



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 8 September 2023

Close

Belgium France Netherlands | 2022 |
104 min | Cert 12A

Director: Lukas Dhont

Screenplay: Lukas Dhont, Angelo Tijssens

Starring: Eden Dambrine, Gustav De Waele,
Émilie Dequenne



Lukas Dhont on 'Close'

Following the glowing reception of your debut film *Girl*, first in Cannes in May 2018 and then globally, when did you get a chance to start thinking about making your next one?

After Cannes, I toured with the film for about 18 months. We screened it all over – in Toronto, Telluride, Tokyo, you name it. The film was also selected as Belgium's foreign-language Oscar submission, so I spent a long time in the States. As a first experience it was hugely exciting, but also overwhelming. I must have gone through every emotional high and low during that period. When it was time to move on to something else, I had to forget about the film, leave it in the past – like a part of me.

When I finally returned home and sat down in front of a blank page, it was quite a shock. I had to think of a subject that I could talk about just as passionately and in a certain way pick up what I'd started with *Girl*. I discovered cinema through my mother, who adored the film *Titanic*, and my subsequent film studies. It didn't take long for me to realise that I wanted to make intimate, personal films. I wanted to try and explore things that were unsettling for me in my childhood and early teens. In *Girl*, my intention was to discuss identity and the difficulty of being oneself in a society underpinned by social norms, labels, pigeonholes. *Girl* was also a physical film, one that focused on an external and internal struggle, and I wanted to keep exploring the issue of identity and the conflict arising from how you are perceived by others, a group. Above all, I wanted to speak about a deeply personal subject.

Where did the idea of telling this story of friendship come from?

I explored several ideas, but I was a little lost. Then one day, I went to visit my old primary school in the village where I grew up. The memories came flooding back of going to school at that time, when it was really tough to be my true, unfiltered self. The boys behaved one way, the girls another, and I always felt like I didn't belong in any one group. I started to get nervous about the friendships I had, especially with the boys, because I was effeminate and there was a lot of teasing going on. Having a close relationship with another boy only seemed to confirm the assumptions others had about my sexual identity. One of my former teachers, who is now the headmistress, burst into tears on seeing me. The school reunion was particularly emotional and the memories we talked about weren't all happy ones. Even today I'm still coming to terms with the painful years at primary and secondary school, without wanting to sound overly dramatic about it. So I attempted to write down these sentiments and express something about that world from my own perspective.

I put down a few words on paper: friendship, intimacy, fear, masculinity... and *Close* emerged from that. The screenplay then began to take shape following conversations with Angelo Tijssens (my writing partner on *Girl*).

How did you develop the characters of Léo and Rémi, the two boys at the centre of *Close* ?

I feel that in a way I'm both Léo and Rémi. There's a piece of me in each character. First, we determined the

age of the actors, a very precise moment between childhood and adolescence: the start of secondary school, the onset of questions about sexuality, physical changes, one's relationship with the world and how these things evolve.

The book *Deep Secrets* by psychologist Niobe Way, in which she studies 100 boys aged 13 to 18, was a major source of inspiration for me. At age 13, the boys talk about their friends as if they are the people they love most in the world, to whom they can pour out their hearts and open up. The author describes how every year she would meet up with each boy and observed how, as the years passed, the boys increasingly struggled to bring up the notion of intimacy with their male friends. This book helped me to understand that I wasn't the only young gay boy who grew up struggling with the intimate aspect of friendship.

There is a sense of continuity between *Girl* and *Close* in terms of mise-en-scène and the aesthetic, the way in which your films always seem to feel choreographed. Are body and movement central to your work?

Yes, I think so. I realised it during my film studies. While all the other students were doing work placements on film productions, I did internships with choreographers. If I'm honest, I didn't want to become a director, my ambition was to be a dancer. But I gave up that dream when I was 13 because I was ashamed. When I used to dance, I felt judged, and I didn't have the strength to not give a damn what others thought. However, when I was dancing I got to express myself, to be truly myself. That whole experience left almost a physical wound, but despite all of that I've always remained close to choreographers and dancers. Writing gave me another way to channel this desire. I realised that I find it harder to express myself through words than movement and dance. I'm just as interested in the movements of my characters as my own. This is only my second film, so I'm questioning myself more, and I believe that my films incorporate movement as my means of communicating. When I write, the words often translate into corporeal intentions.

In *Close*, I wanted the boys to be as close as possible in the bed. These are images we rarely get to see. This closeness between two boys is almost alien to us. There's also a fight scene, a hand-to-hand struggle that is practically iconic in queer language. The

sense of accountability central to the film is also something extremely physical, like an internal burden. I was drawn to ice hockey for what it represents in terms of masculinity and brutality. In the second half of the film, we see that it gives Léo a reason to wear a helmet, a wire cage covering his face. This costume was interesting because it encloses, it masks, and weighs down on a person's movement. To my mind, movement is always there at the start of my writing. In my films, I love to communicate through visual movements and even through sound.

Was the title of the film, *Close*, intended to imply both intimacy and confinement?

My decision to call the first film *Girl* was a statement I felt I had to make. As for *Close*, it was a word that frequently cropped up in the book *Deep Secrets*: 'close friendship'. It's an unavoidable word when describing the intimate relationship between these two boys. It's this scrutinised intimacy that is the catalyst for the film's tragic events. When we lose someone, we try to seek intimacy with the person who's gone. We are thrown into a kind of philosophical struggle. The word just as easily conjures up the notion of being confined, of wearing a mask, the inability to be yourself.

The first proposal for the film's title – *We Two Boys Together Clinging* – is the title of a David Hockney painting inspired by a poem by Walt Whitman and representing the brotherhood between two men. 'Clinging' is a particularly expressive word for the desire to hold on tightly to someone.

*British Film Institute
Production Notes*