



# Dheepan

**Director:** Jacques Audiard  
**Country:** France  
**Date:** 2015

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*.

There is such exhilarating movie mastery in this powerful new film about Tamil refugees in France from director Jacques Audiard, who gave us *A Prophet*, *Rust and Bone* and *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*. It's bulging with giant confidence and packed with outbursts of that mysterious epiphanic grandeur, like moments of sunlight breaking through cloud-cover, with which Audiard endows apparently normal sequences and everyday details. There is also something not always found in movies or books or TV drama – that is to say, intelligent and sympathetic interest in other human beings. Every scene, every line, every frame has something of interest. All of it is impeccably crafted and the work of someone for whom making films is as natural as breathing.



But it is not his best work. *Dheepan* comes close to unravelling in its final rather overblown action sequence, which fudges one of its own conditions of suspense: someone with a gun held to the head in one scene, but not the next. There is also a self-consciously demure and downbeat coda. The Cannes jury caught everyone by surprise last summer by giving the Palme d'Or to *Dheepan*; it looked like more of a career tribute to Audiard, more or less confirming him as the Jean-Pierre Melville of his day, the prince of French cinema.

The action moves with absolute assurance from Sri Lanka to a tough French housing estate. It periodically returns to Sri Lanka, as if in a dream or memory; the image of an elephant will stir, enigmatically, from the darkness of sleep or forgetting, like an ambiguous call to arms.

A Liberation Tiger warrior in the Sri Lankan civil war is forced in the bitterness of defeat to abandon his dreams and also his identity in the chaos of a refugee camp. He is very well acted by a non-professional, former Tamil soldier turned novelist Antonythasan Jesuthasan. His character's eyes glitter compellingly with rage and pride. Some human traffickers have a dead family's trio of passports for sale, so he makes common cause with a woman (Kalieaswari Srinivasan) who is a complete stranger to him and who has recruited a 9-year-old orphan (Claudine Vinasithamby). Posing as a family, they claim asylum in France. *Dheepan*'s Antonythasan Jesuthasan: from Tamil Tiger to star of a Palme d'Or winner

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They reinvent themselves as phoney husband, wife and daughter – *Dheepan*, Yalini and Illayaal, invisible mendicants of the French welfare state – and *Dheepan* gets a publicly funded job as a caretaker in an apartment block which is basically a meeting place for drug-dealers. The trio are tense and terrified, as alien to each other as they are collectively to the French-speakers by whom they are surrounded. They can survive if they can just keep their heads down, but keeping his head down does not come easily to *Dheepan*, this former revolutionary and alpha male – though he comes to see how the role play of family could easily become a comfortable and agreeable reality, until Yalini gets a job as housekeeper to the ailing father of a local gangster, Brahim (Vincent Rottiers).

*Dheepan* finds that his need to be a warrior and a defender of territory is transferred intact to the banlieues. Inexorably, his vocation for military discipline, for organisation, for working undercover behind

enemy lines rises to the surface: he gets things done, he works efficiently with machines, he starts work on trying to repair the static lift in the tower block.

Much of the film's fascination lies simply in the everyday lives of Dheepan and his family, and how they fabricate normality in the midst of chaos. There is a great scene when Illayaal comes back from school after a day of being bullied. She reads aloud an angry, heartwrenching poem about how your life is nothing without friends. Her quasi-mother hits her in an ambiguous rage: rage at her quasi-child's insubordination and implied blame, and at the indiscipline of complaining when it is only by silence and invisibility that they can get through this.

Perhaps misguidedly, I wanted the rest of the film to continue on this level of subtlety and accessibility. Instead, it rears up in a great big gangster rage to the generic level of crime drama, or maybe crime melodrama, as Dheepan makes his last stand. Of course it is handled with flair. Audiard styles it out, and what style he always has.

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