

Faith Akin's *Lorna's Silence* (2008)

Major Credits:

Director: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Screenplay: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Cinematography: Alain Marcoen

Cast: Arta Dobroschi (Lorna), Jérémie Renier (Claudy), Fabrizio Rangione (Fabio), Alban Ukaj (Sokol)

Production Context:

With this film, the Dardennes return to the subject of immigration, which was at the center of their first great international success, *La promesse* (1996) and which has become a recurrent topic of 21st century international cinema, including such important films as Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya 4-Ever* (Sweden, 2002), Fatih Akin's *Head-On* (Germany, 2005), and Abdel Kechiche's *The Secret of the Grain* (France, 2008). No less than four languages—French, English, Albanian, and Russian—are spoken. As with their previous films, *Lorna's Silence* focuses on the daily struggle of socially marginalized persons and the dignity of work (thus the scenes of Lorna making a living in the laundry) and avoids passing judgment on the illegal or immoral actions of the protagonists. But *Lorna's Silence* also marks some subtle changes from the Dardennes' customary methods: set in Liege rather than their hometown of Seraing, with a more deeply plotted screenplay (with elements of film noir) that takes the story through a longer period of time, a somewhat looser framing that allows the environment to register more powerfully, and the introduction of something akin to magic realism in the closing scene—even including, for the first time, some non-diegetic music as the closing credits roll. Perhaps these innovations account for the somewhat lukewarm reception when the film premiered at Cannes (where the brothers had previously twice been awarded the top prize); with the passage of time, however, *Lorna's Silence* has come to hold its proper place among the brothers' extraordinary oeuvre.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Casting—Pairing Renier with newcomer Dobroschi produces a palpable chemistry, perhaps because they appear as almost androgynous doubles, a likeness exploited in the powerful lovemaking scene. Dobroschi, from Kosovo, reenacts the characteristic Dardenne character arc from detachment and exploitation to empathy and transcendence; her performance is extraordinary. Sadly, her career seems to have stagnated. Cinephiles will recognize Dardenne stalwart Olivier Gourmet and *The Son's* Morgan Marinn in very minor roles here.
2. Editing—Although the film preserves the naturalistic style associated with the Dardennes' previous work, there is a startling jump cut near the beginning and, more significantly, a dramatic cut forward in time in the middle. The slightly more conventional camerawork (steadier, at greater distance from the characters) and editing (cutting within dialogue scenes) may be a product of the directors using 35mm for the first time.

3. Screenplay—The drama is structured by three significant scenes played out in the alcove of the small apartment, each marking a stage in Lorna’s personal development from detachment to passion to silence.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The film opens with a close-up of the exchange of money, re-establishing the essential currency of contemporary Europe that the brothers emphasized in *La promesse* and *L’enfant*. Since their early days as documentarians, the Dardennes have presented a critique of post-industrial capitalism in which everything is for sale. At the same time, they seem to question the economic determinism proposed by Karl Marx. To what extent do the characters represent an existentialist freedom that transcends their degrading economic circumstances?
2. At the mathematical middle of the narrative, waving goodbye to Claudy on his bike, for the first and only time, Lorna *smiles*. What is the significance of the lovemaking scene and its immediate aftermath? What is the effect of the flash forward to Lorna packing Claudy’s belongings?
3. The film’s ending proved confounding to many critics. Renowned for their naturalistic filmmaking, the Dardennes seem to lapse into a form of “magic realism” or a miraculous “happy ending” that appears at odds with their gritty depiction of life at the lower depths, transforming their neorealist film noir into a moral (even Christian) fable. Is the final scene (concluding with the chords of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 32) aesthetically and philosophically satisfying?