

Young Ahmed: A portrait of a youthful religious zealot—from the Dardenne brothers

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Written and directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Young Ahmed is the latest work by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne (born in 1951 and 1954, respectively), the Belgian brothers who have been writing and directing socially oriented fiction films for the past quarter century or so, including *The Promise* (1996), *Rosetta* (1999), *The Son* (2002), *The Child* (*L'Enfant*—2005), *Lorna's Silence* (2008), *The Kid with a Bike* (2011), *Two Days, One Night* (2014) and *The Unknown Girl* (2016).

At the center of their most recent work—originally released in 2019 and now available for streaming—is a teenage Belgian Muslim boy, Ahmed (Idir Ben Addi), who has been converted to an extreme interpretation of Islam by a local imam (Othmane Moumen). On his own, Ahmed determines to kill his teacher whom he and the cleric have determined is an “apostate” and a “blasphemer.” The film focuses primarily on the concerted efforts of Belgian authorities to “de-radicalize” Ahmed.

The Dardenne brothers often dramatize situations and problems they locate, as in the case of *Young Ahmed*, in their native region of southern, French-speaking Belgium, one of the oldest and most decayed industrial areas in the world. They frequently create moral tales, in which relatively deprived individuals face difficult choices, forks in the road, so to speak, in their daily lives.

For example, as we noted in a 2002 comment, in *The Promise*, “a teenage boy makes a commitment ... to a dying immigrant worker, killed in the employ of the boy’s father, an exploiter of such labor.” In *Rosetta*, a young woman, “living in a trailer park with her alcoholic mother, is determined, at apparently any cost, including betraying others in her own situation, to find work.” A carpentry teacher in a special school for recently released offenders, in *The Son*, “discovers that one of his charges was responsible for his son’s tragic death five years before.” In *The Child*, one of their best-known works, a

small-time criminal sells his girl-friend’s newborn, before suffering pangs of conscience.

We have written at some length about the Dardennes’ efforts, about which film commentators have made sizeable claims, and urged a more critical attitude.

Clearly influenced by the deadly terror attacks in Paris in November 2015, allegedly organized in Belgium, and in Brussels in March 2016, *Young Ahmed* aspires to “shed light” on the phenomenon of religious zeal. However, both the form and content of the film preclude much light from shining through. It is not clear there is much in the Dardennes’ film that cannot be found in shallow and selective (or worse) daily media coverage.

Ahmed has already convinced himself about certain things by the time the film opens. We soon see him refuse to shake hands with his teacher, Inès (Myriem Akheddiou), because she is a woman. She earns his wrath by proposing to teach (modern) Arabic by means of song, rather than through the words of the Quran. What’s more, she has a Jewish boyfriend. At home, Ahmed sharply rebukes his white mother (Claire Bodson) for drinking alcohol and his sister Yasmine (Cyra Lassman) for dressing like a “slut.” His mother suggests desperately the imam is “brainwashing” him, but to no avail.

The 13-year-old constantly prays or washes and purifies himself. The fate of his cousin, presumably a jihadist-martyr, inspires him. Ahmed clumsily attempts to attack Inès with a knife and gets sent to a youth correctional institute of some sort. There, the social workers attempt to change his behavior through therapies of different kinds.

As part of the rehabilitation process, Ahmed visits and works on a farm, where he meets a girl of his own age, Louise (Victoria Bluck). She becomes a little interested in him and they kiss. Ahmed now feels impure. He prays, “I have erred. I promise I won’t do it again.” He asks Louise to convert to Islam, which she rejects. When she tells him “heaven doesn’t exist,” he pushes her away as an

“infidel.”

Meanwhile, he has still not given up his designs on his teacher’s life.

In their directors’ statement, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne write that when they had finished writing the screenplay, “we realized that, in a way, we had written the story of the fruitless attempts made by various characters to dissuade the young fanatic Ahmed, our main character, from carrying out his murderous plan.” In the same vein, the brothers comment that when they began writing, “we never imagined that we were creating such an inscrutable character, capable of eluding us to such an extent, of leaving us without any possibility of a dramatic construction to catch up with him and bring him out of his murderous madness.”

If the *creators* of the narrative could “never” have “imagined” these things, who might have? These oddly and unappealingly (but typically) passive observations point to some of *Young Ahmed*’s serious flaws, and the larger failings of the Dardennes’ brand of filmmaking. The brothers concentrate very heavily on the immediate facts of every situation, consciously setting broader, contextual analyses to the side.

When we interviewed the Dardenne brothers at the Toronto film festival in 2008, in regard to *Lorna’s Silence*, we asked them how they saw their feature filmmaking in relation to their history as leftist militants, in the 1960s. Luc Dardenne commented that their history no doubt contributed to their interest in how “society operates ... by excluding people, how it operates by marginalizing people.” But, he went on, “when we deal with a character, we try not to give him extenuating circumstances.”

To explain, however, is not to excuse. As we noted in 2008, in response to the brothers’ comments, no one would argue that economic hardship absolves anyone of “anti-social behavior. ... Human beings are responsible for what they do in the narrow sense,” but if conditions, for example, of emigration, exploitation or poverty (and the social order as a whole) are not, in the larger scheme of things, responsible for human actions, “then what connection exists between the macro- and microcosmic spheres? Why portray the social conditions at all, if they are not an active element?”

Much of modern literature and drama has concerned itself precisely with setting out the “extenuating circumstances,” the social conditions and climate, above all, that help account for extreme, irrational or even homicidal violence. The drama in *An American Tragedy*

without the mitigating, qualifying factors would be little more than a lurid item for the tabloids. One might say the same about the narratives in *Crime and Punishment* or *Madame Bovary*.

How is it possible to speak seriously about the adherence to Islamic fundamentalism, at the societal or individual level, without any reference *whatsoever*—none, zero!—to historical and social facts? The rise of such a trend is incomprehensible, in the first place, apart from an examination of US policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the CIA’s financing and incitement of jihadists, the history of imperialist attacks on the Arab world—including three decades now of military interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia—and the Western powers’ limitless support for Israeli oppression. In addition, there is the reality of anti-Muslim chauvinism and repression incited by far-right groups in Europe and encouraged by every government on the continent. One could add a few choice words about the especially brutal, bloody history of Belgian colonialism.

Instead, the Dardennes offer us a dull, repetitive story about a boy who has turned inexplicably fanatical. They write, in their statement, about his “hard, mysterious core” and how his “determination” has “surprised” everyone, including the imam.

In so far as the Dardennes uncritically follow their instincts and impressions, wherever the latter take them, they tend, in fact, to accept the immediately given facts as presented by the media and other official institutions. These are not untainted or “neutral” facts, they are conditioned by and grounded in the existing set-up.

Without meaning to, the filmmakers, mired in immediacy and discouraged by the general course of events, end up largely blaming their characters for their own conditions. Again, what is there in *Young Ahmed* that might not appear in the Belgian or European media generally, even to the extent of picturing this “young fanatic” at odds with a thoroughly benevolent and caring juvenile legal system? According to this highly conservative work, all’s well in Belgium apparently, except for the presence of a few dangerous zealots.



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