



# the son of joseph

a film by **EUGÈNE GREEN**

# Synopsis

Vincent, an adolescent, has been raised lovingly by his mother, Marie, but she has always refused to reveal who his father is. He finally discovers that it's a certain Oscar Pormenor, an egoistic and cynical Parisian publisher. Vincent develops a violent plan of revenge, but his meeting with Joseph, a man living on the fringe of society, has a profound impact on his life, as well as that of his mother



Nationality: FRANCE/BELGIUM  
Running Time: 1H55  
Year: 2016  
Specs: COLOUR, 1.85 / SOUND 5.1

# Eugène Green

Eugène Green is a French filmmaker and writer.

## SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY:

**TOUTES LES NUITS** (2001) Louis-Delluc Prize for First Film 2001

**LE MONDE VIVANT** (2003) Cannes Film Festival - Director's Fortnight 2003/London Film Festival - FIPRESCI Prize 2003/Grand Prize Indielisboa Film Festival 2004

**LE PONT DES ARTS** (2004) Locarno Film Festival - Cinéastes du présent 2004

**A RELIGIOSA PORTUGUESA [LA RELIGIEUSE PORTUGAISE]** (2009) Locarno Film Festival - International Competition 2009 · Ourense Film Festival [Galicia] Grand Prize 2010

**LA SAPIENZA** (Italian release 2014, France 2015) Locarno Film Festival - International Competition 2014

**FAIRE LA PAROLE [HITZA EGIN]**, documentary (2015) Torino Film Festival - Onde section 2015 · Festival Cinéma du réel - Paris 2016

# Interview with Eugène Green

## By Hugues Perrot

**Your latest film, *The Son of Joseph*, is based on the myth of the Sacrifice of Abraham...**

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 *The Son of Joseph* in separate parts, something you often do in your films. Here, each part makes 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 are fond of, to send up the literary world, as you did with theatre and baroque**

**music in *Le Pont des Arts* and architecture in *La Sapienza*. 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.

**The character played by Mathieu Amalric, Pormenor, is a bigwig in the world of publishing who appears to possess some sort of dark, plenipotentiary power. At first he seems condemnable for being morally bankrupt. But we sense he’s lost something, and this gives him a human dimension that was absent, for example, in the character known as *The Unnameable* in *Le Pont des Arts*.**

There’s a Pascalian idea which holds that you can receive grace and refuse it. Perhaps Pormenor refused a grace received during childhood, or at the very least, distanced himself from it once he began his ascension in the literary world. Perhaps at the end of the film, Pormenor realizes he’s missed out on life. I tried to gently get that point across without going so far as to redeem the character in extremis. Mathieu Amalric’s subtle acting in the final sequence was a great help to me in that endeavour. I felt it was important that we glimpse a human dimension in this character, who otherwise seems quite devoid of humanity.

**As in *La Sapienza*, the transmission between Joseph and Vincent 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, who had previously viewed the city as hostile.**

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.

**There's also the scene in the church where Le Poème Harmonique performs a piece by Domenico Mazzocchi...**

Yes, it's the same thing. In that moment, Vincent has an aesthetic revelation. He doesn't understand the verses, which are sung in Latin and relate a mother's pain at the death of her son, but he receives the emotion directly through the music and the performers' energy. Something opens up within him, and before him, and he understands his mother's love for him, and her courage in confronting life. Right after this, he decides to introduce Joseph to his mother, provoking a new relationship. Out of this aesthetic experience, two relationships are formed or reformed: Marie and Joseph, Joseph and Vincent. Using the whole song in the film was important, because for Vincent, as for the audience, a musical work is meaningful only when played in its entirety, respecting its full length.

**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.

**The transmission between Joseph and Vincent seems to be possible precisely because it's happening between an adult and an adolescent. Similar twosomes are formed between the characters in *La Sapienza*.**

Deep down, I still think of myself as an adolescent, and I happen to have a lot of friends who are younger than I am. My friendships with them allow me to keep the youthful part of myself alive. I feel my younger friends give me as much as I can give them. The transmission flows both ways. In my earlier

films, the characters were all more or less the same age and moved forward together. In *La Sapienza* and *The Son of Joseph*, the relationship between the adults and the adolescents is probably closer to those I have in my own life.

**How did you choose the adult actors in the film?**

The three main adult roles are played by actors I know well, having already worked with them: Natacha Régnier in *Le Pont des Arts*, Fabrizio Rongione in *La Sapienza*, and Mathieu Amalric in *Les Signes*. I'd often seen Maria de Medeiros in films and in plays, working in both French and Portuguese, and it was a pleasure to work with her for the first time. I'd had experiences with most of the other actors, notably when I worked in theatre. It was a great joy to work with all of these actors, and the technical crew as well.

**Tell us about Victor Ezenfis, whom we're seeing here in a film for the first time.**

Victor is a very intelligent, lively and astute young man. I quickly sensed he could embody Vincent. He's got this inner life that corresponds to the character. I never do auditions where I ask actors to play scenes. I simply ask them to introduce themselves, because what's most important to me is to discern their inner life and observe how it shows through. I worked with Victor as I do with all my actors. I established a relationship of trust which allowed us to work together in perfect harmony, and I found him to be spot-on in every situation.

**This is the first time you've directed a sex scene.**

First representation of a physical coupling, yes. At the risk of shocking some people, I think censorship left room for an eroticism that we seem to have lost now. From the mid-70s onwards we've been shown everything, to the point where I often get the impression I'm in a zoology class while watching a sex scene. Nothing is hinted at; everything is presented bluntly, without imagination. So I opted to film the springs of the divan on which Pormenor and his secretary make love. It seemed like a good way to suggest this particular erotic act, which is comical and also a little bit sad, as we're witnessing it through Vincent's eyes. We need to be able to get back to the thrill associated with modesty and desire, which is nothing more than the absence of concrete expression. All the great love poets since Sappho have known this. A shot of two hands touching says more about amorous desire than the act itself filmed starkly in its entirety.

## Cast

Vincent VICTOR EZENFIS  
Marie NATACHA RÉGNIER  
Joseph FABRIZIO RONGIONE  
Oscar Pormenor MATHIEU AMALRIC  
Violette Tréfouille MARIA DE MEDEIROS  
Bernadette JULIA DE GASQUET  
Paysan JACQUES BONNAFFÉ  
Philomène CHRISTELLE PROT  
Philibert ADRIEN MICHAUX  
Comédienne LOUISE MOATY  
Chanteuse CLAIRE LEFILLI TRE  
Théorbiste VINCENT DUMESTRE

## Crew

Director & Screenplay EUGÈNE GREEN  
Cinematography RAPHAËL O'BYRNE  
1st Director's assistant VICTOIRE GOUNOD  
Sound BENOÎT DE CLERCK  
Set design PAUL ROUSCHOP  
Costumes AGNÈS NODEN  
Unit Manager SARAH MOREL  
Music ADAM MICHNA Z OTRADOVIC, EMILIO DE CAVALIERI,  
DOMENICO MAZZOCCHI Editing VALÉRIE LOISELEUX  
Grading STÉPHANE MEDEZ  
Mixing STÉPHANE THIEBAUT  
Make up WALLY DIAWARA  
Casting Director ALEXANDRE NAZARIAN  
Special effects THIBAUT GRANIER  
Scripte CATHERINE GROSSEN  
Line Producer FRANCINE & DIDIER JACOB  
Executive producer Belgium DELPHINE TOMSON  
Production Manager SYLVAIN MARQUET  
Production COFFEE AND FILMS (FRANCINE & DIDIER JACOB)  
Coproduction LES FILMS DU FLEUVE (JEAN-PIERRE & LUC  
DARDENNE), TSF, FILM FACTORY, EN HAUT DES MARCHES

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**MUBI** 