

Identifying the Unknown Girl

The Spaces and Inequalities of the Noir Tradition
in *La fille inconnue*

Jamie Nicholas Steele

*is Senior Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies at Bath Spa University. He has published a monograph, *Francophone Belgian Cinema* (2019) as part of the *Traditions in World Cinema* series for Edinburgh University Press. Steele has also published journal articles and book chapters on both French-language Belgian cinema and French Cinema.*

Abstract

This article critically analyses *La fille inconnue / The Unknown Girl* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 2016) as a genre film that operates through a transnational mix of references to the French noir and neo-noir traditions. It argues that these borrowings and references emerge from two key features in the Dardenne's film: firstly, the spatial dynamics of the postmodern city and its anonymous "lower depths", and secondly, the articulation of so-called "ethnic hierarchies" (Vincendeau 2009) of the French neo-noir tradition. It is precisely these transnational connections that draw attention to the evocation of key issues and debates within *La fille inconnue*, such as the migrant and refugee crisis in Western Europe.

Keywords: *The Unknown Girl/La fille inconnue*, film genres, transnational cinema, French neo-noir, postmodern spaces.

After the première of *La fille inconnue* (*The Unknown Girl*, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 2016) at Cannes film festival, a review in *Sight and Sound* highlighted the Dardenne brothers' turn to the broadly-defined noir genre. In particular, the main protagonist, general

practitioner Jenny Davin, was defined as “a sort of female Wal-lander” (James 2016a, 22). An exploration of international film criticism returns more mentions of the Dardenne’s involvement with the transnational tradition of film noir and the crime genre: Yan Tobin (2016, 36) labels the film “une enquête policière” [police investigation], Nick James (2016b, 32) a “detective story” and Justin Chang (2017) a “carefully plotted thriller”. Fontaine’s review was perhaps most explicit in drawing links to genre filmmaking, positing that *La fille inconnue* is “comme un roman policier” [like a detective novel] in the same universe as “Agatha Christie” and the “bas-fonds de Liège” [lower depths] somewhat reminiscent of Georges Simenon (Fontaine 2016). In short, with the single exception of the review in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* (Nectoux 2016, 43), critical readings of *La fille inconnue* concur in defining the film’s style through genre classification.

Although the Dardenne brothers are most appraised for the production of films that articulate social concerns through Levinas’ ethics (Cooper 2007), this article argues that their film *La fille inconnue* refers to different noir traditions, on a range that includes French *polar* and American detective films. The notion of “polar mélodramatique” [melodramatic *polar*] (Régnier 2016) resonates with the early terms afforded to American film noir in its nascent stage. Gates offers the notion of a “maritorious melodrama” in the context of American film noir, defining it as “a melodrama with a female protagonist at its centre, a narrative driven by her goals and desires, [where] moments of excess [...] puncture the surface realism of the text” (Gates 2009, 29). This proves instructive in light of the Dardenne brothers’ choice to focus on Jenny Davin as an impromptu investigator.¹

As Nettelbeck outlines, it is common for auteurs in French cinema to turn to the *polar* – the typically French version of crime fiction – at some point in their career (2006, 34). Although Belgian, in the case of the Dardenne brothers, it can certainly be said that they have a certain predilection for the crime/*polar* genre. For example, *Le fils* (2002) and *Le silence de Lorna* (2008) are imbued with a certain *noirish* tendency. James categorises *Le fils* as a “revenge noir” (James 2016b, 32), and Mosley argues that the link to the noir tradition lies in the “class-based context of deprivation, substance abuse and social marginality [which] contributes to the *noirish* atmosphere”,

recalling “the novels of David Goodis” (Mosley 2013, 124). The social context is crucial to these references and allusions to the noir tradition, particularly in relation to French noir. As Vincendeau contends, in France, “film noir serves as a social rather than a generic purpose” (Vincendeau 2007, 46). *La fille inconnue* adopts this social lens to shine a light on contemporary issues connected to the so-called ‘lower depths’. The term ‘noir’ – used as a label for the Dardenne brothers’ films – offers a transnational definition that mediates references to American, French and European film cultures.

This article analyses how the Dardenne brothers’ film, *La fille inconnue*, articulates the ‘lower depths’ of Belgian society and the major issue of the contemporary migrants crisis through the noir tradition. The film is limned by the Dardenne brothers’ use of a popular film genre to tell an important story with regards to the ‘place’ that is provided to young migrants and refugees in Western Europe. That is to say, the film highlights how they live in the in-between and liminal spaces of the postmodern urban space. This article uncovers how these issues are articulated to the spectator, by deploying textual analysis to close read the film’s mise-en-scène and how the character of the ‘unknown girl’ posits the persistence of “ethnic hierarchies” (Vincendeau 2009, 111) in a noir context. This approach is nuanced through contextual and theoretical approaches to the noir tradition (Gates 2009; Place 1998; Powrie 2007; Vincendeau 2007; Vincendeau 2009) – particularly within the French crime film (referred to as the *polar* or *policier*) – and the anthropology of space (Augé 1995). This better contextualises the spatial and thematic noir tropes represented in *La fille inconnue*.

The Belgian ‘Lower Depths’²

The mise-en-scène of *La fille inconnue* operates within the context of a “noir sensibility” (Powrie 2007) and, more specifically, of an aesthetics reminiscent of the tradition of French *polar*. To characterize this particular aesthetics, Phil Powrie brings up the “blackest of noir” subsection of Alain Corneau’s *Série noire* (1979) in which the mise-en-scène is described as city-based (namely Paris), “dismal,” “nondescript,” and a “muddy wasteland” (Powrie 2007, 67-68). Ginette Vincendeau similarly articulates the French neo-noir’s approach to locations describing the “bleaky anonymous spaces” that form the “new lower depths” portrayed in contemporary French

neo-noir (Vincendeau 2009, 111). The *bas fonds* are essentially defined as “the underbelly of society,” the lower depths portrayed in French novels “from the early modern period onwards and in particular in the 18th century *roman noir*,” and used by the authors to expose the reality of “those on the margins of the big cities, the poor and the criminals” (Vincendeau 2016, 42). It is within the aforementioned “bleakly anonymous spaces” (Vincendeau 2009, 111) of postmodern Paris that “the connection between the denizens of the lower depths and the ordinary population has been severed” (Vincendeau 2009, 111). In *La fille inconnue*, the Dardennes lace together a depiction of the “lower depths” of both the classical and the ‘neo’ noir traditions, particularly with an emphasis on urban wastelands, Internet cafés, construction areas and the use of night-time cinematography.

In José Fontaine’s review of *La fille inconnue*, the critic also uses the concept of the *bas fonds* to describe the locations visited by detective Jenny Davin in Liège. Similarly, Chang’s (2017) discussion of *La fille inconnue* hints at this dialogue with the *polar* and the “noir sensibility”, by stating that the Dardenne films “have turned this small world of nondescript apartments and construction zones into one of the most vivid and recognisable landscapes in international cinema” (Chang 2017). This particular articulation of space coheres with Marc Augé’s notion of “non-places” (1995). However, as hinted at by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne in interviews (Feuillère 2016; Gilson 2016; James 2016b, 32-34; Pluijgers 2016), the urban spaces of *La fille inconnue* seem rather to operate – to adopt Augé’s terms – at the intersection of “non-place” and “anthropological place”. In fact, the filmmakers have repeatedly suggested in their interviews about *La fille inconnue* that the working-class and industrial heritage of the urban spaces represent non-descript and anonymous locales (Feuillère 2016; Gilson 2016; James 2016b, 32-34; Pluijgers 2016).

Space and crime are joined together through anonymity, and, therefore, pose questions in light of Augé’s (1995) “supermodernity” and late capitalism. For instance, the eponymous *fille inconnue* is “inhumée anonymement” [buried anonymously] (Fontaine 2016) on the site of nondescript spaces in the industrial wastelands of Southern Belgium (Wallonia). The ephemerality of these places is evinced by the fleeting glance given to the location of the unknown girl’s body on a concrete platform beside the Meuse river. As Augé

contends, “non-places are there to be passed through, they are measured in units of time” (Augé 1995, 104). As the crane operator states to Jenny Davin, a barge took the concrete block on which the unknown girl’s body was found earlier in the day on the riverbank. The site beside the river is a place emptied of its significance. The incessant noise of passing traffic on the motorway that runs both sides of the Meuse (Feuillère 2016), and the power tools from the construction site, further exacerbate this ephemerality, and the sense of transit and in-between-ness attached to the site beside the river. As attested by the conversation between Jenny and the crane operator, Jenny initially finds it difficult to locate the precise site of the unknown girl’s death. The camera pays little attention to this empty location – merely a concrete platform with no police tape or evidence to indicate where the body was found – and this further consolidates the notion that individuals can simply disappear without leaving any trace of their previous lives and identities. What is most salient for Jenny is that – in the context of postmodernity or “supermodernity” – the physical trace is not present, with only digital footprints left of what was once a human being: a snapshot of a recording from her CCTV system on her smart phone. This is the single virtual image that is left of the unknown girl for Jenny and the spectator, and it is a harrowing picture of fear and panic that evokes the images of the refugee crisis and their dissemination across media platforms. The combination of the eponymous ‘unknown girl’, the mysterious death, and the river represents the plight of young migrants attempting to cross the English Channel from France to the United Kingdom and the Mediterranean from North Africa to Spain, Italy, and Greece, as also noted by the filmmakers (Denis 2016, 4). The deaths of these people are reported across news platforms as numbers, and the Dardenne brothers’ film is drawing attention to this issue by attempting to reclaim her name. The image is proliferated, but the deeper meaning and individual story is not explained.

To further stress the film’s noir sensibility, Jenny drives to a *cyber-café* located in Liège’s red-light district. Jenny’s exploration of the murky and seedy areas of Liège, shrouded in darkness, reveals a “noir iconography” (Vincendeau 2007, 41) that is reminiscent of the French noir tradition. At the time of the film’s production (around 2015), the choice of setting this sequence in an Internet café was al-

ready incongruous, given the proliferation of phone and Internet connectivity and devices already available everywhere. However, images of telephone boxes in bars, cafés and nightclubs populated by criminal gangs are a recurrent feature in American film noir as well as in French noir and neo-noir (Vincendeau 2003, 145; Vincendeau 2007, 37). *La fille inconnue* retains the telephone booth in a 21st century context, attesting to its hybridity. The row of telephone booths and computers provide a front to criminal activities, just as in the nightclubs and bars of both French and American noir films. Unused by locals, they are only utilized by pimps, gangsters and vulnerable individuals (namely migrants and refugees) coerced into prostitution. The front of the Internet café for criminal activities also preys on those who do not have Internet-enabled devices, or intend to use the telephones for long-distance calls to speak to family members. In this way, the sequence conveys a social message, and evokes Vincendeau's (2009, 111) notion of "ethnic hierarchies" in the neo-noir tradition. In fact, Liège is represented as a shorthand for crime. The young refugee and her sister work as prostitutes within Belgium's black market in order to make a living. This is a market that has previously been exposed in other Dardenne films filmed in Liège, such as *Le silence de Lorna* (the arranged marriages).

The postmodern urban spaces are depicted as industrial wastelands that are inherently anonymous. The scene in which Jenny Davin meets the unnamed *fiils* Lambert [Lambert's son] under a rail bridge on the outskirts of the industrial town is an example *par excellence*. The industrial complex seen through the steel plant in the background is an image of a post-industrial landscape that has fallen into disrepair, where seedy actions are committed. The mobile homes, the underpass with its shuttling traffic and the abandoned, boarded houses eschew specificity, and, instead, proffer a notion of transit and ephemeral temporality. Speaking of Jean-Pierre Melville's films, Vincendeau (2003, 146; 2007, 43) contends that the *mise-en-scène* of his *polars* portrays "an abstract, generic [and grim] noir space". Similarly, this sequence and the mid-shots of the two characters – with a primary focus on the body of Jenny Davin – offer abstraction through the lack of specific signifiers. The only code of the noir aesthetics that is absent at the point of this meeting is nighttime cinematography. However, the interior of the cramped mobile home is laced with darkness and evokes the conventions of the *noir*

tradition even without the use of sophisticated lighting set-ups and high contrast cinematography. The characters' actions and vices are placed in a sinister and exploitative underground context, consolidated by its literal position under a rail bridge.

For Tobin (2016, 37), the urban space of *La fille inconnue* represents a "configuration de l'espace qui entoure et isole les personnages" [a configuration of space that surrounds and isolates the characters]. The isolation of the characters within this postindustrial landscape resonates with Augé's reference to the "solitude" experienced by the individual in the non-places of neo-liberal late capitalism. In interviews, the filmmakers contend that the choice of the spaces in *La fille inconnue* is deliberate, as indicated by Feuillère (2016). The purpose for the ambient sound of the doctor's surgery and the non-stop, fast-paced traffic is evocative of "la brutalité du quotidien [...] un ordinaire sans pittoresque" [the brutality of everyday life, a normality deprived of any picturesque aspect] (Feuillère 2016). This hostile environment is, according to Luc Dardenne, relieved at the film's dénouement: "on peut dire que lorsqu'elle retrouve le nom de cette fille inconnue, grâce à cette soeur qui vient parler, la circulation s'arrête" [we could say that when she finds out the unknown girl's name thanks to her sister who finally speaks, the traffic comes to a halt] (Feuillère 2016). This experience of "solitude", "isolation", and the "brutality of the everyday" (Feuillère 2016) in the urban space is linked to the plight of individuals, who live anonymously amongst the city's margins, as discussed in the following section.

Inequalities in the neo-noir tradition

Alongside the articulation of place and space set up by the Dardennes' mise-en-scène is the question of "ethnic hierarchies" (Vincendeau 2009, 111). Vincendeau sums up the inequalities portrayed in French neo-noir as present within "a racially marked hierarchy [that] is still in place in the new criminal world (Vincendeau 2009, 110). For the Dardennes, the choice to shoot in the Seraing area demonstrates that the filmmakers have consistently represented "the poor and disadvantaged and, in particular, the fate of immigrants" (James 2016b, 32). The use of the noir references is particularly instructive in terms of how the film evokes aspects of the contemporary global crisis through the representation of a particular cultural context. As Place argues, the style of film noir indicates

a “homogeneous cultural attitude, and is only possible during an isolated time period, in a particular place, in response to a national crisis of some kind” (Place 1998, 50). The use of a noir style as a representation of crisis is particularly poignant in *La fille inconnue* particularly because of its focus on a migrant body, found dead in an anonymous place without identification papers. Rather than a reading centred on its national context – i.e. as a critique of Belgium – the film evokes a clear criticism of, more generally, Western Europe’s stance on immigration and the refugee crisis, with its insistence on self-interest and phobic nationalisms. As De Cleen et al. observe, in Belgium, the debate on immigration “has been dominated by a discourse that constructs the recent influx of refugees as a Flemish, Belgian, or European crisis rather than as a crisis suffered by people fleeing war and other hardships” (De Cleen et al. 2017, 66). Moreover, the interpretation of ‘crisis’ that emerges in media representations shows little engagement with the victims’ story and background.

The “Getting the Voice Out” project – a blog initiative focused on detention centres in Belgium, aimed to “get the voice of the detainees out, to inform us on the conditions of their detention and deportation and to report the resistance actions they organize in those prisons” – is particularly instructive to contextualise the film (Gettingthevoiceout.org 2019). The website reports information about the status of refugees and migrants that have moved to and from Belgium, and those who have died either during their journeys, or from suicide in detention centres, run over by cars and buses, killed during confrontation with police, or found deceased on railway tracks, in rivers or canals. Significantly, some of the information for the deceased, such as their names and identities, is incomplete, even if it appears that they are primarily refugees from African countries.³

The plight of migrants and refugees who arrive in Belgium without identification papers to search for a better life, but only to suffer abuse, exploitation and neglect by men in the local community is exposed in another of the Dardenne brothers’ films, *La promesse* (*The Promise*, 1996). A review in the French newspaper *Le Monde* interprets the two Lambert characters, son and father, of *La fille inconnue* as “the crooks of *La promesse*, two decades later” [“les malfrats de *La promesse*, vingt ans plus tard”] (Sotinel 2016, 17). *La promesse* was

produced contemporaneously with the emergence of *polar* and neo-noir films in the mid and late 1990s. Like *La fille inconnue*, *La promesse* was also released at a critical time in the debate about the position of migrants and refugees in Belgium and Western Europe as a whole. In particular, while *La promesse* intersects with the *sans papiers* debate in France in the late 1990s, in *La fille inconnue* the death of the unknown girl coheres with the representation of the ‘disappeared ones’ in European media at the time of the recent migrant and refugee crisis.⁴

This is not to say that *La fille inconnue* marks a return to the early stages of the filmmakers’ career. Rather, as a “narrative of racism and exclusion” (Higbee 2005, 313), it insists on the discernible similarities in the treatment of those belonging to ethnic minorities that persist along this whole period of time, i.e. unmarked graves, abuse, and exploitation are represented in both films. Although, on a more nuanced thematic level, the articulation of “ethnic hierarchies” (Vincendeau 2009, 111) is concomitant with similar concerns surfacing in the neo-noir tradition of the French film industry of the 1990s and 2000s. At this point the Dardenne brothers’ film operates well beyond the hermeneutics of genre, being definitely ‘within the world’ and ‘of its world’ at the time of its production.

As Jean-Pierre Dardenne argues, in the film the question of “Europe’s treatment of immigrants” (James 2016b, 32) is articulated through the inclusion of a young girl who is “found dead, without papers, beside water, so it resonates with all the questions of immigration and all the people who die in these circumstances” (James 2016b, 34). In this way, the film calls out wider concerns, addressing and exploring them in a way that connects with contemporaneous spectators. It poses ethical and moral questions through the exploration of key social and political issues in contemporary Western Europe. Jenny Davin’s search of the name and identity of the young, disappeared woman, found beside the waterway, nuances a media representation that needs to individualise the victims of today’s immigration policy.

Conclusion

By analysing the film in the context of the *polar* genre and the neo-noir tradition, the film’s intricacies – such as its socio-political context – I have tried to show how the film contributes to key debates in

contemporary Western European cinema, namely the problem of “ethnic hierarchies” (Vincendeau 2009, 111) and the migrant and refugee crisis. This short article highlights that, by drawing on noir tropes, the notion of anonymity permeates both the spatial and thematic continuities of *La fille inconnue*. It argues that the borrowings from the noir tradition produce an urban space that resonates with Augé’s “non-places” in addition to evoking contemporaneous issues and debates that highlight the inequalities that are at play in Western Europe. The Dardennes’ treatment of these issues resonates with Vincendeau’s analysis of the “ethnic hierarchies” that emerge in the noir tradition in French cinema. This results in *La fille inconnue* drawing on transnational noir tropes and generic references (primarily from the *polar*) to also articulate transnational social concerns (such as the migrant crisis) that are shared across Western Europe as a whole.

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Notes

- 1 The concept of the 'impromptu investigator' represents a typical characterisation for female detectives in detective and crime fiction since its early stages in the 19th century. A key example is E. T. A. Hoffmann's novella, *Mademoiselle de Scuderi* (1819). From this point onward, female detectives are not formalised and institutionalised by the police and systems of law, order and control, but they are brought into and lead the narrative based on their own intuition to drive towards a clear resolution (See: McChesney 2008).
- 2 In *Francophone Belgian Cinema* (Steele 2019, 59-64), I also explore the "spatial dynamics" of the Dardenne brothers' films from *La promesse* to *Deux Jours, Une Nuit*, referring to Augé's (1995) "non-places" in transnational cinema. The book chapter is primarily concerned with the way in which the films create a rhythm and flow to the urban space that is both locally recognisable and transnational at the same time. The pre-

sent article focuses instead on reading the spatial dynamics as an evocation of urban spaces in the noir tradition. The references to the noir tradition are nothing new in Belgian cinema, as I have also argued in the case of Lucas Belvaux (Steele 2019, 155-177).

- 3 As Wittenberg reports in *The Guardian*, refugees fall through the cracks in the system and “there are other ways of disappearing: when you’ve got no voice; when even if you have, those around you don’t, or won’t, find the time to listen [...] You don’t go missing – only your files do” (Wittenberg 2019).
- 4 Higbee (2005) offers a clear and precise contextual overview of the *sans papiers* debate in France. He posits that the “socio-political realities” of “subjects such as immigration, racism, unemployment, exclusion and social fracture” were included in key French films of the 1990s and were further evidenced by the filmmakers’ involvement “in protests that took place in February 1997” (2005, 308).