



# Counting the Days, Not Living Them: *You Will Die at Twenty*, Directed by Amjad Abu Alala, 2019

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If there is any doubt from the title as to the subject matter of *You Will Die at Twenty*, the 2019 standout film by the Sudanese director Amjad Abu Alala, the opening scene quickly dispels it. *You Will Die at Twenty* opens with an in-your-face camera shot of an animal carcass in the desert—and then holds the image, lingering there. One can safely assume that what follows will bear some relation to the prospect of death. Indeed, the protagonist of the film is Muzamil, a young man who from infancy has had the misfortune to be subject to a Sufi curse that he will die on his twentieth birthday.

The theme is grim, yet *You Will Die at Twenty* is a stunning film, with superb acting, luminous cinematography, and a beautiful original score alternating with other well-chosen music. Based on a short story, “Sleeping at the Foot of the Mountain,” by Sudanese writer Hammour Ziada, the viewer is mesmerized by this film as if listening to a childhood fable that contains a wise but as yet unexplained lesson, and ultimately the film’s principal tenet is more inspirational than shocking: Life is what we make of it ourselves, to be lived and savored in our own ways, seized with energy and passion. And the alternative? It is possible to live, as Muzamil’s father says of his travels and travails, “a life worse than death.”

A person might reasonably ask, as does Muzamil’s mother in various ways, what is the point of future planning when one’s lifespan is to be so short? For that matter, what is the use of seeking or pursuing love, juxtaposed against the certainty of death? To be sure, all humans live under a sentence of death, but usually it is randomly applied, meaning that unless faced with a predictably terminal illness, most people carry on without having to contend with the knowledge of a precisely fixed end-point. But Muzamil’s predicament is different, and he has accepted his fate as a “son of death” without disputing its validity or considering other explanations. In the first scene of the film, moments before the curse that suddenly darkens the life of the infant Muzamil and his parents, the mystic sheikh intones: “A person on God’s earth knows not where his steps will take him.” That is the natural order, how things ought to be.

There is a second storyline in *You Will Die at Twenty*. It is about parenting and what kind of legacy will be left to the proximally succeeding generation. From his mother Sakina, for example, Muzamil endures a distorted brand of nurturing. Sakina allows the

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anticipated tragedy of her son's early death to contaminate her thoughts with fear. Prematurely mourning a living person, Sakina can be seen anxiously counting the days, not living them.

Sakina's apprehensive ruminations influence her son to reject Naima, a woman he has loved from childhood. Turning away from Naima to spare her the pain of his early death is an act of self-denial and an especially tragic one, because this young woman loves Muzamil "with her heart, not with her head"—the special kind of blessing from which one should never turn away. But Sakina does nothing to discourage this heartbreaking outcome, so preoccupied is she with counting Muzamil's days, months, and years of remaining life.

*You Will Die at Twenty* does not ignore the father-son relationship. Highlighted is Muzamil's anger at the father who abandoned him to his fate by literally running away. So Muzamil prefers to say that his "real" father is Sulaiman, an aging Europeanized roué who lives, spiritually and geographically, on the outskirts of their village.

It is Muzamil's need for a bold, undaunted father that leads him to Sulaiman and to a fraught internal conflict. On one hand, Muzamil could choose to be the dutiful son who pleases his mother by learning the entire Quran by rote, even in two different reading styles, but that course implicitly requires accepting his sentence of death at age twenty. On the other hand, he could be independent, even sinful—and choose life. Hurling ink onto a blank sheet of white paper, Sulaiman desperately tries to demonstrate to Muzamil how one must know sin to understand purity as a contrasting element, and also, that he could never achieve any kind of satisfaction in life by passively identifying as a condemned man.

Sulaiman himself is drawn to Muzamil and understands him in the way that parents should know their children but rarely do. Like all persons who passionately lecture others about what course to take in life, Sulaiman is preaching to himself as well as to Muzamil. So when Naima marries another man, Sulaiman confronts the now-bereft Muzamil angrily, determined not to reward avoidance with commiseration.

There are also other points of connection between Sulaiman and Muzamil. Sulaiman, who had experienced discord with his own father, recalls: "The only good thing about my dad is that he loved cinema." Eventually Sulaiman, despite his frustration with Muzamil, recognizes that his protégé's conflicts are much like his own. As a gesture of parental love, as well as a droll reference to the art and psychology of filmmaking, Sulaiman bequeaths his father's camera to Muzamil. The real legacy of the film—a treatise on living, not dying—lies in the gift of this camera. It is an imperative, a personal appeal to Muzamil, and to us, to look closely at the world, capture as many precious images as possible, and enjoy them to the full.

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