



Deux jours, une nuit

(Two Days, One Night)

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My mother's sisters and my father's sisters and my grandmother all watched over us. If they hadn't, I don't know what would have become of us, in that sad house, where nothing ever changed, where life had come to a standstill. My father was all but undone by my mother's death. In the evening after supper he walked the floor and I walked with him, with my arm around his waist. I was ten years old. He would walk from the living room into the front hall, then, turning, past the grandfather's clock and on into the library, and from the library into the living room. Or he would walk from the library into the dining room and then into the living room by another doorway, and back to the front hall. Because he didn't say anything, I didn't either. I only tried to sense, as he was about to turn, which room he was going to next so we wouldn't bump into each other. His eyes were focused on things not in those rooms and his face was the color of ashes. — William Maxwell, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*

To offer their particular views of human nature, working-class life and contemporary work relations, in *Deux jours, une nuit* (Two Days, One Night) the Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne use several techniques that are worthy of special attention. The movie calls attention to some of the ways in which movies can be constructed, for all most movies do not make use of these techniques. The following notes will also make much use of another technique: comparison, to other artistic forms and to other specific works. And we shall not shy away from speaking of depression and isolation.

1. Although the movie's genre seems to be gritty (if sun-washed) realism, in fact it is, or is also, a fable. A young mother, Sandra, has been suffering from a depression. Her husband and best friend push her to go ask a dozen or so people for their help, to help her. As it turns out, only half of these people are willing to help her, and some are violently opposed. But the glass slipper in this case is that through the asking, through telling the world, out loud, "I want to live too," Sandra regains her strength. (In this Christmas season, words from the gospels come to mind: "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.")

I note in passing that Sandra would not have been able to undertake this journey and to regain her voice were it not for the dogged, unwavering support of her husband. The movie is a commercial movie, and so it has a happy end, and the complexities and deceptions of human nature are limited. When a colleague, breaking into tears, promises to support Sandra in her fight to regain her job at a solar-panel factory, he is indeed telling the truth, he is going to support her. In real life, I have found, vows of this nature turn out to be disingenuous about half of the time. People say what they think they should, what they wish were true. And the more the dramatic the speeches, the less reliable their contents. For his part, Sandra's husband may well be eager for his wife to get her job back and to be self-supporting so that, after the long months of nursing her through her depression, himself going without love, he can leave her and start a new life on his own. But *Deux jours, une nuit* only hints at this possibility.

2. A great deal of the movie, perhaps more than a quarter of it, is taken up with showing the protagonist—her eyes focused on things not in the landscape and her face the color of ashes?—walking to and from the locations where she goes to find her fellow factory workers and have brief conversations with them. This screen time is used by the filmmakers to show us the under-nourished scenery of a tired industrial suburb of Liège, Belgium. But, above all, the directors are giving this time to us, the movie viewers—and whether we want this extra time or not. While Sandra (played by Marion Cotillard) is walking and thinking whatever thoughts and having whatever feelings she may indeed be thinking and having, we have to nothing to do but think and feel ourselves.

Of course many movies include fill-in-the-blanks moments such as this. The images on the screen suggest that a character or characters are having thoughts or feelings, but—unlike in literary fiction—we are not given the contents of these thoughts and feelings. During these blanks moments we either imagine for ourselves what might be going through the characters' minds or find various thoughts and feelings about ourselves and our own lives besieging us, or flitting in and out.

I cannot think of a movie that makes so much room for such moments, for these experiences as *Deux jours, une nuit* does. Bertolt Brecht's departure from naturalistic theater comes to mind. Among other things, Brecht was seeking to keep the audience from being absorbed within or escaping through the fiction of the spectacle.

3. There are a few moments when the simplicity and lack of relief of *Deux jours, une nuit* is broken. One of these is when Sandra, her husband and one of her most supportive colleagues, as the car they are in is heading into a tunnel, start loudly singing, along with the car radio, the pop song "Gloria." One of the other moments is a very brief speech Sandra makes to her husband. They have been sitting quietly together on a park bench, and during this stretch of time the thought came to me—a person who has, more than once, been involved in nursing depressed people, month after long month—she (Sandra) needs to tell her husband that she appreciates his help, his commitment to her. But this is not at all what she says. Instead she says something like, "You're going to leave me." Or, "We're going to split up." Just prior to this she had some silly line about wishing she were a bird, but what the Dardenne brothers are touching on here is how the truth, trying to speak the truth, can set you free.

It was this feature of *Deux jours, une nuit* that sent me back to Maxwell's beautiful, spare, autobiographical novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. The extract above is from near the beginning of the book. Near the end we get to this:

After six months of lying on an analyst's couch—this, too, was a long time ago—I relived that nightly pacing with my arm around my father's waist. From the living room into the front hall, then, turning, past the grandfather's clock and on into the library, and from the library into the living room. From the library into the dining room, where my mother lay in her coffin. Together we stood looking down at her. I meant to say to the fatherly man who was not my father, the elderly Viennese, another exile, with thick glasses and a Germanic accent, I meant to say *I couldn't bear it*, but what came out of my mouth was "I can't bear it." . . . Other children could have borne it, have borne it. My older brother did, somehow. I couldn't.

4. When there is dialogue in *Deux jours, une nuit*, it is kept to a minimum. Conversations are short and clipped, and, above all, a certain set of phrases are repeated, more or less verbatim,

over and over again. That is, each time Sandra is able to enter into conversation with one of her fellow workers, she tells them the same thing (here summarized, from memory):

Because of irregularities, there is going to be a re-vote at the factory. You are going to be able to again vote to get a bonus or to allow me to return to my job [to continue helping to make solar panels]. I would like you to vote for me.

These few phrases lead to a bit of dialogue, but, again, not much.

The repetitiveness of her speech, and of the dozen or so scenes in which it is encased, may bring to mind *Groundhog Day*, in which the same encounters are reprised again and again (and which is also a movie about a depressed person). But whereas in the latter film the lead actor, Bill Murray, is called upon to each time vary boldly and often wittily his responses, in *Deux jours, une nuit* Cotillard's affect changes minimally at most. She is a captive not only of her psychological depression but also of the depressingness of her job, work relations and landscape, and of the task she has before her—to try to convince nine of her fellow workers to give up their bonuses to help her and her family. As I joked to the person who was watching the movie with me, the momentous shift in the film is when Sandra shifts from wearing T-shirts that expose her bra straps to a T-shirt that covers her bra straps.

There is a kind of music being made. One might think of some somber composition by a minimalist composer. But the refrain-like quality of the movie's dialogue also made me think of folk and pop songs, of "Freight Train," "Irene Good-night" and, particularly, "Please Mr. Postman." Its refrain is "Mister Postman, look and see, If there's a letter in your bag for me." This is the equivalent of Sandra's little speech—because of irregularities, there is going to be a re-vote, etc. And then the little bit of conversation that ensues is like this or that verse—"So many days you passed me by, You saw the tears standin' in my eyes, You didn't stop to make me feel better, By leavin' me a card or a letter." (It is hard for me to recall these words without tears coming to my own eyes, as the song touches on a hard time, some years ago, when I spent many evenings playing my guitars and singing to myself in my living room, and this is one of the songs I sang, over and over again.)

Neither *Deux jours, une nuit* or *Groundhog Day* may be worth all that much as guides to how to cope with or overcome hard times, the cruelty of others and of life, and depression, but the movies' advice is, in any case, clear. The 1993 American movie says you have to work on yourself, make yourself better. The 2014 Belgian movie sees a more social solution. In this view, the despondence of the depressed person is linked to her isolation and to her sense of insufficiency, her inability to meet her needs by herself. In *Groundhog Day* Phil (Murray) responds to the latter problem by attempting to indeed become sufficient unto himself. He becomes lovable (and by Andie MacDowell, a beautiful young movie star) when he no longer needs love. By contrast, Sandra (Cotillard) begins to find love and hope when she

realizes that she cannot do without other people, and when, with other people's help, she finds the courage to speak to other people of this need.

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