



Le Fils de Joseph

Eugène Green

Producer Francine Jacob, Didier Jacob, Luc Dardenne, Jean-Pierre Dardenne. **Production companies** Coffee and Films (Paris, France), Les Films du Fleuve (Liège, Belgium). **Written and directed by** Eugène Green. **Director of photography** Raphaël O'Byrne. **Editor** Valérie Loiseleux. **Sound design** Stéphane Thiébaud. **Sound** Benoît de Clerck. **Production design** Paul Rouschop. **Costumes** Agnès Noden.

With Victor Ezenfis (Vincent), Natacha Régnier (Marie), Fabrizio Rongione (Joseph), Mathieu Amalric (Oscar Pormenor), Maria de Medeiros (Violette Tréfouille), Julia de Gasquet (Bernadette), Jacques Bonnaffé (Farmer).

DCP, colour. 115 min. French.

Premiere 12. February 2016, Berlinale Forum

World sales Les Films du Losange

Summer in Paris. Fifteen-year-old Vincent refuses to join in with his schoolmates torturing rats or selling sperm on the Internet. He lives with his single mother Marie and finally wants to find out who his father is. His investigations lead him to a famous publisher with an obnoxious character. When he meets said publisher's brother Joseph, his life changes in a flash.

Eugène Green drops biblical motifs – Abraham and Isaac, Mary and Joseph – into this genuinely contemporary setting as if it were the most natural thing in the world, augmenting them with nods to crime films, Italian Baroque music, a Doisneau photograph, three 17th century paintings and an artificial way of speaking that is anything but current. The characters are positioned within the visual compositions and look directly into the camera, their diction flawless. Whatever needs saying – and that's a lot – they recite impassively, in declamatory fashion. Along the way, there are jabs at the literature milieu and trendy yuppies. A film where divine seriousness rubs against bizarre comedy, where theology meets caricature, an intriguing film, anachronistic and innovative in equal measure.

Birgit Kohler

“Art must overlap with life, one way or another”

Your latest film, *Le Fils de Joseph*, is based on the myth of the Sacrifice of Abraham...

Eugène Green: The kernel of the story for each of my films and novels comes from elsewhere, in a flash, and then I develop it ‘mythically’. The Greeks of the Classical period saw a myth as a story whose simple narrative continuity provided an opportunity to express one or more truths. I knew people who were in the same situation as Marie and Vincent, that is to say, a woman raising her child on her own because the father did not want to be involved for one reason or another. I think a woman who makes the decision to raise her child on her own is a courageous woman, full of life, a life she wants to perpetuate in another human being. Interrupting the life process, which begins the moment a child is conceived, is no trivial thing. In the film, Marie is aware that the life she’s leading is more difficult for her, and also for her child, who may be subject to feelings of anger or hatred toward his mother. Vincent, played by Victor Ezenfis, is indeed inhabited by such feelings. He doesn’t initially understand his mother’s bravery, nor the love she feels for him. He sees her as a mother who has deprived him of a father and is concealing that father’s existence. He sets out to find his father, but the revelation he will have is not the one he expects.

You’ve structured *Le Fils de Joseph* in separate parts that each make reference to a passage in the Bible.

Yes, the film is divided into five parts, each of which relates to a passage in the Bible: ‘The Sacrifice of Abraham’, in which the character of Vincent confronts his mother and struggles with his incomprehension regarding his absent father; ‘The Golden Calf’, which evokes the world of publishing with its power plays and penchant for idolatry; ‘The Sacrifice of Isaac’, in which Vincent tries to sacrifice his father in a reversal of the myth; ‘The Carpenter’, in which a filial relationship not based on blood is established, recalling the one between Jesus and Joseph; and finally, ‘The Flight to Egypt’, in which Joseph, Marie and Vincent leave Paris for Normandy. This association with the Bible is important to me, as is everything that constitutes my culture, and thus my life experience.

In ‘The Golden Calf’ section you use satire, a genre you have used in earlier films, to send up the literary world. What is your relationship to this particular form of expression?

Satire comes naturally when I’m evoking environments that are familiar to me and I want to draw out some of their more grotesque traits. I haven’t had any particular problems with the publishing houses I’ve worked with for my own books, but there is always humour to be found when you move in closed circles. I share some of Vincent’s anger, but I think satire is a pleasant way to evacuate anger and leave space for love.

As in your earlier film *La Sapienza*, the transmission between Joseph and Vincent in *Le Fils de Joseph* flows both ways. They enrich each other and draw each other out, to themselves and to the world around them. Also, Paris seems to reveal her better nature to Vincent.

That’s true. Vincent has an unexpected revelation. He will not find the figure that is missing from his life in his biological father but rather in his uncle, whom he didn’t know existed and

will not learn he is related to until the very end of the film. The transmission between them happens above all through words, but also through art, which enables them to deepen their relationship. I don’t see art any other way. It must be vital, that is to say, it must overlap with life, one way or another. The day at the Louvre gives Joseph and Vincent a chance to grow closer. What Vincent experiences when he walks through the Palais Royal and feels the wind blowing is of the same order as the revelation he has while looking at paintings with Joseph. Paris is revealing herself to him, like a character, in the same way Joseph and Marie reveal themselves to him and to each other.

One might think this detour through knowledge would remove the characters from their visceral connection to the world, but it actually helps them relate to things around them, inanimate or otherwise.

Yes, and it’s the same distinction that Alexandre, the architect in *La Sapienza*, makes at the end of that film between knowledge and sapience, which is the knowledge that leads to wisdom. Sapience is acquired through learning, but also through experiencing life. I think it’s important for people to see the world through art in a direct way, without interference from the intellect, and for the aesthetic experience to reveal another truth, different to the one we think we know.

Interview: Hugues Perrot, January 2016



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Eugène Greene was born in New York, USA in 1947. Since 1969, he has been living in Paris, where he studied French literature from 1970 to 1973, and art history from 1975 to 1977. Also in 1977, he founded the Théâtre de la Sapience in Paris. He completed his debut film, *Toutes les nuits*, in 2001.

Films

2001: *Toutes les nuits* (112 min.). 2003: *Le Monde vivant / The Living World* (75 min.). 2004: *Le Pont des arts / The Bridge of Arts* (126 min.). 2009: *La Religiosa portuguesa / The Portuguese Nun* (127 min.). 2014: *La Sapienza* (101 min.). 2016: *Le Fils de Joseph*.