Mario Pezzella and Katia Rossi
On
Jacques Audiard’s A Prophet

1. Imprisoned for a minor crime, young Malik finds himself before a drastic ethical choice: either kill Reyeb, another Arab, on the orders of the leader of the Corsican underworld César, or be killed. In the claustrophobic and tragic immanence of the prison, there is neither open horizon nor space for compromises or mediations – Malik’s attempt to accuse the Corsicans has failed because the guards are in collusion with César and obey his commands. Malik decides to kill and survive. His choice is “brechtian” in some sense, as the music from A Three Penny Opera reminds, which accompanies the closing sequence of the film: in a completely criminal world, one needs to accept the rules, until better times.

Nevertheless, the murder committed by Malik is just the beginning of a long and articulated process of personal submission. Just like the Hegelian servant in The Phenomenology of Spirit, Malik is afraid of dying and therefore must accept reification and radical enslavement by César. On the other hand, it is this fear that breaks down every rigidity, narcissism, and morale in him. This uprooting creates extreme weakness but also a potential for future strength, because Malik begins to act again with desperate adaptability, deftly moving among various conflicting groups while growing progressively detached from every tie to loyalty. The film recounts the way in which the “servant” Malik, once reduced to being less than an object, is able to invert and overturn his relationship with his master, humilitating and then replacing him.

The prison situation should not be taken as a realistic representation. The Prophet is not a film inquiry into the exposure of the conditions in French prisons, but rather follows along the lines of prison film genre with a long storyline, especially for American cinema standards, that often culminates with an escape attempt or redemption. The prison has a symbolic role as the status of nature that is immanent and without any possible transcendence, in which every right is suspended and where talion law and immediate violence is in force. The contrasting skills of strength and cunning dominate in the all out struggle to the death: Homo homini lupus, in a context that leaves no room for mercy or compassion.

The humiliation and also physical enslavement of Malik are emphasized by the bodily searches that mark his presence in the prison, by the aggressions with which
his every will to resist is taken from him, and by the blade that he learns to carry in his mouth in order to assault and surprise his victim, transforming him into a sort of rabid beast. He is a pure instrument like the switchblade in the hands of César. Before and after the killing, some frames show Malik stripped down to “nude life” (nuda vita) and trembling, without the right to possess an imagination, a symbolic world, his own will. This is the zero degree of reification. “When César speaks to him, he must not look at his face. He must only listen, having no right to receive a reciprocal gaze.”

Malik’s first reaction to his radical divestment is purely phantasmal and receives a delirious and imaginary compensation; the murdered Arab (Reyeb) becomes Malik’s spirit-guide and comes to him in hallucinations as a reminder of and as an integration to his subjugation. The ghost has a clearly visible cut on his throat that was inflicted by Malik from which cigarette smoke escapes in one scene. Reyeb becomes a benevolent demon that shows Malik the way, though it takes Malik a while to understand this. On the advice of the slain Arab, almost as an attempt to bring back a fragment of Malik’s soul to life, he takes classes offered at the prison and learns to read and write. This is the first sign of redemption from the condition of slave and object; Malik learns a language, acquires a symbolic knowledge that progressively increases his strength, giving him a latent superiority over his oppressors. In Hegelian language, he already has a strength being in itself that will soon become being for itself, passing from internalization to realization.

Malik also learns the Corsican language, and while serving his masters at the dining table, he can understand their jargon and their private conversations, similar to the famous episode in Rousseau’s Confessions. They, on the other hand, cannot understand when he speaks Arabic to the Corsican’s rivals inside the prison.

2. J. Rancière affirmed that when the outcasts dominate the masters’ language and symbolically become aware of their own condition, they are already on the road to overturning the relationships of power and to reclaiming their own identity. On the other hand, César himself, in giving even more personal and complex orders, elevates Malik to his same level of equality and irreplaceableness. Moreover, the ghost of Reyeb finds a human and real alter ego in Ryad, an Arab who becomes Malik’s friend and who helps him to find himself and his own cultural identity.

Malik’s situation recalls the relationship between the colonized and the colonist described by Frantz Fanon. In many genre films in recent years, especially in film noir, racial strife is the driving force behind the conflicts and power struggles that are inserted into old narration techniques. The Arab Malik, up against the Corsican César, his oppressor, is not only deprived of his personal identity, but also his cultural identity. The homicide of Reyeb at the beginning is also a metaphor of destruction of his cultural belonging. The role reversal of power between Malik and César coincides with that which comes about between the Arabs and Corsicans inside the prison.

A caesura point in the film is the sequence where César, whose power is already fading, tries to desperately reaffirm his power one last time by reminding Malik about

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2 Referring only to the films of J. Grey and F. Munzi.
Jacques Audiard’s *A Prophet* 163

the annihilation he had undergone: “When they see you, they see me,” he reminds Malik angrily, becoming aware of his first attempts to acquire his own autonomous action as a young boy. It seems as though Malik must be subjected to a reinforced subjugation again. However, it is during this moment of extreme subjection that he has an internal definitive break from César and has a full illumination of his condition.

Malik is subjected for the last time to César’s physical violence when César tries to blind him with a spoon. We see him on his back on his cell bed, utterly destroyed by humiliation. A furious César reminds him that everything he has bears his name and domain; Malik is nothing more than a sign and instrument of his power. Even his thoughts and dreams belong to him. That’s what César thinks. Indeed, a dream will determine Malik’s decisive internal break from the authority of his so-called “father and master.”

From a completely black frame, the camera moves along in a very fast cart through the hallways and iron bars of the prison until suddenly reaching a road and open landscape. There are animals (maybe deer) scampering about, and then we get a glimpse of body part fragments, parts of the mouth and face, almost giving the impression that Malik is going through a regression, breaking him down on this side of the Ego level to a state in which his very body risks disintegrating into senseless parts. Malik reemerges from this dream to the apparition of Reyeb, who has flames coming up from behind his shoulders – this is his double, his demon, a possible identity that still does not belong to him. He appears to Malik in a hallucination and delirium, but will indicate the way to survival and salvation.

Later on in the film, the premonitory dream will become reality. In fact, Malik will find himself on a road, and the car in which he is riding will hit an animal. His foreseeing the accident will earn him the name “prophet.” The Arab with whom he deals with on behalf of César becomes instead the initial supporter of his redemption and return to his own personal and cultural identity (he was a friend of Reyeb; once he confessed the murder, Malik overcomes the initial trauma that marked the beginning of his slavery and receives a sort of symbolic absolution).

The dream anticipates the resolution of the conflict and the real way out of the intolerable situation. While Malik continues his rebellion, the spirit-guide Reyeb becomes invisible and returns to the land of the ghosts. The estranged identity that Malik projected now belongs to Malik himself. The imaginary ghost ceases to carry out his function and is reabsorbed into the soul. The real rebellion allows for the reappropriation of the dream and the dreamlike image of the identity.

3. César is not only the evil and tyrannical master. He is also, occasionally, the father and keeper of the law, and, in a certain sense, Malik becomes his favorite son, one in being with him. This emotional dependency doubles the immediate relationships of power, but the last and most radical act of violence brings Malik to the conclusion that he must kill his symbolic father and take his place. As Fanon said, inevitably, the first desire of the colonized is none other than to discern the identity of the master, and a desire to make it his own. There is no room, at least initially, for an alternative identity. The mimetic logic of resentment creates the desire to become like the other as the only valid and conceivable possibility. In a certain sense, on the other side of the imaginary desire, the colonized dreams of becoming the colonist and the symbolic dependency
can survive the destruction of the real one. In this sense, Malik cannot even conceive a world in which the slave-master relationship does not exist or is overthrown. At most the servant can take over the identity of the master and substitute him in his role.

In the final sequence of the film, Malik leaves the prison and is welcomed by Ryad’s wife and daughter, whom Ryad bequeathed to Malik upon his death. He is followed by an entourage of cars, where the Arabs who accept him as a leader by now, show their sign of respect. This ending is not to happen without a tragic ambiguity. The relationship of oppression of which Malik was a victim does not disappear; even if the roles have been changed, the substance has not been completely altered. In the extreme survival situation described in the film, Malik, in turn, becomes a master and we can assume that he will not behave much differently than César, from whom he learned the art of power. The ambiguity of this liberation is that which happens in every rebellion, in which the means of control and the way to maintain it remain unchanged, or in which, to recall one of Fanon’s themes, the colonized begins to behave as his European master did before.

In a previous scene, it is César who undergoes physical aggression in the courtyard of the prison by order of Malik. César, who is alone by now, sees Malik take his place as leader in the group of Arabs and motions for him to come closer, a physiognomic gesture more expressive of pity than command. Since Malik does not move, for the first time César is the one to get up and walk over, revealing his weakness and inversion of the roles of power as seen in the space, stride and the direction of his movement. Malik orders two of his men to hit him and keep him from getting closer – the same physical aggression that was exercised upon him when Malik entered the prison, but now he inflicts this on another as he himself had experienced. We see César humiliated, laid out on the ground. Then he gets up again and moves away towards his bench of defeat. Malik’s face in a close-up does not express joy, but suffering that he must hold back. The Himself-turned-master must not allow himself to feel compassion or pardon; he must first maintain and control his emotions and then dissimulate them.

The overturning of the identity is complete, but the logic of the affirmation of power remains the same – only his temporary incarnation has changed: “In this [Malik] is certainly a worthy student of César. Forced by him to be nothing, he learns how to reduce another human being to nothing. On the other hand, as long as César is in power, Malik could never be like him. Even better, he cannot even be him. Therefore, it is he who must annihilate.” The film recounts only a partial redemption. In his universe there is no room for openness and liberation, other than the mimetic logic of violence. This is probably a metaphor of the ethnic and social fracture that threatens – according to Audiard – modern France and that does not find redemption in any form of class solidarity or universal ethics. The “outcasts” risk being forced into inevitable revolt. It is imperative that they find the language of their own rights in order to escape from the mimetic logic of enslavement.

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3 Escobar, “Università criminale.”
“A Prophet”. A Bildungsroman in Film
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“I need the stranger in order to change, through a process of exchange, while still remaining myself.”
(Édouard Glissant). 4

“Our obsession with defense, with walls, is the prison of identity; the Great Wall of China was built not only to prevent invaders from getting in, but also to prevent the Chinese from getting out, as we can see from the wonderful story of the Chinese general who surveys the frontier and detects an opening between two high and very distant mountains. He tells his officials: ‘That is where the world is and we shall not be going over there.’ To shut ourselves off is as terrible as it is to be conquered by the Other, or to conquer the Other.”
(Édouard Glissant). 5

Jacques Audiard is one of the most outstanding of contemporary French directors. He has learnt how to unite the contributions of the classic continental genres of crime drama and film noir with consummate skill, and thus succeeded in combining difficult and often extreme stories with a penetrating insight into human complexity that has always been the hallmark of his work. For Audiard, there are no individuals who are simply good or bad in any absolute sense: every one of the figures in his films harbors some positive aspect or other. The son of scriptwriter and director Michel Audiard (one of the fathers of the tradition of French cinema that was challenged by the Nouvelle Vague), Jacques Audiard likes to present stories of extraordinary visual detail and narrative completeness, and eschews stereotypes for the pursuit of archetypes. If we tried to identify a single thread running through his films, we would probably find it in the ability of his protagonists, male or female, to exploit some disadvantage – whether it be physical, or psychological, or one dictated by social conditions – and turn it into some means of escape. We may think of Albert in Un héros très discret (1996) [A Self-Made Hero], of Carla in Sur mes lèvres (2001) [Read My Lips], of Thomas in De battre mon cœur s’est arrêté (2005) [The Beat that My Heart Skipped], or finally of Malik in Un prophète (2009) [A Prophet], the film which I wish to discuss in detail here.

A Prophet, Audiard’s most recent film, recounts the story of Malik El Djebena (played by the excellent Tahar Rahim), a young beur who has been sentenced to six years incarceration. The tale concerns the “education” of a criminal, and investigates in careful detail the psychological, anthropological, cultural, ethnic, and class-based mechanisms that define the path of the individual within and against the collective. It is the extreme isolation of Malik, at the beginning a mere nineteen year old without qualities, that

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5 “Bisogna amare l’uomo, accettando di non capirlo fino in fondo;” a discussion between Édouard Glissant and Claudio Magris, in Corriere della Sera, October 1, 2009.
6 “Beur” is a slang term for young men of North African origin who were born and raised in France.
generates a silent and evolving strategy of adaptation and transformation. In order to capture this extraordinary process of transformation in cinematographic terms, Audiard combines the film noir techniques of Jean-Pierre Melville with the taste for digression characteristic of Betrand Tavernier, while also drawing on the banlieue setting of films such as Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* of 1995 and distantly recalling another recent and highly acclaimed French film, Laurent Cantet’s *Entre les murs* of 2008 (released under the English title of *The Class*: here the walls in question are those of a school).

Right from the opening credits Audiard invests the filming with a remarkable stylistic precision: the images are very difficult to make out, barely visible on a dark screen that reveals only intermittent patches of light. In the initial scenes the viewer is restricted to an extremely limited view of the persons and events involved, just like the recently arrested Malik himself, as he discovers that he must serve his sentence in “La Centrale” now he is no longer a juvenile. We are thus thrown directly into the emotional turmoil of the protagonist, who sees normality unraveling from behind the bars of the van that transports him to prison, catapulted into an alien and very strange environment that turns him into a lost, bewildered and defenseless stranger. Yet this place is also a symbol of our contemporary condition, where different languages, cultures, and identities come into contact and conflict with one another, are confused and confounded with one another: a world where the intermingling of cultures ends up generating something unforeseen, a world within which we must move with a constant awareness of imminent uncertainty (though is true that Malik seems to have nothing to lose but his life – he is an almost illiterate young man, alone in the world, having been raised in an orphanage, with shoes judged unfit even for prison, and only 50 francs to his name).

But his moment arrives suddenly and unexpectedly. He has been noticed in the showers by Reyeb (Hichem Yacoubi), an Arab who is temporarily in the same prison since he is due to testify in court against the Corsican mafia (which is represented by a significant and powerful gang in the prison). Reyeb offers Malik a joint, but of course he has no money. That is no problem, for he can pay in kind. Malik rejects his advances. But the scene has already been observed by the Corsican contingent, who lead Malik out into the prison yard to meet their boss César Luciani (played with crumbled but striking intensity by Niels Arestrup). He suggests that Mailk become Reyeb’s friend and try and gain his trust, though only for the purpose of eliminating him. Once the poor and unsuspecting youth has grasped the point of the plan he finds he has no choice: it is kill or be killed. What we are forced to witness here is a fully-fledged rite of initiation. While the roving camera shows the unwatchable – a violent struggle that culminates in Malik cutting the victim’s carotid artery with a razor blade – the director does not exploit the scene for voyeuristic purposes: the gushing blood represents a graphic incursion (like the freeze frames with titles that serve to introduce the characters or distinguish the various sections of the story).

There are often moments in Audiard’s films when the image is almost completely obscured in order to place special emphasis upon one particular detail. The director has described this effect as “the Black Hand,” a technique he exploits when he thinks there are too many images, too much light, too great a “visual field.”
Malik’s apprenticeship really begins here, with the attack on Rayeb. But just before he meets his death, Rayeb asks Malik if he can read, offers him books, and suggests that he learn to do so. The thought is that he might just be able to leave prison a little less stupid than when he came in. Malik responds to this involuntary legacy of his victim and starts to attend the prison school, where he meets Ryad (Adel Bencherif), who will become his future friend and accomplice. In the meantime he also manages to win the trust and the protection of Luciani, the man whose eyes and ears he now effectively becomes. In short, Malik succeeds in discovering and developing previously unsuspected personal capacities even in this hellish predicament: he adapts and grows, cultivating a friendship that he will never renounce and acquiring a significant role within the most feared clan inside the prison.

In order to appreciate the linguistic skills that Malik develops in prison, has to be seen in the original. It is not just that the words are spoken in three different languages – in Arabic, Corsican, and French (all naturally transformed in a single “normal” language when dubbed) – but the dialogue also revels in a prison slang which inevitably has a color all its own in the country that produced Les Misérables and The Count of Monte Cristo. But for all that the approach is not simply sociological in a vulgar sense of the word. Audiard is not interested in describing a particular sociological phenomenon. On the contrary, he is raising a different question, one that we could describe, in homage to the recently deceased Martinique writer, poet and essayist Édouard Glissant, as the question regarding our world as a whole (as distinct from the question of “globalization”).

Glissant suggests that we should replace the exhausted ontology of identity with an ontology of relations that no longer seeks to define “subjects” in themselves, but envisages and encourages a relationality freed from morality (where the Good is no longer presented as the final end) or necessity: one articulated in terms of process, fusion, and dissolution within a chaotic world. The character of such relations pursues non-geometrical paths and eludes the grasp of any possible global intelligibility. It could best be summed up in the following words: “I need the stranger in order to change, through a process of exchange, while still remaining myself.” From the almost subhuman position that he occupies Malik is capable of observing what is going amongst the Corsicans “above” him. He engages with them by learning their language, but he does not really mix with them. In this way he learns directly, through his own experience, how human beings tend to band together in separate groups, imagining their own superior status precisely by contrast with the supposed inferiority of the “other.” As it turns out, it is Malik’s very exclusion from specifically predefined groups, from the Arabs to whom he might naturally seem to belong, or the Corsicans who exploit him for their own ends, it is his very marginality that ultimately permits him to be his own master. He is essentially an opportunist who effectively recreates the principles of Machiavelli within a prison context. For he must be prepared to do what it is necessary to do, combining the force of the lion with the cunning of the fox, and learn to simulate, or dissimulate, with brilliant and extraordinary conviction.

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Perhaps this film offers the appropriate response to the difficult and ambivalent dilemma of the present, wavering between fear of a globalization that suppresses or homogenizes all forms of diversity and anxiety regarding the forms of diversity themselves, each of which threatens to separate and withdraw from every other in a regressive way that allows it to cultivate a kind of mean-spirited micro-nationalism. Malik would then be a prophet (as the title of the film implies) precisely because he intimates a new idea of the world, as distinct from that projected by globalization, as a non-place or dilution of the standard identity of the totality. This new idea of the world is manifest in the imaginary sense that differences and diversities cannot productively be multiplied except by bringing them into relation with one another within the infinitely rich context of unforeseeable encounters.

And Malik does become a prophet in the film, once he has committed the brutal murder of Rayeb. For rather than pursuing him like an incubus, his victim faithfully accompanies him on his path as he grows and develops. The first time the murdered Rayeb appears to Malik is exemplary in this respect. At first we see him lying on the bed alongside the sleeping Malik. The latter, sensing some kind of presence, opens his eyes. The screen fades to black. Then there is a dream sequence that begins in silence and darkness, but culminates by repeating, in slow motion, the violent struggle that took place in reality. All that can be glimpsed is a flurry of flesh and sheets that may recall a painting by Francis Bacon. Then Malik wakes up, without any sign of trauma, to find himself in the cell with Reyeb holding up a burning forefinger and singing to him in Arabic to celebrate his birthday. It has been exactly one year since Reyeb’s death.

Audiard’s film succeeds brilliantly in alternating scenes of action with scenes of sudden visionary intensity. The most significant of the latter is the premonition that will save Malik from the anger of Brahim Lattrache (Slimane Dazi). He is the Arab whom Luciani has arranged for him to meet, on one of the leave days outside prison that Malik is now permitted, to help with his own suspicious business dealings in Marseilles. They are sitting in the car together, and the suspicious Lattrache is trying to understand why an Arab has fallen in with the Corsicans who are probably responsible for the murder of his friend Reyeb. This initial suspicion soon gives way to rage, but at this moment Malik has a vision: his eyes are spellbound, he turns his head, he glimpses a road sign that warns of wild animals crossing the road. He realizes just in time that the car is about to hit such an animal and send it flying into the air. This episode of pre-cognition indirectly saves Malik from a final settling of accounts. Indeed Malik’s confession that it was he who killed Reyeb immediately assumes a new significance in the eyes of Lattrache, who now chooses him as his own business partner.

Malik is no angel. He asserts his own freedom as an individual at the expense of any prescribed identity, showing how, in stories at least, the weak are capable of resisting the strong. His identity, never fixed and always in flux, is only constructed through a continual process of redefining both himself and the others to whom he is exposed. In short, this is the relational identity that Glissard has attempted to theorize. It is an identity rooted in a variety of contexts, in a process of constant becoming, and one contaminated by various aspects that have been taken over from a variety of others. When he finally leaves prison in one piece, Malik is a man who possesses a firm network of business contacts, a modest stash of money, a sophisticated understanding of human beings, an irreducible faith in his own freedom, and even the hope of love.
He is, in short, a minor prophet: a new and in a certain sense exemplary person who is no longer simply crushed beneath the oppressive weight of circumstances. As he steps forth more lightly into the world, we suspect that he will gradually succeed in becoming a free man.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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