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La Gamin au Vélo

The kid with a Bike

(2011)

Directed by Dardenne brothers

Two-time Palme d'Or winners the Dardenne brothers cast their first star, while a Parisian police thriller could be the worst film in competition



Le Gamin au Vélo

This weekend saw the latest film from two of the festival's heaviest hitters: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, who have won the Palme d'Or twice (for Rosetta in 1999 and L'Enfant in 2005); their new film **Le Gamin au Vélo**, or The Kid With a Bike, is in competition. Unusually for the Dardenne, this one features a star in the traditional glossy-glam sense: Cécile de France. Still, there's no mistaking it for anyone else's film: a social-realist drama set in the suburban-rural hinterland of the directors' native Belgium, on the theme of parent and child, and father and son, with repertory casting of the Dardennes' favourite players: Jérémie Renier and a brief, almost totemic appearance from Olivier Gourmet. The Kid With a Bike restates the Dardennes' style so emphatically it is almost like Monet repainting his lilies. In fact, the movie

appears to be a variation on De Sica's Bicycle Thieves, in which a father and son search for a bicycle; here, a son with a bicycle searches for his errant dad. Thomas Doret is the 12-year-old Cyril, in care and unable to believe that his father has abandoned him. Under the Dardennes' direction, this very talented young actor suggests a borderline disorder, an almost autistic inability to understand or respond to what his carers and other adults are telling him. Chance appears, rather implausibly, to take a hand when Samantha, a kindly hairdresser played by De France, offers to take Cyril for the weekend. His selfish, deadbeat dad (Renier) refuses to get involved, and so, agonized by this need for a father figure, Cyril falls under the spell of a local drug-dealer who needs an underling to do his dirty work.

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As ever with the Dardennes, the realism coexists with some baffling unrealities. The motivation of Samantha is sketchily presented, and as in their previous film The Silence of Lorna (2008), the directors display an almost childlike belief that when you hit someone over the head with something hard, the victim will fall conveniently unconscious and immobile and then recover, completely, about twenty minutes later: it's a convention I remember from 60s and 70s TV cop shows, and one I thought had long since become obsolete. So there are flaws, and yet the Dardennes' tough, spare, almost haunted storytelling style was much in evidence. There is also something moving in the fact that Renier, once the "kid" figure in the Dardennes' movies, is growing up to be the grizzled, careworn dad.

Perhaps it is too early to say, but **Polisse** by Maïwenn Le Besco, has to be a strong contender for the most awful film of the competition. It's a freewheeling ensemble drama based on true events in the life of the Juvenile Protection Squad, a division of the Paris police. They're a bunch of tough types busting pedophile's, cracking down on child-pickpocket gang masters and working out their soap-opera private lives. Much of it feels like a

pretty dodgy evening in front of the television: less *The Wire*, more *The Bill*. But I don't think any director of *The Bill* would have permitted the toe curlingly embarrassing overacting we get in this movie – particularly, I am sorry to say, from [Karin Viard](#), who is usually such a safe pair of hands. All too often, the cast look like drama students put into some sort of group improv workshop and told to think themselves into the role of stressed cops. This means they shout at each other, and then they tell each other to calm down. Hey! HEY! Ta gueule! Calme-toi! Putain! CALME-TOI! Maïwenn herself has a supercilious small role, playing a photographer permitted to be a fly on the wall recording the unit's daily life; she has a row with a cop, and then inevitably, an affair with him. We never get to see any of these photos she's supposed to be taking.

Some of the movie works: there is a scene that shows the officers – strained beyond endurance – laughing uncontrollably, and inappropriately, at some of the evidence. But elsewhere there are a lot of wrong notes and horrendous tonal misjudgments, particularly when one cop, trying to get pregnant and tormented with body-image issues, insists on naming the dead baby of a rape victim. It is pretty uncomfortable to see that superb actor Louis-Do de Liquecing, so powerful as the lead in Mia Hansen-Love's [The Father of My Children](#), in the thinly written role of a child abuser. The ending is wildly unconvincing and melodramatic.

Seeking a Father, Finding Humanity



Thomas Doret in "The Kid with a Bike." "Credit...Sundance Selects
The fast-moving boy in "The Kid with a Bike," a quietly rapturous film about love and redemption from Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, races along with frightening intensity, his little legs pedaling hard, his eyes fixed on a heart-heavy destination. What the 11-year-old Cyril (the newcomer Thomas Doret, touchingly serious) wants — what every muscle in his small, tensed body strains toward — is the father who left him at a children's home, abandoning his only son to the kindness of strangers with as seemingly little regard and feeling as someone else might toss a pair of old shoes.

Cyril's search for his father, Guy (J r mie Renier, a Dardenne regular), initially drives "The Kid With a Bike," giving it relentless momentum (those small legs pump like pistons) and investing it with palpable peril. Early in the film, Cyril escapes the home and races out, trying to find his father. He makes his way to the bleak apartment complex where they lived, but all that remains of their life together are empty rooms and peeling walls. For a long,

painful moment, Cyril stands eerily still in one of the rooms, facing away from the camera — his shoulders look so small — the camera keeping a slight distance from this child who has literally turned his back on the world.

Image



Thomas Doret and Cécile de France in “The Kid With a bike.”
“Credit...Christine Plenus/Sundance Selects

Although not much appears to have happened at this point — a boy ran and ran some more and then hopped on a bus or two and kept on running — if you’re familiar with the Dardennes, you may feel as if you recognize this willful child. Like the title teenage character in their film “Rosetta,” Cyril is an extraordinarily physical presence — you’re acutely aware of the effort involved in his movements, in his running, colliding and scaling walls — and stubborn. For Cyril, this seeming obstinacy is a manifestation of faith: he feverishly believes in his father, believes that they will be

reunited and that Guy would never have sold Cyril's beloved bicycle. Shortly after he goes to the apartment, Cyril is off again, a few steps ahead of the children's home counselors who have followed. He tries to take refuge in a medical office in the building, where he crashes into a woman, Samantha (Cécile de France), so hard that they both fall as the counselors move in. Cyril locks her in a hug, holding on as if to a buoy as the counselors try to pry him loose. "You can hold me," Samantha says, "but not so tight." The collision happens so fast that you may not initially recognize the underlying poeticism of the milieu, a place of suffering and healing. In an [interview in Film Comment](#), Jean-Pierre Dardenne characterizes Cyril's hold on Samantha as a "reverse Pietà."

This unusual description of the religious image — in a traditional Pietà, Mary cradles Jesus in her arms after the crucifixion — is of a piece with the Dardennes' profound, socially conscious explorations of familiar Christian (they were raised as Roman Catholics) themes of love, forgiveness, redemption and moral awakening in a secular context and age. Or, as Luc Dardenne once put it about another of their films, "when God is dead." In the earlier film "The Son," for instance, a carpenter, newly acquainted with the teenager who years before killed his child, makes a decision not to murder the teenager. In "The Child" a young hustler sells his own newborn son for money only to save the infant, another child and finally himself.

2:46 Interview: The Dardenne Brothers

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne discuss their film “The Kid with a Bike.”

Even as Cyril lets go of Samantha, she begins to bring him close, first by retrieving his bicycle. Much of the story, written by the Dardennes and set, as usual, around the post-industrial municipality of Seraing, Belgium, involves a series of quotidian incidents after Cyril, at his request, starts staying with Samantha on weekends. (You wonder if he thinks he’s found a sucker.) Cyril bikes and bikes some more; Samantha works at her hair salon. As he continues his searching, his restlessness matched by the Dardennes’ moving camera (the cinematographer is their regular, invaluable collaborator, Alain Marcoen), the relationship between Cyril and Samantha brings to mind one of the laws of motion: A body in motion travels in a straight path until acted on by an outside force.

Here, as elsewhere in the Dardennes’ work, that outside force is another human being. The Dardennes never explain why Samantha agrees to take care of Cyril. She doesn’t attend church or spout pieties; there’s nothing obviously in it for her. Rather, her goodness is a given. It’s hard not to think that Ms. de France, who here wears a lot of sleeveless blouses, was partly cast for her beautifully sculptured arms, which look strong enough to lift any burden. The solidity of those arms and of Ms. de France’s overall physicality function somewhat contrapuntally with the uncharacteristic, brief flourishes from Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 5 (the “Emperor” Concerto) that punctuate several scenes, a use of music that recalls the films of Robert Bresson, an important influence on the Dardennes.