

## Blu-ray Review: Dardenne Brothers Triumph Again in 'The Kid with a Bike'

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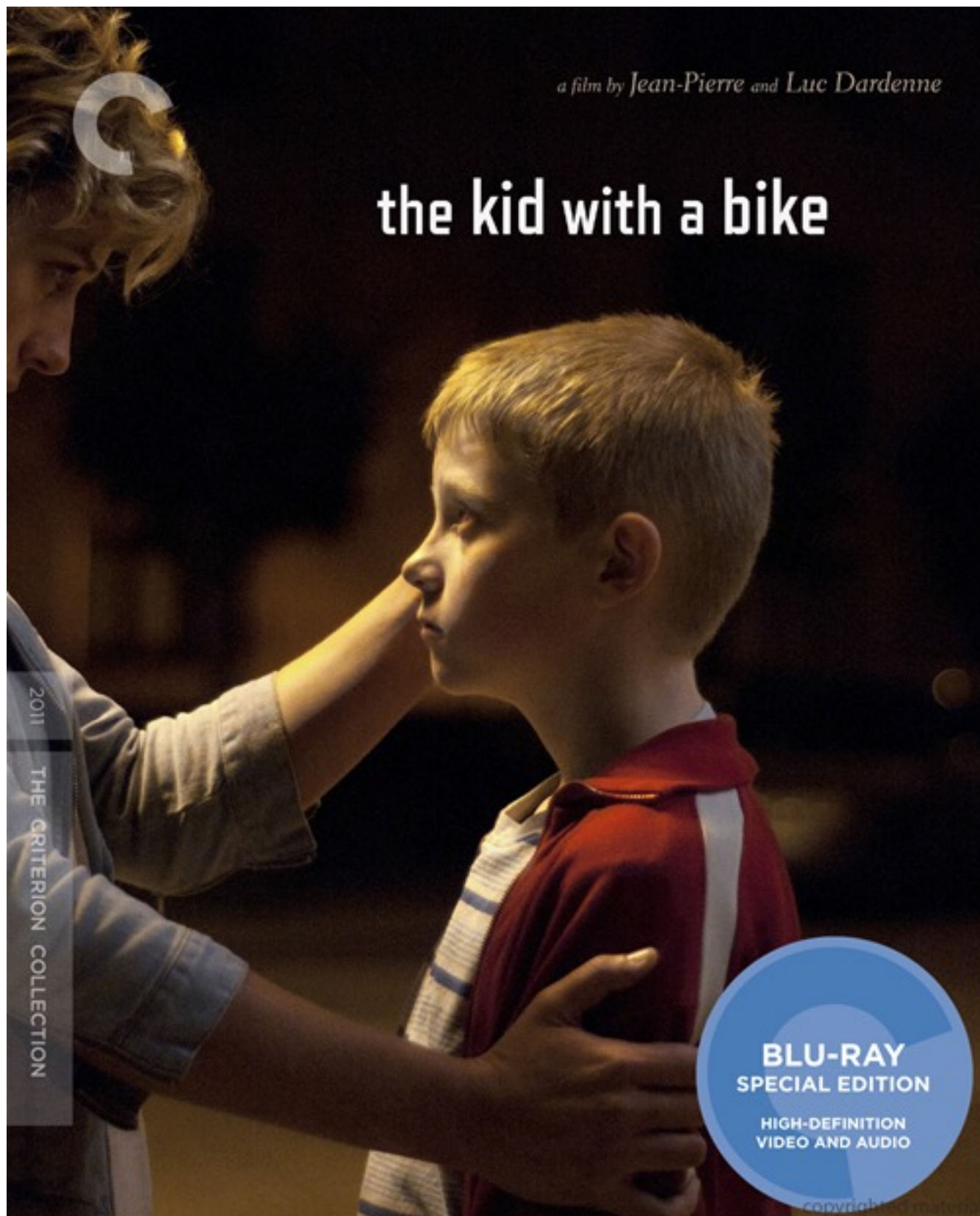
CHICAGO – All this fuss about Ben Affleck not getting nominated by the Academy after directing three decent flicks is even more inane in light of the fact that Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, arguably the greatest directing duo in modern cinema, haven't garnered any Oscar attention. At all. Their latest naturalistic triumph, "The Kid with a Bike," snagged a mere Golden Globe nod several months before it even premiered on U.S. screens.

The alleged edge-of-your-seat suspense in "Argo" has all the tautness of a snail race compared to the blistering tension conjured by the Dardenne Brothers as their camera confines the audience within the solitude, desperation and mounting dread of their troubled protagonists. "The Kid with a Bike" is the Dardennes' most excruciatingly suspenseful and emotionally galvanizing effort since their 1996 breakthrough, "La Promesse." Both films center on self-sufficient boys in danger of deteriorating into destructive products of their environment, so it's only fitting that the boy in "Promesse" (Jérémie Renier) rematerializes as the distant father in "Bike."



Blu-ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

In an astonishing debut performance, Thomas Doret plays Cyril, an orphaned kid whose youthful features are aged by the hardened expression of grief etched on his face. He can't understand why his father, Guy (Renier), would abandon him in a state-run youth farm, and is determined to track him down. The boy's sense of entrapment is heightened by Alain Marcoen's claustrophobic cinematography, which often follows Cyril at a close distance, enabling the audience to view the world from his limited perspective (Marie-Hélène Dozo's editing is so seamless, it's practically invisible). When Cyril finally hops aboard his bicycle, Marcoen captures the boy's exhilaration as he discovers his prized mode of escape. Yet Cyril's weary eyes are unclouded by the phony promises that society is poised to break. Life's bitter indifference has granted him no time to waste sulking in the shadows. His quest for Guy is spawned not by starry-eyed fantasies but by the sheer disbelief that he could be so thoughtlessly discarded. When an adult warns him that a reunion may not provide him all that he had dreamed, Cyril flatly replies, "I'm not dreaming." Doret inspires such fierce empathy from the audience that no explanation is needed for why a childless hairdresser, Samantha (the radiant Cécile De France), would feel compelled to adopt him. Though she treats him like a budding young man, Samantha is determined to protect Cyril from the predatory gangs eager to recruit wayward youth. Yet sometimes the most vital life lessons must be learned the hard way.



The Kid with a Bike was released on Blu-ray and DVD on February 12th, 2013.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

This quietly riveting masterpiece packs such a gut-wrenching punch that it puts most of this year's toothless, formulaic Oscar bait to shame. The Dardennes' characters are not the stuff of Hollywood formula, anyway. They're spawned directly from the members of Belgium's lower class that the filmmakers spent two decades documenting before they switched their focus to narrative features. As entrenched in De Sica's neorealism as it is in Bresson's distilled portraits of redemption, the work of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne demonstrates the sort of miraculous craftsmanship no serious moviegoer can afford to ignore.

"The Kid with a Bike" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio) and includes a splendidly thorough, 73-minute conversation between critic Kent Jones and the Dardenne Brothers, who reveal the real-life story that inspired their script. In a separate interview, De France recalls the physically demanding shoot (which required her to perform stunts without protective gear) and emphasizes the importance of maintaining emotional restraint with her young co-star, Doret (who also offers a brief reminiscence on this disc). Yet the most rewarding extra of the bunch is the 33-minute featurette in which the Dardennes revisit five key locations from the film and explain their methods behind staging each scene. They consistently wanted to create a tension in the frame by juxtaposing Cyril's diminutive size with towering authority figures, while continuing to isolate him in the frame with minimal camera movement to accentuate his alienation. For the scene that introduces De France, the Dardennes were careful not to bathe her in nearby sunlight, which would've given her an all-too-saintly appearance. Her forced embrace with Doret was meant to resemble a variation on Buonarroti's Pietà sculpture in which the roles of mother and child are reversed. It's candid details such as this that are guaranteed to captivate every cinephile fortunate enough to stumble upon this sublime Criterion release.

*'The Kid with a Bike' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Thomas Doret, Cécile De France, Jérémie Renier, Laurent Caron, Fabrizio Rongione, Egon Di Mateo and Olivier Gourmet. It was written and directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. It was released on February 12th, 2013. It is not rated.*

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