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Everyone is chomping at the bit to see Terrence Malick's *The Tree Of Life*. Not since Wong Kar-wai's *2046* has a movie come to the festival with critics so desperate for it to be undeniably great. Meanwhile, the Dardenne brothers -- one of the most remarkable talents of the last 15 years -- deliver yet another gem but it was treated as just more of the same by some. "Oh, John Ford made another western? Ho hum."

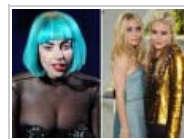
WU XIA aka DRAGON or SWORDSMEN ** 1/2 out of ****

This enjoyable martial arts flick combines the subgenre of wu xia with TV's *CSI* to create a detective/action

movie that's pretty fun, even if it does get in its own way sometimes. Our hero is a modest man living in China in the early 1900s. He came to a small village from far away, took a new name and an abandoned (but beautiful!) young mother for his wife and treats her son as kindly as the child they would have together. When two vicious killers invade their world, our hero Liu (Donnie Yen) throws himself at them but somehow we suspect in his fumbling desperate manner, he is employing vastly superior skill to defeat them without revealing to others the martial arts expertise that he possesses. It works for the simple villagers he calls friends...but not for the detective (Takeshi Kaneshiro) who arrives to officially

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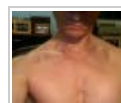
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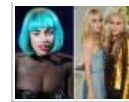
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pronounce the cause of death. This officer of the law once gave a young man the benefit of the doubt, only to see the boy poison his own parents. Ever since, the detective refuses to bend the rules or base his judgments on anything other than the strict letter of the law. This forces a showdown as his prying brings a deadly clan of outlaws descending on the village and forces Liu to abandon his mild ways to save his family, his friends and even the detective.

Much is made in this film of elaborate visual reenactments of fight scenes and martial arts techniques that can for example stop a heart for minutes at a time. This leads to all sorts of *CSI*-like moments where the camera flies through a nervous system and zooms in on an organ to show the effect of punching *here* or *there*. It's fun but overdone. The movie looks handsome but is undercut by a schizophrenic score which is half inventive and smart (like one fight scene scored with a very subtle, quiet cue) to a rock-pop score for many moments that is obvious and cheap. And the big final fight scene is fatally undone by a very lame, unimaginative conclusion. Still, for most of the way, this is a fine entry for fans of the genre with some notable twists.

MICHAEL *** out of ****

In France (and apparently Germany), many apartments and homes feature metal-like outer blinds that lower like shields on the outside of windows, completely shutting out light and most sound. They're excellent when you're in an apartment at Cannes and want to muffle the noise of a cafe or street musician below. Those blinds are used to chilling effect in *Michael*, a movie I would have associated with director Michael Haneke even before I discovered that first-time director Markus Schleizer had done the casting on many of Haneke's films for years. This trailer captures the style of *Michael* very effectively.



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Out of the darkness will appear a little boy that Michael, our protagonist, keeps locked in his basement. I suspected that as soon as I spotted the noise-muffling sponges on the inside of the doorway leading to the basement; they gave me an immediate sense of dread. But this is not a horror film, unfortunately. For horror films aren't about real pain; they have villains we know will be vanquished or at least beaten back before resurrecting for a sequel. In *Michael*, all we have is desperate reality. An unassuming middle-aged man (almost comically cliched in looking like a pedophile) goes about his day in a calm, deliberate manner. He does his job, interacts with coworkers just enough not to appear (too) strange, comes home, lowers those blinds, prepares dinner and then and only then allows the boy to come upstairs and eat. They watch TV, the boy is sent back down to the basement at 9 p.m., the man comes down and rapes him, the man cleans himself off and then goes to bed.

The movie is heartbreaking in its directness because you feel so helpless watching this story unfold and wonder what, if anything, will end it. At one point, the boy hand-writes a card which I assumed was for the man. The way he so carefully folded it and then sealed it in an envelope struck me as so sad -- it wouldn't be any surprise that he might curry favor with the man who overshadowed his entire life and decides what petty favors he might grant the kid. The man takes the letter, reads it and then files it away with a pile of others. Only later do we discover that the boy actually thought he was writing a letter to his parents, people the man lies and tells him in an angry moment have insisted they never want to see the boy again.

Some bravura moments appear here, especially the scene where the man is carefully scouting out another boy to kidnap. The trusting child is lured away by the man to a parking lot when finally, finally, at the last minute we hear the voice of the kid's father calling him back. Michael never breaks his stride, slowly and casually continuing to walk away even as his plans are frustrated, but also never running in case he calls attention to himself. The muttered comments of the boy talking to his dad don't mention the nice stranger he was talking too until our hero is safely away. It's a chilling moment.

Ultimately, what keeps *Michael* from greatness for me was that while the film was always engrossing and assured (and the two leads excellent), I never felt any insight either into the pedophile or the boy whose life he is destroying. Still, it's undeniably an accomplished work, however disturbing the subject matter. So I was shocked when this film was the first (and so far only one) of the fest to receive a chorus of loud boos from critics upon its debut.

17 FILLES/17 GIRLS ** out of ****

Based on a true story, the premise of this film was so striking I wanted to be sure and see it. Perhaps it was the image on the poster -- a string of teenage girls, all visibly pregnant and smiling. The film has a similarly vivid moment when many of the pregnant teens are in a pool, helping each other exercise and float. The sight is so unusual, it can't help but seem strange and beautiful, though the movie *We Need To Talk About Kevin* used the same visuals to show how a woman can feel her body has been invaded. In this case, it was an open invitation. When the good-looking and charismatic Camille (Louise Grinberg of *The Class*) accidentally gets pregnant, it starts a bizarre trend in her small, seaside town. One girl who longs to be a part of Camille's clique announces that she is pregnant too and is suddenly part of the team. Then Camille somehow makes being pregnant seem liberating and fun and an act of Three Musketeers-like solidarity. They can all get pregnant and leave their boring families and share a big house and take turns doing the boring stuff!

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It seems bizarre to think that the teens we think of as worldly could be so stupid as to think being a mother at 16 or 17 was somehow going to be fun and liberating, but in fact 17 girls in all take the plunge. Unfortunately, this movie by sisters Delphine and Muriel Coulin never takes full advantage of its odd premise. It's hard to buy Camille's pitch is so successful (even though something akin to it did in fact happen in Massachusetts). And the movie is neither satirical enough nor biting and dramatic enough to show how reality intrudes on their fantasy ideas of what young motherhood might be like. In fact, the movie ends long before the real exhaustion of late nights and diaper changes and the sense of fun has long passed. The girls are quite effective in their stubborn conviction, especially the ringleader played by Grinberg, but *17 Filles* never delivers on its promise.

LA FIN DU SILENCE/THE END OF SILENCE ** out of ****

Another troubled teen with a weapon. It's nice to know the US doesn't have a lock on such scenarios. In this case, the teen is Jean (an impressive Franck Falise making the most of a murky character). He's a young man filled with anger and apathy and abruptly tossed out of the remote cabin home of his family by Jean's older brother. Jean then punkishly acts out throwing gasoline on the house and threatening to light a match until the brother and father tackle him. The kid is so out of control even his own mother at one point begs him to "leave us alone." Why is he so fraught with tension? Jean stumbles away and into the arms of a family "friend" who takes the kid on a hunting expedition. Then the movie gets truly murky. The man's girlfriend or wife takes a shine to Jean, making sure he gets a rifle when the man only wants him to have a stick and serve as a beater on the hunt. Jean takes the gun and scopes out his home from a hill high above, like an assassin or an outsider. The man reaches out to Jean by making the kid feel welcome but also has a violent temper. But wait a second. In the tradition of so many art films, it's slowly becoming clear exactly what is going on. The man might be Jean's biological father, which would explain why both have such short fuses. Maybe Jean's brother and dad know this, which explains their complicated relationship. We know Jean didn't torch his brother's car, but the truth never bothers to come out though it would seem awfully germane as the film trudges along to a climactic showdown. That showdown with everyone gathered in one place doesn't begin to answer all the questions we have. But by this time, we don't really care. First time director Roland Edzard brought together a fine cast and solid technical crew; too bad he didn't give them the sturdy, clear script they deserved.

LE GAMIN AU VELO/THE KID WITH A BIKE *** 1/2 out of ****

Some filmmakers just strike a chord with you. Their style, their stories, their obsessions just click with you on some fundamental level and you are continually drawn to their work. That's certainly the case with me and the Dardenne brothers. Jean-Pierre and Luc are unquestionably one of the major cinematic talents of the past 15 years. I was mildly disappointed with their last movie, *Lorna's Silence*, a plot-heavy

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affair that seemed obvious compared to so many of their other works. Still it and *The Kid With A Bike* show the Dardennes growing stylistically.

They've always focused on the marginalized and on, frankly, the losers of the world -- people with desperate situations who make bad decisions under pathetic circumstances in which almost no choice is good and helplessly watch their lives spiral out of control. The Dardennes also usually rely on handheld cameras that create a remarkable intimacy with their main characters, almost literally perched on their shoulders like a guardian angel that can only stand by and watch with empathy while things go horribly awry. The difference here is that *The Kid With A Bike* is a little more polished, with the camera at a slightly removed distance. They even use a dash of music (in this case Beethoven) to underscore key moments. Best of all, the film has a sense of hope about it that was dramatically absent in so many of their other movies. The result is a very typical Dardenne film and yet one that deserves to reach their widest audience yet. It's sure to be one of my favorites of the year.

Our hero is a classic Dardenne protagonist. He's a little boy (a marvelous Thomas Doret) whose mother is dead or missing and whose father (Jeremie Renier) has dumped him at an orphanage. Stubbornly believing the best of his indifferent dad, the boy is especially certain his dad would "never" have taken off and not made sure the boy got his bike. So the kid keeps escaping from his orphanage and trying to track his dad down. He questions everyone his dad crossed paths with. Even as it becomes painfully obvious to us that the dad sold the kid's bike and took off, the kid keeps insisting his dad simply wouldn't do that. He almost literally stumbles into a woman (Cecile De France) who feels for the kid. When she tracks his bike down, she finds herself dragooned into both helping the boy find his dad and even taking him in for weekend visits from the orphanage. Here's the scene where she forces the dad to stop giving the kid false hope.

The boy is difficult and impulsive and even violent (almost always out of pain over the rejection of his father or some other bitter revelation). But the woman doesn't give up on him, even as the boy threatens her relationship with her boyfriend. Worse, the kid proves tragically trusting in the only male figure who shows him any kindness -- a punk down the block who wants the boy to commit a violent crime with him. Most Dardenne films focus on this boy long after any possibility of redemption seems laughably distant. We would meet him at 20 or 30, just out of prison or repeating the same mistakes with his son that the boy's father made with him. But here we have the kid, a smart kid, a decent if troubled kid who is not yet a lost boy. Can he get on the right track? Can he make mistakes and still recover from them thanks to an adult in his life who actually cares about him? I literally had no idea what would happen at the end of this movie, finding the tension almost unbearable as I usually do at their movies. It gives nothing away to say that, for once, I wondered what might happen but hoped against hope that it wouldn't be disaster. That, for the Dardennes, constitutes progress. And this film ranks with *La Promesse*, *Rosetta* and *The Son* as yet another gem in their growing list of top-notch movies.

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