

The Broken Circle Breakdown

Kristof Van Den Troost

Belgian cinema is modest compared to its European neighbors. A small, linguistically and politically divided nation surrounded by major film producing countries (France, the United Kingdom, Germany), it has nevertheless produced a few excellent directors who went on to achieve global fame. Names such as Chantal Akerman, the Dardenne brothers and Jaco Van Dormael should be known to most cinephiles—their fame might even have given one the impression that Belgium is (mostly) a French-speaking country. It is only in recent years that directors from the northern, Dutch-speaking part of the country are starting to receive similar international acclaim. While in 2011 Michaël R. Roskam made a splash internationally with *Bullhead*, another young director, Felix van Groeningen, followed up his 2009 hit *The Unfortunates* with *The Broken Circle Breakdown* (2012), which is currently enjoying a limited run in Hong Kong. After *Bullhead* in 2012, it was the second Belgian production in three years to be nominated for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.

The opening shot of *The Broken Circle Breakdown* shows a group of men performing bluegrass—a type of American country music. One of them is Didier (Johan Heldenbergh), and, as is revealed one hour into the film, this scene is the moment he and tattoo artist Elise (Veerle Baetens) fall in love. The song the band is singing immediately also presents the main theme of the film. “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” was a popular Christian hymn in the early 20th century, and has been rewritten several times since then—in one influential version (famously performed by Mother Maybelle Carter) as a funeral hymn. The chorus of the song, which is repeated multiple times throughout the film, goes as follows:

*Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, Lord, by and by
There's a better home awaiting
In the sky, Lord, in the sky*

This specific version of the chorus perfectly captures the film's central conflict. Whereas the first line wonders whether there is an afterlife (whether life is an "unbroken circle" or something that has a definite end), the third and fourth lines answer this question in the affirmative. It is disagreement about the existence of an afterlife, and the different ways of dealing with loss that result from this, that divide the two lovers as they grapple with the tragic death of their young daughter, Maybelle (named after the aforementioned country star), leading eventually to the "breakdown" of the film's title.

The story covers a seven-year period, from the first meeting between the lovers to the months following the death of 6-year old Maybelle. Didier is an atheist, who firmly believes in science and the answers it offers. When his daughter, who already has lost her hair because of chemotherapy, asks what will happen to a bird that died because it flew against a window of their house, he is at a loss and can only tell her that they should throw it away—"but not on the compost heap, because the birdie has bones!" Unsurprisingly, the little girl reacts with tears and anger—a reaction echoed later in the film by Elise, who like Maybelle, finds some comfort for the unspeakable loss caused by death by believing in an afterlife.

Because of his atheism, Didier is unwilling to accept this religious answer—not only in his own life, but also in that of others. In his grief, he increasingly becomes prone to ranting against religion and against George W. Bush, featured in a news clip in which he explains his decision to ban embryonic stem cell research in the United States. This appearance of Bush is ironic, as Didier has earlier professed his love for America, describing it as a place for dreamers, a place where one can start one's life all over again.

His refusal to believe in an afterlife is arguably also the reason why Didier hangs on to his life more than Elise does, and why he desperately tries to carry on. Elise has a harder time doing so, possibly because of another fundamental personality difference, which van Groeningen subtly indicates through a discourse on tattoos. As a tattoo artist, Elise believes in inscribing one's body with what one cares

about—as a result she has several covered-up tattoos, which used to contain the names of ex-lovers! From this perspective, her tattoos can also be seen as scars. Didier, on the other hand, is unwilling to make such lasting inscriptions on his body, indicating he is less attached, but can also more easily move on with his life if something bad happens.

While the basic plot of *The Broken Circle Breakdown* is fairly straightforward, its narrative structure is complex and carefully constructed. Rather than telling his story chronologically, the director frequently shifts between different moments in time, adding an element of suspense to the film and also increasing its emotional impact by clever juxtapositions—for instance, by cutting from a destructive fight between Didier and Elise to the moment they first met. The ingenious editing, the clever use of motifs and music, and the raw performance of the actors all add up to an emotional uppercut of a movie, that will take most audiences hours to recover from and likely will inspire philosophical pondering over the meaning of life, love and death for many days after.