The Place Beyond the Pines: Fathers and sons

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Directed by Derek Cianfrance, written by Cianfrance, Ben Coccio and Darius Marder

The new film from director Derek Cianfrance (*Blue Valentine*, 2010), set in and around Schenectady, New York, is made up of several interconnected stories that take place over the course of fifteen years.

Luke Glanton (Ryan Gosling) is a motorcycle stuntman who works in carnivals and travels around the region. Back in Schenectady, he looks up Romina (Eva Mendes) with whom he had a brief affair a year before and discovers she has had his child. She also has a new man, Kofi (Mahershala Ali), in her life.

Luke, very taken with the infant, quits his stuntman job and finds work in a rundown auto repair shop owned by Robin (Ben Mendelsohn). The low wages are not enough to allow Luke to help support Romina and his newfound child. He and his boss, who briefly led a life of crime some years before, team up to carry out a series of bank robberies.

In the end, Luke's good fortune runs out and he has a fatal encounter with an ambitious policeman, Avery Cross (Bradley Cooper). The film's focus then shifts to Cross, who works his way into the office of assistant district attorney—and beyond—by exposing police corruption.

In the movie's final section, the sons of Glanton and Cross, Jason (Dane DeHaan) and A.J. (Emory Cohen), respectively, cross paths a decade and a half later, and act out their own additional episode of the tragedy.

Cianfrance's film has positive features. As he did in *Blue Valentine*, the filmmaker directs his camera toward places that tell us something about America's decayed or tawdry physical surfaces. Schenectady is a former manufacturing center, the home base of General Electric, near the state capital of Albany. The city has lost most of its manufacturing jobs and almost a third of its population since 1950.

The film's title refers to the Mohawk Indian source of the city's name. It obviously has a metaphorical significance as well. Not only do several important scenes take place in the woods, there is the added implication of things pushed into dark psychic places. Some of the sequences of roads and forests are quite striking.

The director wants to say something about "what we're born with and what we pass on" (the film's production notes), about the heavy psychological and social burden individuals may inherit and how they can perhaps break free from it.

One always assumes in such cases that the filmmaker—whether fully conscious of this or not—has at least one eye on the broader state of American life and is wondering how the levels of violence and abuse, personal and otherwise, might be overcome. And generally these days, the artist concludes, as he does here, that "It's about the choices we make and how those choices echo throughout generations" (production notes again).

One of the weaknesses of Cianfrance's filmmaking, on display in both the new work and *Blue Valentine*, is a tendency to take for granted what he has, in fact, to prove dramatically. In the earlier film, it was the life-and-death character of the central relationship between Dean (Gosling) and Cindy (Michelle Williams). As we noted, "The drama suffers from gaps and missing links, and contrivances. One feels, for instance, that the filmmakers are straining for an emotional impact, at the moment of the couple's breaking apart, without having thoroughly presented the facts that make that breaking apart convincing."

In *The Place Beyond the Pines*, the director would apparently have us feel all sorts of things about Gosling's character that are never thoroughly established. In an interview included in the production notes, Cianfrance observes, "Luke is a guy who has this dark and mysterious past. He's seen and done everything, and had everything happen to him. He's damaged, wounded—a person who was kind of covered, not necessarily in scars, but in these tattoos that were signs of the pain he had experienced. On the outside, he had this mythical presence … He's a bit of a contradiction—wounded and scarred on the inside, but with a wall of armor on the outside, the muscles, the tattoos, the hair, the charisma,

etc… He's like a big cat in a small cage—abused and dangerous and utterly compelling."

I reproduce the entire somewhat silly comment and invite the reader to see *The Place Beyond the Pines*, and then compare the director's comment with his film. Of course, almost no character could, or perhaps more to the point *should*, live up to that overblown description.

One of the moments at which we become aware of the yawning gap between what the director *would like us to feel* and *what we have actually experienced on screen* occurs during the first bank robbery, when Luke suddenly exhibits extreme violence and aggression. Where has this craziness come from? The audience is expected to fill in what is missing, to provide the character with a history ("this dark and mysterious past") and motivation ("he's damaged, wounded") that the filmmaker has not genuinely given him.

Unhappily, Gosling and Cianfrance bring out the worst in each other. The actor is a naturally gifted performer, but he has a tendency to be self-conscious. One is far too often aware of the wheels turning. He strains to be impressive rather than simply say something about life and people. His general emotional state is mournful or soulful. Even when he is smiling and laughing, we know that underneath this he is mournful or soulful. This gets tiring.

Cianfrance is an overly self-conscious and schematic artist too. He is always reaching for something significant, but he fails to confront the more interesting and dramatic questions in American life. He refers only in passing to the concrete conditions in Schenectady: "It's this place with such a rich history and it's in the midst of this economic struggle. My co-writer, Ben Coccio, who grew up there, describes it as a small town version of Detroit." And then … nothing more.

Along those lines, because the apparently important questions involve the internal changes one must make, the director can tell his interviewer that the Cooper character, for example, is "this modern man who decides to bury his problems and, instead, focus on problems in the world. And he does good things. He's a good man. But his tragic flaw is that instead of healing the wounds inside himself, he tries to fix everything else around him. And that haunts him."

So, inevitably, the real city and its actual condition and its actual population, in the end, all recede into the distance, are merely scaffolding for a tale about eternal, universal relations between fathers and sons. The themes of Cianfrance's film prove inevitably to be abstract and thin, little more than maxims: Parents should not ignore or neglect their children. Don't suppress your demons—face them. Biology does not define fatherhood or motherhood. We can free ourselves from the unhappy legacy of the past.

Hegel once noted about a particular work that it was "a book for everybody, but for that reason contains much that is vapid" and that it offered "proverbial instructions … which are right enough thus generally expressed, but which lack the concrete specifications necessary for action."

Asked what he hoped audiences would take away from his film, Cianfrance remarked, "I'm not a message filmmaker. I just want people to be entertained by it—to be absorbed by it and to take what they will into their own lives." (How tedious and defensive such comments are! When will contemporary filmmakers cease making them?) The director of *The Place Beyond the Pines* went on to explain that the best response to his film came from someone who, "after seeing the film … cancelled the business dinner he had that night. Then he called his ex-wife and asked her, 'I know it's your night tonight, but can I come pick him up?' He then drove across town and picked up his teenage son, brought him home, and they spent the night together." This is truly not asking much.

The scenes of Cross's dealings with a corrupt local police force (including a malevolent Ray Liotta), its chief (Robert Clohessy) and the district attorney (the always excellent Bruce Greenwood) are the strongest element in the film. This section is concrete, convincing and disturbing. The final act, however, except for the performance of Dane DeHaan, is terribly weak. The work, uncertain how to conclude since it is uncertain of precisely what it has to say, rambles on far too long.

Because it attributes nearly everything to individual psychology and individual choices, *The Place Beyond the Pines* lingers on faces or profiles, as though if only the camera could poke through the skull, we could get at the truth.