

## The Son/Le fils (2002)

### Major Credits

Produced, written and directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Cinematography: Alain Marcœn

Cast: Olivier Gourmet (Olivier), Morgan Marinnie (Francis), Isabella Soupart (Magali)

### Background

The Dardenne brothers began as documentary filmmakers recording the decay of working class culture in their home city of Seraing, Belgium (pop. 60,000), something like Michael Moore (Luc's exact contemporary)—only without interjecting their own personalities on screen. Unlike the Coen brothers, they share credit for writing and directing each of their films and do not shy away from the intellectual or political implications of their projects. Like the early Italian neorealists, they have self-consciously combined a gritty, *verité* cinematic style with a committed leftist agenda.

*The Son*, their fourth feature fiction, comes between *Rosetta* (1999) and *The Child/L'enfant*, (2005) both of which won the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes—an extremely rare feat. This film, too, received very favorable reviews. With its limited dialogue, long sequence shots, and spare plot, it may initially take some viewers out of their comfort zone, but as the tension builds, the characters are revealed in their complex humanity, the significance of their lives affirmed.

### Cinematic Aspects

1. Documentary Style: The film is shot entirely with lightweight 16mm cameras, allowing for mobility and a grainy image that conveys an unscripted feel to the plot as well as the authenticity of a home movie. Notice how often Olivier's back is to the camera, which follows him from close behind, looking over his burly shoulder.
2. Long Takes (sequence shots): Note how the camera re-focuses on characters within a shot rather than cutting. The film's climax involves a long sequence shot in the woods, anticipating a similar scene at the end of *Lorna's Silence* (2008).
3. Mise-en-scène: The camera frequently follows characters, especially Olivier, around corridors and walls and up stairs, thereby suggesting an ethical labyrinth he must navigate. Domestic spaces—Olivier's and Francis' homes—are notable for their barrenness, an emptiness that suggests their similarities as solitary men needing to rebuild their lives.
4. Ending: All of the Dardennes' features end abruptly, underscoring the uncertainty of the characters' futures and the openness of the narrative.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Several critics have noticed how the Dardennes' films usually center on dysfunctional families and, in particular, the motif of the lost, murdered, or abandoned child. *The Son* more specifically alludes to the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. How do the brothers re-interpret this myth for a modern world?
2. Another way of considering the film's central ethical dilemma is to view *The Son* against the immediate background of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Is it plausible to contrast the brothers' take on the imperative for revenge with mainstream American cinema at the time (*Collateral Damage* and *Munich* come to mind)?
3. What are the values that the film foregrounds as an alternative to violence and revenge?
4. What kind of a man is Olivier? How does he cope with the trauma he has endured before the film begins? Does his relationship with Francis seem psychologically plausible?