

# Clement Virgo's *Brother*, from Canada: “That bigger story of life and vitality”

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9 January 2024

The Canadian independent film *Brother*, directed by Clement Virgo, is an affecting coming of age story centred on the relationship between two siblings growing up in an impoverished immigrant neighbourhood in Ontario during the 1990s.

The screenplay is based on a 2017 novel of the same title by Canadian author David Chariandy, who determined to write novels set in Scarborough (the eastern district of Toronto in which he grew up) “that admit challenges, but tell that bigger story of life and vitality that you don’t always see in [the negative] headlines.” The film adaptation lives up to this wholly legitimate aim.

Virgo’s *Brother*, currently streaming on Netflix, opens with a striking image of pastoral serenity—a green rolling landscape—intruded upon only by the eerie humming noise pulsing from what is revealed to be a high-voltage security fence. Inside the perimeter, two teenage brothers stare up at the imposing scaffolding of a sinister electric transformer. Francis (Aaron Pierre), the bold and daring athlete, directs his anxious younger sibling Michael (Lamar Johnson) with subtle amusement: “Let’s climb.”

This opening metaphor—its duotone of pressing anxiety relieved by moments of spontaneous warmth and creative whimsy—sums up the brothers’ shared vulnerability and fierce loyalty in a challenging world. “But when you climb,” Francis cautions Michael sternly, “You watch me, follow my every move.” We soon come to understand the tragic irony of this advice and also the full significance of this scene, referred to throughout the work.

A decade later, in the present (the early 1990s), the self-effacing Michael—now a young adult in his mid-20s—meets up with his old girlfriend Aisha (Kiana Madeira), to whom he offers a place to sleep while

she’s in town. Aisha is back in Scarborough due to her own unfortunate circumstances. At home (in an apartment complex where they both grew up), Michael explains to her that his mother Ruth (Marsha Stephanie Blake) is only quiet sometimes, “especially at night.” An air of congealed pain hangs over the apartment.

The narrative travels back and forth through the brothers’ lives effectively. One night in their childhood when Ruth, a nurse, leaves them home alone (“I have to go, they pay me time and half”), the brothers inadvertently catch security footage of a violent robbery on television, an experience which proves formative for Francis. He later confides to his mother, while the three of them are curled up in bed, “We’re not safe.”

During more idyllic high school years, the charming and popular Francis spends much of his free time absorbed in music. Meanwhile, Michael awkwardly strikes up a romance with the book-smart Aisha. One night, the brothers are caught in the crossfire between rival gangs. Someone is shot and a sleeping child injured when an errant bullet pierces her bedroom wall. After narrowly escaping, Michael and Francis are hunted down by police (“Put your hands on your f—ing heads!”), a case of guilt by association, and brought home to their startled mother.

On multiple occasions, the area’s malicious cops subject Francis and Michael to illegal pat-downs. Throughout the film, the threat of police and/or gang violence looms large, and there is the sense that on any given day hostile encounters could end in disaster.

The daily harassment, humiliations and emotional strains have a corrosive effect on Francis, and he becomes increasingly withdrawn and elusive. He spends most of his time at a barber shop spinning records with his close friend Jelly (Lovell Adams-

Gray). Tensions between Francis and Ruth reach a breaking point when he quits high school just three months before graduation and moves out. A tragic sequence of events follows.

Some of the most compelling scenes occur during the brothers' high school years. The performances by promising young actors Pierre and Johnson are especially persuasive. Both actors shine in their depth and subtlety (currently in short supply in the film industry).

In one of *Brother's* most agonising sequences, Francis and Jelly have just performed their routine in a DJ battle before a group of self-important producers who promptly shoo them away ("So you'll let us know if we win?" "Yeah kid, we'll definitely call you").

Outside, Francis gets into a skirmish with an obstinate bouncer and is brutally assaulted. Michael drags him back to the barber shop where friends tend to his injuries. Francis, delirious and devastated, scans the concerned faces in the room, his face bloody and swollen:

Francis: "Look at you ... *all* of you. F—ing losers ... f—ing nobodies." [His face drops.] "Just dreaming. Are we just dreaming? There's no way forward, no way out, man. Just ... dreaming."

The supporting cast are also committed to their roles. In one striking scene, adult Michael has pasted up tinfoil on the living room window to block out the sunlight (and perhaps his own grief). Ruth arrives home in her uniform and stands there, stooped over:

Ruth: "Is that what I look like to you? The kind of woman that advertise tinfoil to everybody passing on the street?"

Michael: "Well it's not a bad idea, I mean, other people do it."

Ruth: "Oh! And I'm other people! Yeah? You sit over there and look at your own mother and think, 'There she is, my mother, *other people*'!"

In adapting Chariandy's novel, director/filmmaker Virgo (*Lie with Me, Poor Boy's Game*), who was born in Jamaica and grew up in Toronto, drew heavily on his own experiences. In an interview, Virgo explained he was "profoundly moved" by Chariandy's novel. "It spoke to me on a visceral level," he went on. "This world I knew, this family felt like my own and it felt like David had written a novel just for me." Indeed, Virgo's intimate knowledge of the film's universe has

helped produce some of its exceptional qualities—a combination of penetrating directness with delicate restraint that drills deep into the emotions.

The artistic success of Virgo's approach is rooted foremost in a profoundly sympathetic attitude to the plight of the Canadian immigrant community. Throughout the film, we understand that these are loving and intelligent people caught up in arbitrary circumstances rooted in the terrible injustices of class oppression. But perhaps the most farsighted aspect of *Brother* is the careful ambiguity threaded into the chain of events leading up to tragedy, which not only serves to amplify the painful outcome, but also provides some essential ingredients for its future resolution.

*Brother* is a humane story, truly "that bigger story of life and vitality that you don't always see in headlines." Its most recent accolade, the award for Best Adapted Screenplay at the 2023 Toronto Film Festival, is well deserved. It should reach a wider audience.



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