

Interview with Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, directors of *Lorna's Silence*

By David Walsh
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The WSWS interviewed Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne at the recent Toronto film festival.

David Walsh: What was the origin of the idea for this film?

Luc Dardenne: For a number of years we've wanted to make a film about a woman, and we wrote a number of scenarios, or the beginnings of scenarios with a woman, a young woman.

And there was a story that a woman we know in Brussels told us. Her brother was a junkie, and he had a proposition from the Albanian mafia in Belgium. He was really into drugs, and he was approached by the mafia, who proposed that he marry an Albanian prostitute. His sister, thanks to her profession, knew that there already had been junkies who died from overdoses in marriage arrangements like that. She told her brother: "Don't get married, because they're going to offer you money at the start of the marriage, and at the time of the divorce, you won't have anything, you'll be dead."

So her brother didn't get married, and this story stayed in our heads, and then the idea of wanting to film a woman combined with that story. What interested us was to put this woman in a situation where she was going to have to "choose" either to let a man die or not let a man die. And everybody agrees, after all, that someone who takes drugs is not truly a human being. So that was the starting point, that's where it came from.

DW: Did you do any special research?

Jean-Pierre Dardenne: We didn't do any special research on the characters, in regard to their careers, but we had to do some research on particular points, on the divorce laws, which are in the process of changing. It had to be convincing, what they were doing.... These paper marriages ["mariages blancs," unconsummated marriages] are more and more suspect; that's why Fabio is very uneasy about a divorce. It's for reasons of money and the need to end the marriage quickly, following which she has to marry the Russian, and certainly as well because police investigations are more and more thorough. Things like that, on some small points we did research.

But as to how the whole operation works and all that, we didn't do any research.

Joanne Laurier: Is this a big racket, in Belgium with eastern Europeans?

LD: I think today, from what I've read, that the traffic in human beings and the paper marriages which are part of that represent a lot of money for the mafia, yes. It is a traffic in various forms. The Russians play a role.

DW: At the beginning of the film, Lorna is prepared to participate in a murder, or let someone die. Does she understand the reality of that situation, because to kill someone or let someone die is a serious act, a sociopathic act, and here it's for a snack bar. As I say, is she really a participant in murder to begin with, do you think?

LD: I think she agreed to it at first, then later she says no. But I think that she hasn't truly realized in the beginning what's involved. I think she agreed to it, and she's living with this man, whom she tries not to see, she tries not to think about it.... When she comes home, she brings him back what he wants, but she doesn't want to look at him, she doesn't want relations with him that would create something human between them.

When he asks her to help him and throws himself on his knees and she agrees to find him the medication, at that point, if I can say it, she becomes more human. She begins to have a relationship with him that's going to go much farther than she imagines. But at the beginning, I think she's going along with it, with her boy-friend, Sokol, who agrees also. Sokol says, "He's a junkie, who gives a damn?"

DW: What concerns me, or what I think is an issue, is the sudden psychological transformation. To be prepared to kill someone, you have to have a thick skin, a thick hide. There are a lot of people like that, not only in Belgium, but the United States and everywhere. But to transform into someone much more human, it's difficult, because someone who's prepared to kill another human being is very damaged.

LD: Today, human relations are much tougher, and to make their way people are prepared to...

DW: No question. There are many hard people. But Lorna is transformed into something else, that's the issue. People like that are so damaged, can they be transformed in this manner? That was my question.

J-PD: That's the power of fiction. That's what interested us, to see how in our story we could give Lorna the ability to change, even if this change, well, you saw it, I'm not going to tell you how it works out....

But her to-ing and fro-ing, between "I feel something for Claudy," no, yes, no, and then at a certain moment, she is caught by something stronger than herself, that's the power of fiction, to try to give people like Lorna an opportunity. There's no question that in reality it would be much more difficult...even if she changed her mind. Fabio or Spiro would shoot her, and she

wouldn't end up in a cabin speaking to a child who doesn't exist. What interested us was to trace out Lorna's route.

DW: I understand. People change all the time. But what is the impulse in this case? Is it love, a kind of animal instinct, a maternal instinct?

LD: Love perhaps. It's also guilt. She feels guilty being with this man and also realizing that he's going to die and that she can't tell him anything, and then there is also love possibly, but that comes later. In the beginning, it's compassion, she didn't think that would happen to her, she thought she couldn't crack, if I can put it that way. And I think that if when she'd said, "I don't want him to die," Sokol had said, "Yes, it's true, you're right," then perhaps.... But when she has to feel guilty and she's alone, it's even more difficult. The pressures are there, no one was with her at the beginning, and even after.

DW: What I'm trying to get at: is there some objective impulse behind her action, or is it some sort of an accident or a little bit miraculous? Is there a social impulse, an objective impulse?

LD: What impels her to change? We think that it's the fact that at a certain moment she responds to Claudy when he calls to her, "Lorna, Lorna, Lorna." There's a certain moment when she responds, she doesn't say, "No, no, no." There's something that is set in motion, and she realizes that the guy wants to live.

I think that if Claudy had not wanted to live, if he hadn't said, "You have to help me survive, I'm going to kick this," I think that this wouldn't have happened like that. I think it's because Claudy says, "I want to live, I want to live," and she sees this guy. Lorna's not a professional killer, she no doubt thought it would be easier than it turned out to be, so at a certain moment there is this guy who wants to live, that shakes her up. I don't know, I was never in a war, but I think there are people who at a certain moment did things in war that were against their own interests to start with, but then they saw someone in front of them and they couldn't kill them.

DW: Of course, we're all concerned about the state of the world, how people are and the conditions of their lives. Is a social transformation the sum-total of individual transformations or is there some bigger impulse?

LD: In the film, she's all alone, that's what's difficult. There's no one who helps her.

DW: More generally, I'm curious because I know something about your histories, and they're obviously very interesting histories. I'm curious how you see, if you see, a relevance between your social and political history, as militants, and your filmmaking. How do you see that today?

LD: Perhaps there's a relationship [to that history] in the fact that we are interested in these people, in the people we film. I believe that we are interested in people whose social condition, whose condition of life, shows how a society operates, I would say, by excluding people, how it operates by marginalizing people. So, yes, it's those people who interest us. But when we deal with a character, we try not to give him extenuating circumstances.

We don't say, for example, Lorna is a poor immigrant so she can kill because her condition of life makes her susceptible to that...or, he is black, so maybe he is a crook because of.... We try to take people, characters, we try to see how they are ready, I

would say, to do lots of things to earn their place in the sun, to get the snack bar, their personal happiness. It's legitimate, it's normal, when one lives as she lives, to want a better life. So, to what point will the desire to have a better life allow her to ignore the other human being; how can such people change?

That no doubt has something to do with our lives as documentarians. We have seen people, we have seen situations that interest us, for sure. But I would never say that this film that we've made represents immigration today in Belgium. No, it's entirely particular.

DW: Given the present political circumstances, which are obviously difficult and confusing for many people, do you think that it's perhaps the case that one can only find individual or personal solutions to these larger moral or social problems?

J-PD: Oh, no, I don't think so, that's not what we are relating in this film, that's not what it's about. We didn't want to make a film on how immigration today exists in our country and how conditions can be improved, it's not that. And it's certain that if it was a wider movement, eventually people would take public positions, they would try to create a power relationship with the people who decide, so that the power of decision would no longer be with them, so things would change.

We haven't done that, like Luc said. Lorna is not a representative.... There's no doubt that in everyday life up till today, the better social conditions that we've been able to obtain came about because there were people who fought, who went on strike, who did this and that, that's for sure.

DW: Why did you stop making documentaries and start making fiction films?

J-PD: To answer concretely, I think every filmmaker at a certain point has the desire to make fiction. Then he finds he's good at it, or he finds he's not, but if he finds he's good at it he keeps going. I'm speaking for us, obviously. We wanted to see how we could tell our stories and work with actors, whether they were professionals or non-professionals. In *The Promise*, for example, we wanted to film someone who let someone else die, and who said to his son, we let him die. In a documentary, you can't do that, and it's this human situation that interested us. There is only fiction, for us.

In telling the truth about social relations, fiction allows you to push things farther, even if only that we film things prohibited in documentaries; we can go places where the documentary can't go, we can film situations that, morally, you wouldn't allow yourself to shoot in a documentary. That's certain.

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