

Jacques Audiard's *Un prophète*: An extreme case of making a virtue out of necessity

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Jacques Audiard, screenplay by Audiard and Thomas Bidegain

French director Jacques Audiard's prison film, *Un prophète* (*A Prophet*), has received numerous accolades and awards.

It was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Foreign Language picture, won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival, the BAFTA for Best Film Not in the English Language and was nominated for 13 César awards [French Oscars]—tying it with only three other films in history—of which it won nine, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor.

The critics have also fallen over themselves internationally to sing the praises of *Un prophète*. Is the movie worthy of all this acclaim?

Audiard, the son of veteran screenwriter Michel Audiard, began his career as an assistant editor to filmmaker Roman Polanski. He has obvious gifts. Moreover, he claims an interest in real life, stating that “Cinema for me only has meaning when it has a relationship with what I see outside on the street.”

Nonetheless, the fact that his film has evoked such overwhelmingly positive reaction is curious. *Un prophète* has the veneer of reality, but does it genuinely probe French life? Is it truthful in a deeper sense?

In Audiard's work, 19-year-old Malik (Tahar Rahim) enters prison to serve a six-year sentence for assaulting a police officer. The institution's ethnic dividing line runs between the Corsicans and the “Arabs” (i.e., those of North African descent), with the former holding the upper hand.

In Malik, Corsican crime boss César (Niels Arestrup) sees something of a blank slate, a potential minion and intermediary between rival gangs. In what amounts to an initiation rite, César forces Malik—under threat of death—to murder an Arab prisoner named Reyeb (Hichem Yacoubi), slated to testify against the Corsica mafia. Following this act, accomplished with great cruelty, Malik comes under César's protection and functions as part-son/part-slave to the overlord.

A fellow Arab inmate, Ryad (Adel Bencherif), convinces Malik to avail himself of prison services and learn to read. The latter also becomes proficient in the Corsican language, enhancing his usefulness to César, who utilizes his influence to obtain day passes for his underling. Acting as César's emissary

in Paris and Marseilles, Malik benefits from the opportunity and establishes his own rogue, criminal enterprise. Ryad, now released from prison and suffering from a relapse of cancer, partners with Malik, allowing him to dump his low-paying telemarketing job and better support his girlfriend and newborn son.

Malik's days as a cipher end when he turns the tables on the Corsican kingpin, organizing the warring factions. A ready-made family is thrown into the bargain.

As Audiard is at pains to make clear in interviews, although *Un prophète* is a prison film, it is not meant as an exposé of France's brutal penal system. And, although its central character is a homeless, illiterate teen from a North African background, incarcerated for a relatively trivial offense, it is not a movie about the repression of minority populations or the conditions of the most socially deprived.

Indeed, Audiard is not at all pleased to be told his film criticizes France's corrections facilities. “To demonstrate or to protest against the system would have been to move closer to documentary,” states the filmmaker. Clearly, not an attractive prospect. In passing, it should be noted that Audiard's claim is revealing. It implies that fiction can never be true to life, or register a “protest against the system.”

Audiard repeatedly points out that he is non-political, non-judgmental. The worst accusation one could make against such a filmmaker is that he is a “social critic,” much less a “social realist.” In certain French cinema circles it is virtually illegal to present to pursue such aims. And this is the country that gave us Jean Vigo and Jean Renoir, extraordinary realists, “poetic” or otherwise, among many others.

The rejection in art of realism about life, however, has a logic. Inevitably, it means creating something “unreal.” *Un prophète* ends up apologizing for, even glorifying the prison experience, or at least Malik's approach to it, as one of the few means through which the most enterprising of the marginalized can achieve upward mobility in society.

What pleases the critics is that Audiard argues his unlikely case employing a good many stylistic flourishes, such as freeze frames, and a liberal dose of sensuality. (Audiard: “Le cinéma est une machine libidinale!”—Cinema is a libidinal machine.) Violence is present, but with poetic touches. In general, the film

has enough grittiness and notable performances to create the appearance of reality—but one that cannot be scrutinized too closely.

The critics and bestowers of awards are too easily swayed. The character of Malik, and the drama as a whole, doesn't hold water.

In one way or another, we are meant to be impressed by the film's protagonist. In the course of his ascendancy in the crime world, Malik's interior life is revealed through intermittent encounters with the ghost of his first victim, Reyeb. Through these quasi-surrealistic sequences, along with other devices, Audiard hopes to convince his audience that he has created a new kind of criminal, an opposite to amoral film gangsters like Tony Montana in Brian De Palma's hysterical and violent *Scarface*, a character the filmmaker especially dislikes.

"[Malik] is a person who fundamentally doesn't like gangsters. He doesn't like violence. He's not greedy. He's someone who shows supremacy of intelligence over violence," says the director of *Un prophète*.

It is understandable why Audiard is determined to reject the charge of "realism." His character, a cutthroat "who shows the supremacy of intelligence over violence," who can unite the various ethnic factions, who has a sensitive and loving side, is something of a fantasy.

Why should we be convinced that carrying out cold-blooded murder doesn't change a person? Why should we remain sympathetic to such a figure? The appearance of the ghost, the attempt to provide Malik with a conscience, is a poor substitute for psychological plausibility. Many poor youth go to prison in France, only a very small number prove capable of carrying out murders, much less become criminal kingpins. Audiard can adopt any artistic approach or genre he likes, but the decisive question remains: is the work truthful? Does it correspond to reality?

In a circular fashion, Audiard has invented a myth to prove an argument of his own making: that Malik's evolution, in an allegorical sense perhaps, represents a way out for the oppressed minority population.

The fact that Malik is a gangster, both violent *and* greedy, doesn't intrude on Audiard's myth-making. When asked about the film's title, he asserts that "it suggests a carrier of something divine in religious terms, and also a person who paves the way for something new in terms of the criminal world."

What is this contention based on? Has Audiard observed or investigated this "new" type of criminal? And if there were such a prototype, what would it signify?

Is Audiard hinting—as he appears to be—that the population of the Parisian *banlieues* (impoverished districts inhabited by many families from immigrant backgrounds) can overcome its conditions by emulating Malik, someone whom prison life (according to the director) has given a "very critical viewpoint," and who is intolerant of "bling or outward signs of

hooliganism"?

Perhaps the youth who have rioted should use their "intelligence" instead, stop fighting with police, play their cards right, and something more promising might open up for them. For a youth who has been cast adrift by society, Malik is an example, says Audiard, of "a rise to power, a rise to visibility."

Really, there is an absurd element to this, and such ideas could only find favor in a warped political and cultural climate.

There is no reason to ascribe to Audiard the worst motives. He seems genuinely concerned about the fate of the immigrant and minority population. The filmmaker appears to believe, and the adulation he has received indicates his belief is shared by a good many others, that he has created an iconic Arab personality in Malik, perhaps in a paradoxical manner, a "role model," or, one should of course say, an "anti-role model."

But it doesn't come from real life. It is part wishful thinking, part bad ideology, part fantasy. In its own upside-down way, this invented solution reflects difficult social and political conditions.

What we seem to have here is an artist who is confused and, in fact, overwhelmed by the plight of working class youth.

In response—finding no impulse for change in the actual conditions of life and not recognizing in the explosive character of the youth the raw material for social upheaval—the filmmaker, on the one hand, invents a strong man, a semi-superhero, even if an unusual kind.

On the other, Audiard adopts the cool, "hipster" pose, which certainly finds favor with the critics. Beneath, and not too far beneath, the "ultra-hip" façade may lie a considerable amount of pessimism and even a feeling of hopelessness. Audiard has directed a film that can only be described as an extreme case of making a virtue out of necessity.



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