

10th September 2012

✓ **Le Gamin au vélo (The Kid with a Bike) (12A)**

Director: **Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne**
Belgium/France/Italy 2011 In French with English subtitles

Running time : 87 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Thomas Doret** (Cyril Catoul), **Cécile De France** (Samantha), **Jérémy Renier** (Guy Catoul).

SCRIPT: **Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Alain Marcoen**. EDITING: **Raphaëlle Dufosset**. MUSIC: **none**.

Reveals minor plot details

Cyril is a small boy on the verge of adolescence who has been abandoned by his father and left in the care of an orphanage. He rebels against authority figures and desires only one thing: reunion with his dad. Into his life fortuitously comes Samantha, a hairdresser who has made the journey to being a contributing member of society against the odds, and sees only too well how things might have been otherwise. Apprehensive lest the worst should befall Cyril, as it has so many others, she determines to be an influence for good in his life by fostering him at weekends.

Such is the set-up for the Dardenne brothers' latest social realist drama, the genre to which they have adhered over the years since *Rosetta*, and which has earned them the title of 'Belgium's answer to Ken Loach'. Indeed, the sobriquet has some truth to it with regard to the working class settings and characters, and the social deprivation at the heart of their stories. But it also has its limitations when one considers the buoyant humour so often found in Loach's work, and the rhetorical gestures of his plots. The Dardennes represent a particularly gallic, pared back approach, with often sparse dialogue (compare Loach's garrulous northerners!) and a roving handheld camera that recalls the Danish *dogme* aesthetic.

With *The Kid with a Bike* there has been a much commented-upon tempering of their trademark dourness, however. The red jersey worn by Cyril and his temptation to stray from the strait path into a life with drugs call to mind Little Red Riding Hood's tarrying on her journey to pick flowers, and Samantha is every inch a fairy godmother! Even the title, *Le Gamin au vélo*, in French carries within it a fabulous simplicity, making the bicycle an attribute of the boy, as opposed to *le gamin à vélo*, say, which is the more mundane 'kid on a bike'. These fairytale elements might promise an uncharacteristic happy ending – far be it for me to

comment; suffice to say, you will be on the edge of your seats with anxiety for the child before the film is over.

On the acting front, Thomas Doret's lead contribution is another Dardenne-coaxed performance of rare authenticity and rawness (compare that of the young Emilie Dequenne as Rosetta). His Cyril is exasperating, and yet ultimately inspires viewer loyalty. As Samantha, Cécile De France is a rare star presence in a Dardenne film, her youthful girlishness having graced such as *Pot Luck*, *Orchestra Seats* and *The Singer*; but this only serves to further her status as a quasi-providential force for good, a creature from another world of film. Jérémy Renier, who is also a well-known actor now, but nevertheless started out with the Liège-based directors, plays the thankless role of the neglectful father, reversing the redemptive arc of his character in the Dardenne's earlier masterpiece, *L'Enfant*, who pulled back from the sale of his infant child to traffickers.

I shall end with the words of Sukhdev Sandhu, writing for *The Daily Telegraph*:

*The Dardennes strike a perfect balance between highlighting Cyril's furious, relentless motion ... and the power of small incidents to ... derail him. It's this wrestle between social or economic structures and the tremulous desire of embattled men and women to overcome them that is a hallmark of the brothers' films. Here, yet again, it's dramatised superbly.*¹

David Clare

¹ The Telegraph online, 15th May 2011