

## Blu-Ray Review: 'District 13: Ultimatum' Falls Short of Predecessor

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CHICAGO – Parkour is a type of physical discipline well suited for the cinema. It trains mere mortals to move like supermen. They can leap from one place to another, while overcoming formidable obstacles, without the need for any harnesses or special effects. The only tools used by parkour practitioners are their own bodies and their surrounding environment. Buster Keaton would've excelled at this.

I first discovered parkour upon my viewing of the original 2004 French thriller, "District B13," which featured two spectacular athletes, Cyril Raffaelli and David Belle, performing the majority of their stunts. The film was terrific popcorn entertainment, blending crowd-pleasing action with a sobering political message, achieving an overall impact similar to Neill Blomkamp's wholly unrelated "District 9." Though its plot has often been compared to "Escape from New York," the titular ghetto in "District B13" felt much more grounded in reality. Yet the film's fight choreography soared to heights of tongue-in-cheek lunacy also reached by writer/producer Luc Besson's other series, "The Transporter."



Blu-Ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

The sequel, "District 13: Ultimatum," reunites Raffaelli and Belle in their respective roles as police captain Damien Tomaso and good-hearted vigilante Leïto. Though both performers are still in top form, they appear to be going through the motions of a plot that, for all its complications, is essentially the same as the original. Shady government big-wigs want to blow up District B13, and the unlikely heroic duo of Damien and Leïto must stop them, while also battling various underworld figures. The story in the original film was little more than a clothesline on which to hang a breathless amount of dazzling action sequences. What's especially disappointing about "Ultimatum" is that there simply isn't as much action, while its needlessly muddled plot forces the characters to repeatedly pause and sort out events with the help of flashbacks. This surplus of dialogue scenes includes some heavy handed, painfully obvious social commentary centering on an evil contractor named "Harriburton."



David Belle and Cyril Raffaelli reunite in Patrick Alessandrin's District 13: Ultimatum.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

While director Pierre Morel ("Taken") demonstrated a gift for inventively staging action sequences in the first film, "Ultimatum" director Patrick Alessandrin ("Mean Spirit") is much more by-the-book. He even utilizes the cheap technique of repeating bits of action from multiple angles. Still, there's at least a handful of moments that retain the original film's imagination, particularly during Raffaelli's opening set-piece where he defeats an array of villains while armed with a Van Gogh painting. Several of Belle's scenes capture the exhilaration of hurtling through space, as he effortlessly swoops through floorboards, jumps off rooftops, and always lands without a scratch. It's a shame there aren't more scenes like that. Instead, the film ultimately falls apart in an unconvincing climax where District 13's cartoon caricatures of racially diverse gang leaders unite to save the ghetto. It's a flat ending to a promising franchise. If there's ever a third installment, I suggest hiring Ang Lee, and naming it, "District 13: Crouching Cop, Hidden Drug Dealer."



District 13: Ultimatum was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on April 27th, 2010.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

"District 13: Ultimatum" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), and like many recent Magnolia releases, the picture quality is second-to-none. The BD-Live-enabled disc includes the original French audio track along with an English-dubbed track that is just plain silly (if you're old enough to watch this picture, then you'll have no trouble reading it). In a somewhat enlightening 26-minute making-of featurette, Belle talks about how parkour "allows you to face any obstacle," while Raffaelli discusses his choreography for the combat sequences. It was Raffaelli who came up with one of Belle's most dangerous and jaw-dropping stunts in the film, which he performed in one take (it involved a jump between two rails upholding a roof). Some of the film's remarkably convincing blue screen effects are deconstructed, while Raffaelli talks about his method for jumping into a car...through the window.

There's also a music video from Alonzo Determine, as well as 34 minutes of production diaries that mainly recycle footage used in the previous featurette. Many of them include rehearsals in which actors plan out their moves for a given action scene, yet the frantic editing often dilutes the footage of any substance. "District 13" fans will especially appreciate the nine minutes of deleted and extended scenes, all of which include more fighting footage. Several of the gang leaders get a chance to individually kick some butt, and the crowd scenes of hand-to-hand combat are particularly impressive. A brief HDNet featurette offers some historical context for the film's setting, highlighting its similarities to the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as the 2005 civil uprising that resulted in French president Jacques Chirac declaring martial law (the film splices in actual footage of riots that occurred during the uprising).

*'District 13: Ultimatum' is released by Magnolia Home Entertainment and stars Cyril Raffaelli, David Belle, Philippe Torreton, Daniel Duval, Elodie Yung and MC Jean Gab'1. It was written by Luc Besson and directed by Patrick Alessandrin. It was released on April 27th, 2010. It is rated R.*



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