

## A Prophet: A Study in the Dialogics of the Social and the Psychological

A review of the film



**A Prophet**

(2009)

Jacques Audiard (Director)



Reviewed by

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Psychologist Susan Rowland (2006) has described a way of reading Carl Jung's collected works: by treating his writing not as a technical, objective report but as literature. Specifically, she approached his texts as examples of the performance of a psyche attempting to come to terms with itself, in short, to *individuate*, to use Jung's term.

Rowland said, "Jung portrays a dynamic psyche *in action* in his writings" (p. 285). Such an approach, she added, is necessarily dialogic; that is, it functions, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1982) described in *The Dialogic Imagination*, as a kind of conversation between competing voices, with the first voice seeking modernist unification, reflecting the West's saturation with monotheism, and the second voice a collusion of fragmentary voices, reflecting what could be called the naturally dynamic mind.

With these concepts—Jungian individuation and Bakhtinian dialogics—we approached the remarkable film *A Prophet*. This film lends itself to this interpretative framework, and its analysis also revealed layers of dialogics at work, in which binary oppositions, such as the social versus the psychological and the unified self versus the crowd of selves, compete with one another and yet never synthesize, never fully realize the naïve promise of modernity's celebration of the individual as an autonomous, self-realizing agent of positive change.

In the end, the film is what we call a successful failure in that it presents all too accurately the human condition in a world of uncertainty, violence, and suffocating social roles. The success is in the director's masterful choice of very human actors living out prescribed roles. The failure, we believe, is in current society itself, where underneath the surface of civilization lurks the bestial, the violent.

From the outset, *A Prophet* invites the viewer into the gritty world of stark oppositions: life versus death, love versus hate, freedom versus incarceration, and strength versus weakness. Even in its horrific imagery, the film plays on the boundaries between extremes, with a consistent though often jerky move between light and shadow. Indeed, the very first images confronting the viewer are dark, partial, nightmarish.

The main character, Malik El Djebena, played by Tahar Rahim, is initially presented literally in pieces: first, just a voice, then a clenched fist, then a partial body shot revealing a scarred torso, and finally, as the screen brightens, Malik, a French-born Arab, being led through the process of incarceration. He is stripped, questioned, and gradually herded, through sterile and harsh corridors, to the real beginning of his journey: his induction, for crimes more suggested than delineated, into the “modern” prison.

As we watched and rewatched this provocative film, we were consistently struck not only by the oppositions listed above but also by their nondialectical presentation. Specifically, one of the grounding oppositions, good versus evil, is offered less as a thesis versus an antithesis than as a constant set of questions concerning the nature of good and evil.

Bohr's (1960/1987) principle of complementarity may be apt here: Like the quantum physicist who participates and arguably even cocreates the reality of wave/particle, all oppositions in the film are alternating visions, determined in part by who is observing. And among these alternating visions, the overarching dialogic in play is between the starkly real social and the dreamy psychological. To be true to the movie, we feel that a dual analysis is required, operating on two levels: the social and the psychological.

## The Social: Living the Nightmare of Deindividuation in the Group

In approaching the film as a person's struggle to come to terms with social fitness, we found it to be a lived parable of ingroup/outgroup dynamics, with Malik presenting a dehumanizing deindividuation (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952). In the beginning, Malik attempts to discover and then follow the social norms of the Corsican Mafia family. His first contact with them in prison is harrowing: They wrap a trash bag over his head, threatening him, calling him a dirty Arab, and leaving him huddled on the floor, crying.

Sadly, Corsican and Arab are both the two main rival groups in the prison and the dualistic heritage of Malik himself, as he is an Arab, yet becomes, through perverted and violent rites of passage, a functional Corsican, *in* the group but never quite *of* the group. In a more romantic world, one would expect a kindly social worker or thoughtful prison psychologist to be there to help Malik rise above the invitations to join one of the gangs; indeed, throughout the movie there exist seemingly well-intentioned staff members who try to educate Malik and address the issue of rehabilitation.

Yet these characters are always flat, on the margins, and almost perfunctory in their advice. In short, rehabilitation is presented as a child's fantasy: The real world in this film is a world of adaptation to the prison social environment, and that environment is cruel, rank-ordered, and devoid of any real rehabilitation.

Denied any real possibility of "fitness" as a "good" prisoner, Malik obeys the Corsicans. At their orders, Malik kills a man, an Arab, Reyeb, using the ruse of a trade of sex for drugs, in the most frightening scene in the movie. The killing is beyond messy: Blood spurts and splatters as the two men grapple on the floor. The shaking of the victim in his death throes is mirrored by Malik's own shaking; he cannot stop shivering after the murder, and he lies on the floor, covered by his own and his victim's blood.

This scene, like so many in the movie, is neither a Tarantino-esque cartoon of violence nor a slick, film noir realism, but rather something hurtful, disturbing, and inevitable. In order to survive, Malik must act. Following the murder, his status rises, and he is rewarded, tangibly through material resources such as cigarettes and other goodies, and less tangibly, as he becomes the Number One protégé of the Corsicans' prison boss César Luciani, played masterfully by Niels Arestrup.

The social dynamic complicates, refusing any kind of easy resolution and, for Malik, any kind of simple choice. Specifically, the Muslim/Arab population in prison increases as the Corsicans' numbers dwindle. Malik is used by and caught between the two groups. When he attempts to set up his own drug trade, he is savaged by César, who tells him, "If you live, you live thanks to me," adding that even Malik's "dreams" are owed to the crime boss.

What makes César's pronouncement ironic is the eventual role reversal Malik effects by the end of the film. On a leave day, after murdering César's boss's bodyguard at César's direction, he leaves the boss himself alive, letting him know César was behind the attempted murder. This act becomes a kind of nightmare-for-a-dream exchange, as Malik becomes a kind of boss for the Arabs. In a strangely sad scene, the Arabs beat César when he attempts to speak with Malik.

## **The Psychological: Dreaming the Dream of an Individuated Self**

Underneath the masterful presentation of social dynamics, visually underscored via naked lightbulb lighting, lurks a subtle yet consistent dream motif. After killing Reyeb at the beginning, Malik is visited by his ghost. In the first sequence, they grapple, yet the grappling seems more homoerotic than violent, and the ghost, smiling, raises a thumb that bursts into flames. Later, in an extended dream sequence, we see through Malik's eyes a dimly lit prison corridor, down a labyrinth of doors, cells, and barred windows, all shadowy and fragmented.

Then the scene shifts, and the viewer sees, as if looking through a car window, first one deer, then two, then a herd running in front of the car, away from the headlights. The scene shifts again, and partial glimpses of a man's face emerge, never distinct, never whole. Finally, the dream concludes with the ghost of Reyeb, not angry, standing like a friend or a brother in front of Malik. This dream, the last in the film, ends with Reyeb covered with flames, smiling.

At first, these dreams seem like simple expressions of an inchoate guilt Malik may be experiencing. However, the real meaning of the dream is revealed when Malik, on another day pass from the prison, meets with one of Cesar's rivals, who happens to be a friend of the murdered Reyeb.

Upon learning that Malik killed Reyeb, the rival prepares to shoot Malik. As they are traveling in a car, Malik, spotting a deer-crossing sign, yells that "animals" are coming, which *is* prophetic, as the car hits a deer, killing it. The rival, obviously impressed, asks Malik, "What are you?" and then answers his own question, "A prophet." It is from this point that Malik is *in*, though not really *of*, the rival Muslim group.

The dreaming prophet motif is reiterated in a later scene when Malik is thrown into solitary for 40 days and 40 nights—alone but safe as the prison's gangs battle. The question remains: not *what* is Malik but *who* is Malik? That is, what self is trying to emerge? What identity is behind Malik's actions? The archetypes are subtle yet discernible. The burning man reflects both Malik's shadow, and, in his friendliness, the attempt of a self to become

aware of its components, accept them, and then become a unique, individuated consciousness.

However, Malik never really does emerge across the course of the film. In all moments, there is something of the clueless and guileless child about him. He certainly acts, but one never gets a sense of a whole person. He adapts to the social, despite its complexity, yet within, we never see a Malik, never know what he feels, and never get a sense that he learns anything but social survival, which is always in a dialogic relation to psychological health.

At the end of the film, the viewer is left with the possibility that Malik, though not yet in focus, could remain that way. In the last scene, upon his release from prison, he agrees to live with a friend's family and will sleep in the "child's room." His friend's wife, like all of the females in this film, is negligible in the action that has already occurred. Indeed, this film is overtly masculine. In Jungian terminology, crudely stated, it is replete with complex representations of the animus, but the anima, reduced to distant Madonnas or to pornographic sex objects, is significantly absent as either social influence or as a potential aspect of the self for Malik to become aware of and integrate, and thereby facilitate his own self-realization.

Therefore, perhaps the greatest lesson of this film, for both social psychologists, who emphasize the social environment and the "surface" of the human, and the psychodynamic psychologist, who emphasizes the "depth" in the individual, is that each framework, by itself, is incomplete for what Bohr would have called an exhaustive description of human phenomena. Perhaps by framing social influences and psychodynamic processes as an ongoing dialogical process, we, as researchers, teachers, and mental health practitioners, can more fruitfully and accurately approach understanding, treating, and cocreating our fellow humans.

Whatever the case, *A Prophet* is a must-see film for all. Despite its grittiness, violence, and complexities, it does remind us of an inescapable fact: Human psychology is dependent upon the social, and the social, one must never forget, is also a collective of individual and individuating psyches.

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