



“Two Days One Night”—The Observing Video

A Review of

Two Days, One Night (2014)

by Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne (Directors)

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Reviewed by

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The storyline of Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne’s *Two Days, One Night* is quite straightforward; once set forth, one might even say predictable. This is a well-crafted movie that does not involve twists or turns—nothing written within this article could be considered a “spoiler.” A young woman who has returned to work after having been on disability for an unspecified time learns that her employer discovered that her department could run effectively with one fewer person. The supervisor (exact position not specified) has allowed a vote among the coworkers as to whether the remaining employees are willing to forgo their €1,000 bonuses to allow the woman back to work at her previous position. The “two days and one night” are spent by the woman visiting her coworkers, usually in their personal homes, in order to ask for their support.

Rather early on, it is implied that the woman had been on disability status due to depression, and in the course of the movie, within passing dialogue, this is confirmed. Throughout the movie, when the woman is upset, she turns to taking a pill from a bottle—later in the movie, again just in passing dialogue, it is specially stated that she is taking Xanax.

During the course of the film, it is clear that the woman is struggling with her emotions—regarding needing to return to work for financial reasons, regarding the reactions of her coworkers, and regarding the support she is receiving from friends and family. She also has had difficulty taking on the task that has fallen to her in order to protect the financial security of her family.

Marion Cotillard’s performance (for which she won multiple awards in Europe and in the United States) is moving as she deals with positive and negative responses to her requests, requests that she makes with ambivalence, trepidation, and empathy for those whom she is asking to make financial sacrifices for her benefit. At times, her distress is palpable—although not overwrought or histrionically dramatized. On the other hand, other than through observing her behavior, tone, and manner, the viewer is never provided insight to any specific inner struggle beyond the obvious (i.e., whether or not her mission to

win back her job will succeed and the discomfort of having been placed in the position of needing to “campaign” for her job).

This is a film that raises issues for the discerning viewer and can certainly be fodder for discussion on different levels. However, the film is presented from a relatively neutral point of view. There is no overt agenda, ranting, or proselytizing regarding socioeconomic issues other than faintly, by implication. Viewing the movie, we observe but we do not explore. There is sparse information regarding the central character’s emotional battles beyond as fomented by the immediate task at hand. It is difficult to discern any understanding of her inner life or the content or context of her depression with no information provided regarding any issues or circumstances (biological, social, or psychological) that may have contributed to it; there is no discussion of symptomatology beyond what is observed in the present. We never see the woman consulting any mental health professional. In fact, the only inkling we have regarding her mental health treatment is the mention of Xanax (which, of course, is not even an antidepressant medication). There are no comments at all referring to the mental health system or any aspects of mental health treatment.

Within the dialogue, the issues arise as to whether the employer/supervisors or coworkers may be hesitant for the woman to return to work out of concern for her efficiency and/or stability due to having been depressed. Yet we are never privy to the specific thought processes or opinions others may have in that regard other than what they are willing to express directly to the woman. The issue of the stigma of mental illness is implied, but any exploration is left to the viewer. The film itself only casually depicts what might be considered a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” mind-set (Harding, 2010) rather than providing a view of what is actually a significant psychosocial and psychoeconomic problem (Stuart, 2006).

Neither is there any reference, direct or indirect, to the overall issues related to depression and the workplace. In fact, in the United States, depression is estimated to cause 200 million lost workdays each year at a cost to employers of \$17–\$44 billion (Stewart, Ricci, Chee, Hahn, & Morganstein, 2003); however, the film does not provide the viewer with any sense of whether this is a common or unique situation.

Thus, *Two Days, One Night* is not a film that can be analyzed, interpreted, dissected, or even questioned from the point of view of a mental health professional. Other than for perhaps critiquing some rather subtle aspects of Marion Cotillard’s portrayal of a person who is still vulnerable while recovering from depression, there is nothing to discuss from a clinical point of view.

Two Days, One Night allows viewers to essentially be voyeurs, observing, from an external point of view, emotional struggles of participants in a drama that has been “set up” by an implicitly cruel and manipulative employer. We, the viewers, watch and listen to the interactions of people under stress due to practical and interpersonal circumstances, but we are not allowed any deeper understanding of motivations, thought processes, or emotional responses than are available by observing interactions from a distance.

Perhaps there actually is a deeper message to this film, but I fear that this idea is primarily projection on the part of this writer. That is, *Two Days, One Night* provides a rather limited and superficial depiction of a woman suffering from depression and the responses to her by family, friends, and coworkers—which I find analogous to the failures occurring within today’s mental health system (i.e., observation of manifest symptoms and behaviors leading

to suggestions of solutions that lack any real insight, depth of understanding, or appreciation of psychological complexity). An observing video absent an observing ego.

References

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