity they imagine in their films is inherently modal, revealing solidarity as forms-of-life that are continually at stake, dynamic, world-building, and enabling groups to cooperate, share projects, and revise commitments as singular beings that remain inherently human. In other words, they screen solidarity as a form of possibility.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Durkheim's Solidarity

Durkheim looms large in any philosophical or sociological discussion of solidarity. In *The Division of Labor in Society* he famously outlines two forms of solidarity: mechanical and organic.<sup>3</sup> The work explains the inadequacy of instrumentalist reasoning and utilitarian ethics for explaining the 'cement' binding a society and groups within a society.<sup>4</sup> Durkheim's mechanical-organic opposition also discloses the historical variation of solidarity, with solidarity evolving across different types of society, either in modern industrial societies which are complex, differentiated, accommodative of rational individual decision-makers, or simpler, smaller, more pre-modern societies which are putatively more natural, integrated and unified through kinship networks.<sup>5</sup>

'Mechanical solidarity' is emblematic of 'simpler' societies, with mechanical denoting not so much the machinic, but a more natural automaticity.<sup>6</sup> In integrated

---

2 Often solidarity is depicted as fellow-feeling, an emotional bond to those different to me. This is a weak concept of solidarity as it is passively constructed. For a very good overview of solidarity as a philosophical concept cf. Tava, Francesco: Solidarity today: A problem-based approach. In: Cojocar, Mara-Daria/Finkelde, Dominik/Wallacher, Johannes et al. (Eds.): Jahrbuch Praktische Philosophie in Gobaler Perspektive, Freiburg-München 2021, 65–85.

3 Cf. Durkheim, Émile: *The Division of Labor in Society*, Lawrence, KS 2013, 90–92.

4 Ibid, 21.

5 Durkheim defends a strict dualism: 'There are, here two contrary forces, one centripetal, the other centrifugal, which cannot flourish at the same time. We cannot, at one and the same time, develop ourselves in two opposite senses.' Ibid, 91.

6 Ibid.

'mechanical' societies solidarity is 'automatic' because it is tied to natural habits, predilections and cultural sentiments. These constellations of beliefs maintain a common life without thought. Consequently, with mechanical solidarity subjective atomisation is marginal and group or collective thinking is maximal.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, organic solidarity emerges due to a variety of factors such as technological development, population growth, divergent institutions and multiplication of divisions of labour.<sup>8</sup>

'Organic solidarity' is dependent on mutual reciprocity arising from common interests forming around the specialisation of work. Whereas mechanical solidarity is impersonal, with little space for individuality, organic solidarity requires an individual devoted to a '...sphere of action which is peculiar to him.'<sup>9</sup> Counter-intuitively, the more differentiated a society, the more opportunities are afforded to different groups to develop in-group solidarity. Thus, kinship networks are no longer the decisive factor in forming social cohesion. In advanced societies, organic solidarity compels individuals to find belonging in the roles, norms, professions and services operating in society.

The paradoxical nature of Durkheim's account of organic solidarity is curious. It seems that more differentiation leads to more solidarity.<sup>10</sup> Of course, taken to a logical conclusion, absolute differentiation implies a society of individuals, which would annul solidarity. Durkheim is alive to this danger, explaining how the division of labour can incite social *anomie* or precipitate suicide due to society's inability to include individuals who struggle to find '... a basis for existence in life.'<sup>11</sup> Solidarity helps provide that basis. It can also alleviate other problems, such as where there are more corpuscular groupings in a society imposing more stringent normative demands and regulations on members. The more one invests in a group, the more likely one is to reject members who dissent, betray or deviate from the assigned roles deemed necessary to upholding in-group values. In contrast, solidarity is a critical social balm, enabling individuals to find meaning in both differentiated and undifferentiated societies. The strength of Durkheim's view is that solidarity is not tied to identity but extends to out-group members. Solidarity, by cohering varying groups, entails it is a necessary condition of any society emerging in the first place; that is, solidarity is coextensive with the survival of, and reproduction of, society in a 'durable way.'<sup>12</sup>

---

7 Ibid, 104.

8 Ibid

9 Ibid, 91.

10 Ibid, 101.

11 Cf. Durkheim, Émile: *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, London 2005, 219.

12 Durkheim: *The Division of Labour*, 242.

While Durkheim is right to emphasise solidarity contributes to the reproduction of a society across time, the dualism of mechanical and organic solidarity omits to analyse purposive or modal forms of solidarity. By this I mean the ends *towards* which groups form. Solidarity must be the subject of actions and practical identities which have ends in view, whether distant or imminent: tasks which might or might not be accomplished, tasks that are live or at stake. Consequently, solidarity is not necessarily determinable as a particular value. Groups are committed *to*, not subjects *of*, the values of whatever practical forms-of-life they actively solidify around to uphold. If solidarity were not modal in this way, if it were not a disposition *towards*, it would reify into ahistorical values or abstract pieties, with members elevating group value in place of the active priorities in participating, building or sustaining groups.

Durkheim is right to highlight solidarity formed from a differentiation of divisions of labour. After all, work identities generate complementary interests and commitments as much as competing antagonisms and rivalries. However, the condition underlying solidarity is not differentiation of bonds between individuals and groups *per se*; rather, solidarity *is* the provisional commitments, rules and norms adopted in an effort to sustain life over time. Durkheim's oppositions between the individual and the collective, the mechanical and the organic, the sacred and the profane, obscures the necessity of adopting modal practices as necessary to the formation of solidarity. That solidarity must diverge, change or be open to revision implies it is necessarily contingent. Because it is contingent, as a form of life it is a live issue, a palpable matter of concern for those involved, rather than settled, demanding a selection of priorities evolving alongside the self-constitution of the group.

If solidarity is understood as a form of self-sustenance of any group formation, this helps us parse the relations between individual and social roles. For example, solidarity understood as a form of self-maintenance means individuals can participate in, but remain distinct from, any group formation they happen to occupy, simply because an individual can join or leave a group. *Mutatis mutandis*: any group formation depends on the individuals constituting the group but is not necessarily reducible to them, since more members may or may not join. This shows solidarity is both singular and common simultaneously. As a form of life-maintenance, solidarity necessarily requires both individuals and groups to engage in practices of self-maintaining or self-constitution. But individuals and groups do not *necessarily* have to do the maintaining through explicitly organic or mechanical assignation of roles.

## 2. Solidarity as Modal

There is no prospective necessity for solidarity to sustain itself, nor is there a guarantee of social unanimity in the future, nor indeed that it be devoted to noble purposes. That solidarity depends on activities of life-maintenance entails it is subject

to success or failure. Consequently, solidarity is inherently contingent. What makes solidarity a distinctive concept – unlike communal feeling, shared sentiment, tribal absorption – is that it points to a distinctive universal of human experience. And that universal is the modal contingency of norms. This explains why solidarity is often associated with, and sometimes mistaken for, egalitarian forms of belonging. Egalitarianism, however, is not necessarily an essential feature of solidarity. Certainly, the projects and commitments humans take up move towards a horizon of understanding where rights and obligations of each towards all and all towards each are palpable. This, though, does not entail solidarity to be necessarily noble, nor are any of its ideals guaranteed. What is important is not the identity of any group *per se* – football teams, political parties, class identity, religious affiliation, ethnicity – rather, the question is *why* groups adopt forms of life to self-maintain in order to tackle imminent priorities, enhancing their chances of survival across a finite span of time and even potentially beyond it intergenerationally. Contingency and risk are in-built into the formation and activity of solidarity. The universal dimension of solidarity stems from groups confronting the vicissitudes of life and the consequent actions and projects adopted to sustain that life.

That solidarity is an activity means it is open to revision, and therefore solidarity is made, remade and not found.<sup>13</sup> Solidarity depends upon the active selection of roles, norms and commitments. It is a modal disposition towards the formation of a concept of life. These commitments are necessarily neither good nor bad in themselves. Solidarity certainly can take the form of cooperation, collective action and group-participation, but these are not *necessarily* positively inflected. A group of thieves, as the saying goes, can express solidarity for their comrades in crime as much as one set of workers may express solidarity for a different set of insubordinate workers on strike. The point is that none of these specific forms of solidarity are necessarily legitimate, or require idealistic conceptions of value – justice, selflessness, religious ideals, tribal loyalty, humanitarianism – to be intelligible in the first place. Rather, solidarity, although often appearing as such, is not really a value in the sense that it guarantees ways of 'being a better version of myself' or of being a 'good person,' only insofar as it is a manner of actively pursuing the projects and tasks carried out by individuals and groups. Solidarity is the recognition that one has a stake in the outcomes of a relevant group's actions, not that the values of that group necessarily remain intact.

Solidarity actively discloses how mutually recognitive forms of life emerge, however they amalgamate, for better or worse. All the word 'solidarity' names, then, is the recognitive unanimity aimed towards upholding a group's self-constitution in time.

---

13 Here I subscribe to Richard Rorty's characterisation of solidarity as made rather than found, produced historically rather than ahistorically. Cf. Rorty, Richard: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge 1989, 195.

Here, Axel Honneth is valuable. Honneth suggests solidarity is 'symmetrical esteem' or an equality of recognition. For example, being socially esteemed enhances psychological well-being as one's achievements and abilities are recognised as instrumentally valuable by other group members.<sup>14</sup> 'Value,' on Honneth's account, exists insofar as an individual is pragmatically useful to contributing towards maintaining the material interests of the group. Solidarity though, as a type of esteem, requires an exclusive form of group consensus, one originating in a very specific type of social belonging, the social belonging arising from collective resistance to political oppression.<sup>15</sup> The force of the oppression generates in-group consensus, or '...the all-dominating agreement on a practical goal that instantly generates an intersubjective value-horizon, in which each participant learns to recognize the significance of the abilities and traits of the others to the same degree.'<sup>16</sup> As I have argued, it is not necessarily the case that solidarity has a positive value, but Honneth's account is valuable to illuminate how spontaneous forms of solidarity emerge.<sup>17</sup> Solidarity is not a 'value' but rather is based on how groups practically orient themselves across the span of different projects and commitments. Solidarity can occur spontaneously, spawning new relations of solidarity and sympathy across social distinctions like class or professional affiliation.

Honneth's example is war, but it really could refer to any adverse set of circumstances, where new forms of solidarity suddenly emerge in the face of societal strain or emergency. Such an eventuality makes explicit accomplishments and abilities previously deemed useless or unnoticed. One might think here of professional classes applauding 'key workers' during the Covid-19 pandemic. The 'how' of solidarity is quite clear: adverse circumstances are conducive to bonding and solidifying groups. Though Honneth explains instances of how solidarity emerges, he does not depict the 'why' of solidarity. Solidarity necessarily exists as an existential disposition because contingent group formation is conducive to human survival. The 'why' acknowledges that solidarity is connected to explicit tasks groups carry out to uphold themselves over time.

At this point it is worth restating the distinguishing features of solidarity. Solidarity is not necessarily founded on tribal fusion or communal belonging; rather, solidarity is the commitments individuals in groups adopt to self-constitute themselves. Solidarity, as a philosophical concept, and despite its etymological roots as a form of solidification – deriving from the Latin for robust, firm or undivided – is contingent and subject to change, and hence is understandable as a form of activity

---

14 Cf. Honneth, Axel: *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge, MA 1995, 129–130.

15 *Ibid.*, 128.

16 *Ibid.*, 129.

17 *Ibid.*, 128.

dependent on the projects, norms and commitments we adopt to sustain our practical identity across time. Solidarity certainly can be a horizon of meaning and purpose, but a horizon is not a value, a horizon is only a metaphor for possibility. Solidarity is intrinsically modal, being contingent upon activities that might or might not be adopted, or that might or might not succeed. This formal modal structure demonstrates the necessity of contingency to the formation of solidarity. Solidarity certainly requires identification with a cause, but the content of that cause is not final; that there *is* a cause is necessary, but *why* that cause comes into being is dependent on varying activities and sets of commitments worked out practically over time to maintain the lives of a group.

### 3. Screening Solidarity

The social milieu in which the Dardennes place their characters is the city of Seraing in the Walloon region of Belgium, within the economic and cultural formations of late capitalism. In feature films and documentaries they are concerned with what Martin O'Shaughnessy calls 'ethics in the ruin of politics.'<sup>18</sup> The 'ruin of politics' O'Shaughnessy refers to is the contemporary economic order, a world of ruthless competitive individualism, precarious labour, economic desperation, breakdown of kinship networks, and the baleful consequences of longstanding efforts to 'globalise' the economies of liberal democracies. Without social safety nets, individuals' commitments are restricted to just that, and individual entrepreneurial impulses are premised on aggressive acquisition, selfishness, and an inability to transcend the atomisation of relentless self-interest.

The Dardenne brothers have made films about those living on the margins of society. Their careers have been dedicated to documenting the bleak realities of the marginalised, filming the lives of immigrants, the precariat, the unemployed or underemployed, substance abusers, those with mental illness, petty criminals and the impoverished. However, it is important to realise that their films do not sentimentalise the vulnerable, and nor do they fetishise the abjection of the poor. Their most vulnerable characters have agency, make realisations, redress personal failings, and ultimately recognise how precarious and significant solidarity is despite the destructive effects of late capitalism. This is important to grasp, since one danger with their filmic accounts of life in late capitalism is that solidarity is limited to ethical sentiment or personal encounters. As Robert Pippin suggests, '...in the absence of anything political, the epiphanic moral moments...seem inspired by

---

18 Cf. O'Shaughnessy, Martin: Ethics in the Ruin of Politics. The Dardenne Brothers. In: Ince, Kate (Ed.): Five Directors. Auteurism from Assayas to Ozon, Manchester, 59–83. O'Shaughnessy's chapter also provides useful information on the Dardennes documentarian origins.

the sheer physical presence of some specific particular other person.<sup>19</sup> Pippin is right: personal encounters and reciprocity are crucial for the Dardennes. I do think, though, that this focus can be extended beyond immediate ethical encounters to a reflection on solidarity.

The brothers' works, particularly their films, are situated in zones where democratic politics is absent or subsumed in the transactional relations of market forces. In fact, in their films, transactional relations are so endemic as to be normalised. If the only form of commitments are transactional ones, the possibilities of solidarity or any communal consensus are precluded from the outset. Solidarity is replaced by rabidly self-interested forms of social relations, which in turn diminishes the scope of what can and cannot be considered good. It is important to note the Dardennes are not wide-eyed optimists or romantics.<sup>20</sup> While they may very well be optimists masquerading as pessimistic social realists, they always acknowledge the real shapes of the historical realities which inform the modal possibilities of their characters, as well as the obstacles posed to their abilities to become otherwise under the diminished possibilities available in late capitalism.

As such, their characters' realisations tend to hinge on a self-recognition of themselves as abilities-to-be.<sup>21</sup> Broadly, their aim is to 'battle against the loss of trust in humanity, against this falsely lucid thought in which all man's actions are in vain.'<sup>22</sup> Usually the drama is derived from characters struggling with activities they might and might not adopt. This is why the Dardennes' characters are resistant to psychological description. Solidarity as modality is of more importance for characters than revealing any individual motivation or psychic interiority.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the film's protagonists find solidarity not as something accomplished or settled, but actively at stake. Solidarity as possibility is kept *live*.<sup>24</sup> We see this, for example, in

---

19 Cf. Pippin, Robert: *Filmed Thought. Cinema as Reflective Form*, Chicago 2020, 236.

20 One way of defining their work is as 'responsible realism.' Cf. Mosley, Philip: *The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers. Responsible Realism*, New York 2013, 1–25. Another useful analysis of the Dardennes' efforts to confront late capitalism can be found in Scullion, Rosmarie: *Lessons for the Neoliberal Age. Cinema and Social Solidarity from Jean Renoir to Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*. In: *SubStance* 43 (2014) 63–81.

21 This term is John Haugeland's. Cf. Haugeland, John: *Dasein Disclosed*, Harvard 2013, 89.

22 Dardenne, Luc: *On the Back of Our Images I: 1991–2005*, Chicago 2019, 29.

23 *Ibid.*, 30–31, 72.

24 There is direct textual evidence the Dardennes pursue a modal form of cinema. In Luc Dardenne's diaries, he says: 'The distinction Gilles Deleuze makes between "virtual" and "possible" is important here: we must not construct the narrative, the film, in such a way that the spectator can only wait for the possible (the resolution)...we must be able to create a current of sensations and meanings carried along in the flow of the film, actualising unpredicted virtualities, born in the present of the shot, of their relations.' [All translations mine]. Cf. Dardenne, Luc: *Au Dos de Nos Images II: 2005–2014*, Paris 2015, 142. 'Possibility' is negatively emphasised here, but only if we think of possibility as a phase of necessity, or what will come to be;



*La Fille Inconnue* (2016). The central protagonist Jenny (Adèle Haenel), a successful if somewhat overbearing General Practice doctor, refuses after-hours entry to a panicked girl at her medical centre. Jenny occupies a quasi-utopian space, one she is in control of, finding meaning within a closed world of work and success. The visitation of an immigrant girl renders manifest the contingency of her insular existing priorities. Jenny embarks on a detective quest to discover what happened to the girl, who is later found dead. Jenny is forced to recognise that her life is absent of modal solidarity, and consequently she is incapable of counting her own life as a life developing possibilities among others. Critically, she reframes her commitments, taking less well-paid work with more disadvantaged patients.

Either with the stranger who shocks Jenny out of her moral complacency, or a broken family in *Le Fils* (2002), or with *Rosetta* (1999) and the frantic search for normal work, or *L'Enfant* (2005) where a father sells his new-born child, the Dardennes' films are interesting as much for what is absent as for what is immediately present. And a key absence in their cinema is solidarity: it is even necessary to the cinematic form, as something their characters come to recognise. All the different situations depicted disclose how solidarity is misrecognised, absent but emergent despite natural affiliations. We see this explicitly in *Le Fils* where a father forms an impossible bond with the murderer of his child, or in *La Promesse* (1996) where an adolescent attempts to transcend the domineering influence of a father. With *Rosetta* in particular, we find solidarity emerge in the union of two individuals who ought not bond due to Rosetta's (Émilie Dequenne) selfish actions. In all these examples, solidarity happens due to an expansion of the scope of mutual obligation, which requires a recognition of the modal being of character – put more simply, a recognition other folk share the burdens of the possibilities imposed upon me.

If the Dardennes do not glorify the slender freedoms of life on the margins, what are they trying to accomplish? They are looking for something different to moralising. They are trying to make explicit how to be human in late capitalism.<sup>25</sup> In *Rosetta*, for example, we find a paradigmatic case of the foreclosure of modal solidarity. Here the Dardennes aimed to create '... a portrait of an era.'<sup>26</sup> That era is late capitalism, a time of 'survival necessitated by the scarcity of work which results in difficulties with money, housing, food, health, exclusion...'. They start the film in the middle, with an ejection.<sup>27</sup> The film is marked by motion, conflict, beginning with doors slamming. We are viewing from behind Rosetta as she chases towards we know not what.

---

the virtual is that which really exists qua possibility. For a suggestive account of how Deleuze can be put in dialogue with the Dardennes cf. Crano, Ricky: Occupy without Counting. Furtive Urbanism in the Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. In: *Film-Philosophy* 13 (2019) 1–15.

25 Dardenne: On the Back of Our Images, 78.

26 Ibid, 62.

27 Ibid.

Rosetta gets into a physical fight with large men whilst being ejected from repetitive menial labour. But she is, as Luc Dardenne says, a ‘good little soldier of capitalism,’ committed to the now, as yet unable to recognise she exists *qua* possibilities.<sup>28</sup> Instead, Rosetta’s aspirations to a petit-bourgeois lifestyle are more typified by ousting her friend Riquet (Fabrizio Rongione) from a job at a waffle van.

The frantic energy continues for the duration of the film. Famously, the Dardennes often film with hand-held cameras from the back, the camera adopting partial, often disjunctive, partially obscured, mid-level views. They deliberately suffuse their *mise-en-scènes* with uncertainty, with a sense that things are up for grabs. Indeed, on first viewing, it is difficult to tell what is going on. The action is very immediate, with little if any backstory, as well as an absence of markers of place; they favour a placelessness befitting the homogenised world of late capitalism.<sup>29</sup> This uncertainty is compounded by a distinct lack of expository dialogue or any heavy-handed sentimental music dictating how audiences ought to feel. The dearth of stylistic prescriptions matches the dearth of moral prescriptions.

The style alerts us to how the Dardennes’ films use the form of cinema to inaugurate a meta-reflection on how cinema itself challenges the historical shape of late capitalist societies and its subjects. *Rosetta*’s style reveals four salient features of character within late capitalism: motion, impoverished opportunities for meaningful labour, atomisation, and material strategising. The rushed, frantic, uncertain style reveals the necessity of uncertainty, but uncertainty also implies possibility, and their films are committed revealing the phenomenological experience – the what-it-is-likeness – of being subjects of the vagaries of precarious labour rather than being a subject that moulds, has a claim on, or shares authorship of their historical conditions. And Rosetta is surely that, trapped on the treadmill of capital accumulation, evidenced distinctly by her shabby red sports jacket, her life in a ramshackle trailer park, in a parked caravan, itself a blunt symbol of motion standing still. These four features disclose a diminished mode of solidarity because they are characterised by activities beyond Rosetta’s control and which confine Rosetta to the present. Rosetta, on the frantic hamster-wheel of late capitalism, is continually confronted with recycling the precarity of her existing commitments and priorities.

That Rosetta wants to keep returning to employment, any employment, denotes an incapacity to think the contingency of any familiar, tribal or social formations.

---

28 Luc Dardenne in interview with Stevens, Isabel: Woman on the verge. In: Sight and Sound, 24 (September 2014) 65–67, 66.

29 Joseph Mai, on La Promesse, says, ‘Though the film is still set in Seraing, it contains few references to the national context and has moved completely in the realm of globalization, whose forces are postnational, often working through multinational companies, trade organisations, and individual initiatives as much as governments.’ Mai, Joseph: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Urbana 2022, 44.

For example, the natural binding to her mother is provisional. Rosetta is constantly arguing with her mother. Ironically, Rosetta adopts a maternal posture, chastising her mother for exchanging sexual favours for alcohol. Rosetta's mother denotes an impoverished form of opportunity. Impoverished opportunity is still opportunity, though, and what Rosetta fears is the reproduction of her mother's form-of-life; sex-work is always a possibility for a poor, unemployed young girl. Throughout, Rosetta struggles to discern any other priorities outside of her commitments to reproducing an entrepreneurial, atomised self. Rosetta has no sense of a purposive life precisely because she is someone for whom nothing is modally at stake, that is, forms of life she can shape with others; as such, there is nothing *towards* which she can succeed or fail other than immediate work. This is demonstrated most poignantly in her botched suicide attempt with gas, the ultimate affirmation she can discern no viable forms of life with others.

Unexpectedly, solidarity is found at the end of the film in Rosetta's recognition that her struggles to survive belong to everyone. This comes when Riquet pursues her on a motorcycle at the film's denouement. The intrusion of Riquet, who circles Rosetta confrontationally, is at once quizzical, comical and accusatory. He wants to know why she betrayed him to get the job but helped him when drowning: "*Tu m'as quand même aide* (You still helped me)." Because Riquet confronts Rosetta with the unanticipated, an offer of help beyond the cycle of retribution, it is made explicit how Rosetta can be an author of commitments beyond the narrow bonds of enlightened self-interest.<sup>30</sup> In their later films, the Dardennes expand the circle of obligation and commitments.

Solidarity is based on incurring a risk beyond communal fusion; indeed, solidarity is actively resistant to such identarian entrenchment, and demands as I have mentioned, the incurring of a cost. According to Luc Dardenne, wholly identifying with a group is hubris.<sup>31</sup> In *La Promesse* we see more clearly that solidarity is not inevitably tied to context or history-bound. The setting of *La Promesse* follows a similar pattern to the Dardennes' other films. Characters inhabit a deindustrialised setting, as Lauren Berlant suggests they become '...stuck in what we might call survival time,

---

30 Luc Dardenne outlines an explicit debt to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas' language of exteriority, otherness, face-to-face encounters, for him, undermines the sovereignty of the self-interested autonomous ego. For a good summary of Levinas' influence on the Dardennes, cf. Cooper, Sarah: *Mortal Ethics. Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers*. In *Film-Philosophy* 11 (2007) 56–87.

31 In his philosophical work, *Sur L'Affaire Humaine*, Luc Dardenne suggests 'To be part of the group, belonging to a group which contains me, which holds me with others who are no longer others, to partake in unanimity, to be in the circle or to flee the solitude of my temporal, separate, mortal being, this is how the dream of eternity is still pursued for the human who continues to refuse their birth, their separate being, time.' Cf Dardenne, Luc: *Sur L'Affaire Humaine*, Paris 2012, 127. [All translations mine]

the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water – the time of not-stopping.<sup>32</sup> I would add to Berlant's argument that solidarity, at least on the surface, is unthinkable. However, the Dardennes take up this challenge. Solidarity materialises between Igor (Jérémie Renier), an adolescent male, and Assita (Assita Ouedraogo), an immigrant from Burkina-Faso whose husband dies on a shoddily constructed and unregulated building site run by Igor's father. Assita comes from a completely different country, has strange practices, and is content to acknowledge spirits, supernaturalism and prophecy. Igor is a young adult who is strategic, practical, tied to his father's get-rich-quick schemes. Igor is very much of the earth. Assita and Igor meet in the middle, between natural, sensuous life and the spiritual life of ancestors and prophecy.

*La Promesse* begins in a workshop, with counting, measuring, where we find a son disturbed by his father obnoxiously hooting his car horn to leave work early. Immediately, the world of precarious labour is made manifest. The father-figure of the mechanic-mentor, the purveyor of durable and respectable work, holds no draw for Igor, who at first is comfortable working in the informal black-market economy of people-trafficking and housing illegal immigrants in unsafe conditions.

Igor's father, Roger (Olivier Gourmet), is coercive throughout the film. In an early scene Roger gives Igor an identical ring to his, binding Igor to reproducing his own patterns. When Roger figuratively presides over the wedding of Igor to himself, it demonstrates that his coercion is bodily. Also Roger beats, tickles, and sings cheek-to-cheek with Igor. Their physical relationship is dysfunctional insofar as it binds Igor to a diminished recognition of possibility. In some sense, Roger wants Igor tied to the reproduction of the physical realm. After Amidou (Rasmané Ouédraogo) fatally tumbles from a shoddily-constructed scaffold, Igor finds himself promising the dying man he will care for his wife and baby. The promise gives Igor conflicting obligations between the dead and his living father. As the film progresses, we see Igor stripping himself of this natural affiliation. In terms of solidarity, the Dardennes aim to show an individual's solidarity sustaining forms of life in terms of their environment, their surroundings, their minds, but also, critically, by anchoring solidarity in the ability to expand mutual esteem beyond identarian affiliation, even beyond life itself.

The story of how Igor distances himself from Roger also tells us something interesting about solidarity. It is not so much that Igor has a bad form of solidarity with Roger and his lackeys, for which the ethical encounter with the immigrant Assita is the curative. Rather, solidarity requires something purely contingent, proceeding with uncertainty as both Igor and Assita must do. As I have argued, solidarity is neither good nor bad, but only describes the conditions for binding any collective form-of-life to uphold itself in a durable way in the face of obstacles, accidents and threats.

---

32 Berlant, Laurent: *Cruel Optimism*, Durham and London 2011, 16.

And the film is about binding in many ways. Igor binds Amidou's leg with a belt in an effort to preserve his life, which Roger rips off. Amidou's death represents the way the vulnerable and the unfortunate impose moral obligations even beyond the grave.<sup>33</sup> Igor becomes bound by something more than just an obligation to the reproduction of existing forms of life. His commitments become reframed to forming a solidarity with a death constituted in life, something neither brutally materialist, but not purely supernatural either, as represented by Assita's folkloric lineage of gods and spirits. Rather, Igor's solidarity is wholly this-worldly, located in the carrying-out of conflicting commitments and loyalties.

Stylistically, we see this solidarity emphasised where Igor calls Roger on a telephone. The ring is blurred in the background. Roger's omniscience is fraying, his disembodied voice fails to exercise physical coercion over Igor and thereby fails to bind him to a life of bare survival. Igor is instead bound to a recognition that solidarity extends outside the natural bonds of family, the joys and get-rich-quick schemes of the informal economy, and the subtle domination of a cheap patriarch. Like the cleaning lady who helps Assita at the risk of no recompense, there is nothing fixed or resolved in the final scene. There is no guarantee that Assita and Igor will reconcile. This reveals the solidarity the brothers' films express, and the type of solidarity I have outlined from the start of this essay. Solidarity is necessarily contingent, a form of possibility that makes explicit how norms and commitments are at stake, something to be for or against, even generated by random acts of senseless kindness. What the Dardennes screen is solidarity as a practical identity that is modally engaged. Igor and Assita together reveal the stakes of solidarity as a modal form of life because both Igor and Assita incur costs to their past forms of life, form an ersatz group, and recognise themselves as beings with possibilities available to them. They also discern that *both* their individual and human identity is stake. Solidarity arises for the Dardennes when individuals see themselves as various realisations of human possibility.

In *Deux Jours, Une Nuit* (2014) the Dardennes extend their reflection on solidarity beyond interpersonal relationships towards political life in a workplace. The express purpose of this film is to show solidarity is still a possibility. In an interview, Luc Dardenne suggests: 'I think that solidarity is still possible today. In any case that's what the film sets out to show.'<sup>34</sup> Also, Jean-Pierre Dardenne connects the question of

---

33 As mentioned, the Dardennes owe an explicit debt to Levinas. I am less interested in this element, but it is important to note, as Levinas' account of unconditionality of ethical encounters precipitates inter-personality and, by extension, solidarity. Solidarity, as I argue throughout, demands an expanded set of commitments. Cf. Luc Dardenne: On the Back of Our Images, 42.

34 Cf. Dardenne, Luc and Jean-Pierre: Press Conference – Luc Dardenne: I Still Think that Solidarity is Possible Today. In Festival de Cannes, <https://bit.ly/3487sEm>, May 5th, 2014, updated February 13th, 2018.

solidarity to something transformative. The solidarity the chief protagonist Sandra (Marion Cotillard) experiences changes her life in meaningful ways: 'We've tried to show how the solidarity that Sandra experiences, and how her husband's support change this woman's life so that she can say in the end: "I put up a fight, I'm happy."<sup>35</sup>

Like Rosetta, Sandra is unable to recognise herself, dramatised through Sandra's inability to face herself in the mirror. Sandra exudes ontological insecurity, stating at one point she does not exist, that she is nothing at all. Sandra's employment mirrors this existential brittleness: she works in a factory manufacturing solar panels, and the work is in jeopardy due to Asian competitors. It is significant this is a small company, as there is no organised labour protection, and workers are inevitably pitted against each other without unionisation. Sandra's boss Dumont (Batiste Sorнин) wants to sack workers, and for existing workers to do more for the same or less pay. Sandra is informed *in absentia* as she is on leave due to her mental health; she has to scramble to convince Dumont to allow a vote on her job from her fellow colleagues. And this forms the basic plot, as Sandra and husband Manu (Fabrizio Rongione) visit twelve co-workers to convince them to act against their own material interests. If she is forced out of the job those remaining get a bonus of 1000 euros, which for workers on their wages is a significant sum.

Sandra's self-understanding is initially constrained to the entrepreneurial self of late capitalism. She is cast into the position of canvassing, cajoling and convincing her workers to vote for her to say. She has to be the politician late-capitalist politics fails to offer. Most strikingly, Sandra's self-recognition emerges through collective acts of self-maintenance. Self-maintaining with an in-group is different to the bare survival of meeting basic needs. With the former, one is subjected *to* an economy, whereas with the latter one enhances one's ability to be subject *of*, and author of, one's economic situation. In other words, her situation illustrates the difference between agency and exploitation. The film is a 'portrait of a woman' who 're-joins the world.'<sup>36</sup>

Sandra's odyssey takes her out of herself. While many of her encounters with her co-workers are fraught, even humiliating as she pleads for a 'gesture of solidarity,'<sup>37</sup> her activities connect her to a life beyond herself. She visits a cross-section of society, boundaries blurring between neighbourhoods, housing estates, pubs and sportsgrounds.<sup>38</sup> Sandra becomes mindful of the social backdrop that outstrips her own personal choices. Also, she begins to discern that solidarity requires obstacles and impediments to be overcome in order to form.<sup>39</sup> Beyond the interpersonal eth-

---

35 Ibid.

36 Dardenne: *Au Dos de Nos Images II*, 215.

37 Ibid.

38 Luc Dardenne notes his scepticism of the surveillance society. Cf. *ibid.*, 221.

39 *Ibid.*, 225.

ical recognition we find in *Rosetta* and *La Promesse*, what is distinct about the form of solidarity that emerges in *Deux Jours, Une Nuit*, is that it is all at once singular and generic. Individual self-interests and self-sacrifices are the common form of life itself. For Sandra, her individual moral choices, her pursuit of material security and prosperity, is recognised as everyone's pursuit of prosperity. This makes explicit the broader social, political and economic world she is of and which she can shape. She begins to act creatively on her situation rather than experiencing it passively. In one of the more light-hearted scenes, Sandra, her husband and a co-worker sing Van Morrison's version of *Gloria* as they drive through the night – here, solidarity is symbolised in aesthetic communion. Music is something in common, created, and when not commodified, a form of ensemble thinking. Solidarity can, when optimised, be a type of joyous, if fraught, world-building.<sup>40</sup> Sandra's character starts to see her life modally, that is, as one possible version of human life. What is important about the Dardennes' films is that they show solidarity is not about individualism, nor absorption into an indiscernible lump of humanity. Rather, solidarity is an instance of how humans form groups in the face of existential threat. Solidarity is an existential concept, not necessarily a social one.

In the end, Sandra loses the vote. Democratic politics by its very nature is hopeless for guaranteeing the well-being of its citizens.<sup>41</sup> She gathers to movingly say goodbye to those who have formed an ersatz form of life, one that disposed themselves to sustain their labour towards more viable forms of life. This poignant but uplifting scene is upended by Sandra's boss calling her into the office, offering to keep her job at the expense of an uncontracted worker. This is an effective scene precisely because it individualises Sandra's moral obligations and recently-accrued insights. It pits her against a co-worker who helped her, reduces her lived situation to bureaucratic impersonality, and most importantly shows late capitalism reasserting its dominion over Sandra's newfound recognition of solidarity. That she rejects the offer tells us something interesting about the Dardennes' account of solidarity. Like *Rosetta* and like Igor with Assita, there is no resolution or grand triumph. The thing that is different is that she has put up a good fight, as she tells her husband. And this is important. Solidarity is not guaranteed, rather it is created with others and can be adopted to form and maintain freer and more dignified forms of life: as such, solidarity is the creation of possibility itself.

---

40 For Luc Dardenne 'The human being who cannot succumb to this desire to belong, who can undo or at least loosen his link to eternity, is the social individual of a democracy, capable of living amongst relative affiliations, with relative absolutes, in any case capable of living in the fog of mortality.' Dardenne: *Sur L'Affaire Humaine*, 127–128.

41 This is not to say democracy cannot enhance the well-being of its citizenry – only that it does not ensure it.

#### 4. Conclusion

Modal solidarity has four salient features. Firstly, solidarity is distinguished by contingency. The solidification of any group is dependent on activities that work towards success or failure. Secondly, activities of solidarity are intelligible as the projects, norms and commitments we adopt to sustain our life. Put succinctly, solidarity is what we *do*. This is not necessarily morally inflected. So consequently, and thirdly, solidarity as a form of egalitarianism is not guaranteed. Solidarity is egalitarian only insofar as it imposes a common fate on humans, that we need to enter group alliances with those unlike us to sustain our lives; this does not, however, imply virtue. Fourthly, solidarity requires enacted commitments in contingently formed groups. That solidarity in-groups are precariously formed entails a dissymmetry involving others unlike me, for whom I incur costs or bear a burden in some way. Overall, then, we have a more detailed picture of solidarity than the view that solidarity is based only on shared consensus. What I have developed in this article is a way of talking about solidarity as a form of life requiring both differentiation *and* unity. The cinema of the Dardenne brothers and their unique form of ethical film-philosophy give a strong filmic rendition of the modal form of solidarity, as I have outlined herein. In *Sur L'Affaire Humaine* Luc Dardenne connects love to fragility, to meaning over cheap gossip, and to a commonality which recognises all humans are singular *and* universal.<sup>42</sup> What the Dardennes add to the philosophical and sociological picture is a filmic rendition of the modal nature of solidarity. That cinema – the artform of motion – contributes to our philosophical and sociological understanding of solidarity ought to be of no surprise. Solidarity is, as I have shown, an active set of tasks that fit individual lives into a broader human narrative, only when is solidarity is grasped as a modal concept can it thought of as aiming towards developing viable forms of life in the face of adversity. Solidarity is in the end really only a name for the collective unanimity of humanity's successes and failures. Past efforts to maintain our survival are not formed of a compact of past, present and future. This would only be a cheap desire for a repetition of past forms. In contrast, solidarity as modal reveals how we adopt, risk and practically develop priorities to transform the past in order to enact freer forms of life for the future. Whether we succeed or fail is always at stake.

---

42 For Luc Dardenne, 'Thinking that love can only be given if it has been received in a moment of extreme fragility is a common thought, but it doesn't belong to idle chatter, it is common in the sense that it expresses a universal recognition of our human specificity, of our singular universally-shared being.' Cf. Dardenne, Luc, *Sur L'Affaire Humaine*, 171.



## Cited Works

- Berlant, Laurent: *Cruel Optimism*, Durham and London 2011.
- Brandom, Robert: *A Spirit of Trust. A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2019.
- Cooper, Sarah: *Mortal Ethics. Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers*. In *Film-Philosophy* 11 (2007) 56–87.
- Crano, Ricky: *Occupy without Counting. Furtive Urbanism in the Films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*. In: *Film-Philosophy* 13 (2019) 1–15.
- Dardenne, Luc and Jean-Pierre: *Press Conference – Luc Dardenne: I Still Think that Solidarity is Possible Today*. In *Festival de Cannes*, <https://bit.ly/3487sEm>, May 5th, 2014, updated February 13th, 2018.
- Dardenne, Luc: *Au Dos de Nos Images II: 2005–2014*, Paris 2015.
- Dardenne, Luc: *On the Back of Our Images I: 1991–2005*, Chicago 2019.
- Dardenne, Luc: *Sur L'Affaire Humaine*, Paris 2012.
- Durkheim, Émile: *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, London 2005, 219.
- Durkheim, Émile: *The Division of Labor in Society*, Lawrence, KS 2013, 90–92.
- Haugeland, John: *Dasein Disclosed*, Harvard 2013.
- Honneth, Axel: *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge, MA 1995.
- Luc Dardenne in interview with Stevens, Isabel: *Woman on the verge*. In: *Sight and Sound*, 24 (September 2014) 65–67.
- Mai, Joseph: *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Urbana* 2022, 44.
- Mosley, Philip: *The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers. Responsible Realism*, New York 2013.
- O'Shaughnessy, Martin: *Ethics in the Ruin of Politics. The Dardenne Brothers*. In: Ince, Kate (Ed.): *Five Directors. Auteurism from Assayas to Ozon*, Manchester, 59–83.
- Pippin, Robert: *Filmed Thought. Cinema as Reflective Form*, Chicago 2020.
- Rorty, Richard: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge 1989, 195.
- Scullion, Rosmarie: *Lessons for the Neoliberal Age. Cinema and Social Solidarity from Jean Renoir to Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne*. In: *SubStance* 43 (2014) 63–81.
- Tava, Francesco: *Solidarity today: A problem-based approach*. In: Cojocar, Mara-Daria/Finkelde, Dominik/Wallacher, Johannes et al. (Eds.): *Jahrbuch Praktische Philosophie in Gobaler Perspektive*, Freiburg-München 2021, 65–85.