

2. VISIONS AND STYLES IN COMPARISON:

LONDON, 2017

THE NURI BILGE CEYLAN GENERATION

The so-called "third generation" of Turkish cinema refers to filmmakers born in the early 1960s, who made their debut in the mid '90. As already mentioned, these filmmakers reintroduced auteur cinema, making quality art-house films with limited budgets. The third generation is composed of individual personalities firmly established through substantial filmographies whose works can also be usefully compared, as this chapter will demonstrate. Also, many of them expressed themselves through the choice of a specific path, the trilogy of films, although revealing different purposes in the filmmaking context.

The overview begins by analysing the paths of Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Zeki Demirkubuz who, despite their very different approaches, share the same concern with the limitations of the cinematic gaze to describe and understand the existential complexity of the individual. Moreover, while Ceylan places his characters and himself as a director, in a large, but distant, living space, Demirkubuz imprisons his protagonists, in spatial and psychological terms, under an intense duress that is relentless and without any exit.

Born in 1959, Nuri Bilge Ceylan studied electrical engineering and later became a photographer with partial and interrupted film studies. He considers cinema to be a tool that allows him to express things that he wouldn't dare to say, and one that enables him to explore the most intimate and dramatic spheres of his personal condition and vision of reality. He has directed and produced, almost single-handedly, his first short film, *Koza (Cocoon)* (1995), casting his parents, Mehmet Emin and Fatma Ceylan. Addressing the difficulty of cohabitation, this film immediately establishes Ceylan's interest in exploring emotional dysfunction and alienation. He followed the short film with his "Provincial trilogy". *Kasaba (Small town)* (1997), his first feature film, in black and white, of which he is also screenwriter, co-editor, director of photography and producer, exhibits a minimalist and a poetic approach to the observation of the details of everyday life in the village of Anatolia where his family is living. Divided into four episodes, corresponding to the seasons, the film presents characters and landscapes from the perspective of two young boys, witnesses of the "mysteries" of life and nature. It is vibrant, not lacking in irony, and boasts an extraordinary visual sensibility that favours static shots, slow, long takes and uncut scenes. *Mayıs Sıkıntısı (Clouds of May)* (1999) returns to the context and setting of the previous film, offering a double vision of the countryside as a site of boredom, misery and frustration yet also a peaceful place that can nourish the soul. The protagonist is Muzaffer (Muzaffer Ördemir), alter ego of Ceylan himself, a forty-year-old director who returns to the village of his elderly parents, Mehmet (Mehmet Emin Ceylan) and Fatma (Fatma Ceylan), to make a film about them. The film is a self-reflexive exploration of the continuous and vain effort to describe the "essence" of life in the countryside, with its rituals, obsessions, desires and worries. Moreover, the presence of the sound equipment and of the camera highlights the distance and the dichotomy between the protagonist's present condition as a city-dweller and his past in the family home. Shot in black and white, it's an extraordinary film which focuses on the slow passing of time, on the observations of nature and on the interaction of the characters, all the while and enhancing the importance of apparently insignificant objects. Throughout, *Clouds of May* offers a deliberate incompleteness to show the viewer the failure to achieve the objective of truth. Both the film's humour and its melancholy stem from the way in which it highlights the ultimate superficiality of any attempt to capture the reality and the complexity of ordinary life through cinema. *Uzak (Distant)* (2002) takes place in Istanbul and privileges desolate, misty and rainy autumn atmospheres. Again it explores the rural / urban divide by staging the impossible encounter of two taciturn and contrasting individuals. Mahmut (Muzaffer Ördemir) is a forty-year-old photographer in professional crisis, oppressed by melancholy and by the obsessive routine of a lonely life of straitened circumstances. Yusuf (Mehmet Emin Toprak) is his younger cousin, who suddenly arrives from the countryside to look

for work as a port labourer. He is someone who reminds the photographer of the rural background from which he, Mahmut, now feels "distant" and who forces him to consider the individualistic aridity of his present existence. Trapped in the vain search for a job, the one, and in the inability to solve an ancient emotional bond, the other, the two share the Mahmut's old apartment and an intense feeling of failure, unable to communicate in any way. Their distance is developed through different levels of moral conflicts. The taste for the detailed observation of behaviours, spiked with subtle humour, frees the director from the temptation of resorting to the predictable or the hackneyed, allowing him to find the way of a tangible authenticity. The film is an intense reflection on loneliness and the impossibility of escape and offers a pessimistic view of the Turkish male. Echoes of Tarkovsky's and Ozu's works are evident. The sharp photography has a stark contrast with the sordid nature of the depicted environments.

With *İklimler (Climates)* (2006), Ceylan takes another step in his path of bitter reflection on himself. Once again, he presents the inability to support an affective and emotional attachment, telling the story of a normal couple that faces a crisis due to the end of the relationship, and tries in vain to reassemble it. Isa (Ceylan himself) is a forty-year-old university assistant, while his younger partner Bahar (the director's wife, Ebru Ceylan) is a production assistant in a television company. They live in Istanbul, but the film opens with images of their solitary summer's holiday on a magnificent sandy beach of the Mediterranean coast. From that moment, in which one perceives clearly the gap separating the couple, Ceylan articulates the narration in three moments, climatic and existential seasons, which make up the story. The lack of communication between the couple clearly connects to the inexorable and slow temporal succession. Summer realizes the separation, autumn is the time of independent living and of the vain search for an escape from the frustration and the desolation, while winter shows the attempt to recompose the fracture. Ceylan confirms his brutal honesty in dealing with the theme of the male / female relationship, with an avoidance of any obvious psychological explanations. He represents with merciless bitterness, and occasional irony, the superficiality and the fake intellectualism of the character he plays. The film shows an exceptional quality through its quiet, clear and intense visual and narrative style. Dialogues are scarce, terse and raw, indicating the existential wear and tear of the characters. The universe defined by the shots, meticulous in details, is not cold and narcissistic, but rather expresses an exceptional photographic definition that makes the viewer feel the physical sensations condensed into images. The long shots and the extended sequence shots define alienating landscapes and capture the empty disenchantment of the characters that also show flashes of vitality, sometimes feral, but to no avail. The soundtrack is essentially composed by ordinary noises, but extremely present and precise, with the aim to amplify the effects of the images.

In *Üç Maymun (Three monkeys)* (2008) Ceylan expands his horizon moving from the focus on a small group of relatives and colleagues, and also on himself, to the close observation of the destinies of other and diverse characters. This film is a melodrama-noir, the result of a measured and controlled presentation, which challenges the canons of genres. It is a bitter apologue about the moral decay of a society gradually stifled by avarice and weakness. As is clear from the title, the story aspires to the status of a parable based on the well-known Asian legend of the three monkeys: one does not see, the second does not speak and the third refuses to hear. Therefore, the film strives to show the escape of people from responsibilities and sorrows too hard to bear, and the negative consequences that result. The story begins with a car accident in which a fifty-year-old politician, who drives his car, hits and kills a pedestrian in the middle of the road. Servet (Erkan Kesal) convinces his driver Eyüp (Yavuz Bingöl), absent at the time of the accident, to assume the responsibility and to serve the prison sentence, offering in exchange a substantial financial aid to his family. This agreement triggers a chain of consequences, according to a morbid psychological game that echoes Dostoevsky, between betrayal and passion, ambition, distorted loyalty and suppressed anger. The politician and Hacer (Hatice Aslan), the driver's wife, begin a sexual relationship. İsmail (Ahmet Rifat Şungar), the woman's teenage son, realizes the adulterous relationship of his mother, but he is unable to tell the fact to his father when he visits him in prison. In the film, all the

characters are somehow corrupt, guilty and involved in a complex web of lies and subterfuges. The dramatic irony of the story is surrounded by an overall atmosphere of torpor not lacking in symbolism. Ceylan re-proposes his aesthetics, emphasizing again the observation of nature and the passing of time. He chooses a very careful, and often maddeningly slow, composition of the images. Thus, he introduces a very suggestive "realism" characterized by static shots with motionless camera, long sequence shots, downtime, a pivotal role of glances and silences and a dark and sepia-toned photography.

*Bir zamanlar Anadolu'da (Once upon a time in Anatolia)* (2011) focuses on characters who are much more developed. Their interaction is functional to a specific desire of the director to tell a story and many smaller stories. In addition this film is a parable about humanity, although less bitter, not because falsely optimistic, but because more explicitly vital. At the same time Ceylan proves to be uninterested in any attempt of mythicize his country and its people. It is a drama which plays with crime thriller and road movie conventions. However, it looks very atypical if compared to those genres, because it rejects their schemes and their conventional articulation of events. The plot is apparently very simple. It follows the course of a judicial inquiry supported by the police, with a site inspection, which lasts from dusk to noon of the next day. Moreover, what should be a routine situation becomes, in the film, a subtle game of chess that, as the events will focus, provides a broader picture of the people, involved in the action or encountered, and of the places. A small caravan of cars goes along peripheral roads in the countryside, among barren hills and fields of ripe wheat, on the outskirts of a small provincial town in Anatolia. Some police officers, a judge and a forensic doctor accompany a man, a self-confessed murderer, in search of the place where he buried the remains of the victim, after killing him during a fight. The group goes from place to place because it is obvious that the murderer is unable to remember the exact place where the body is buried. The itinerant investigation proceeds slowly and drags on, recording speeches and actions of the often garrulous individuals. At some point during the night, they go to a farmstead and eat a light meal offered by the farmers. During the break, the dialogues of the inhabitants, talking about their personal problems, social issues and customs of the region, are interwoven with those of the group conducting the investigation. Then at noon, after a night spent on patrol, the group comes back to town and sends the accused back to prison, to the curiosity and comments of onlookers. The investigation was apparently inconclusive, and yet in reality many details and stories have emerged. The result is a more general portrait of life in this region of Anatolia. The director does not hide his pleasure to place the characters in a specific space and to let us observe them. He highlights their little quirks, the opinions expressed with regard to one or the other and the forms of their interaction, among moments of frustration, discomfort, pain, or even when they are exchanging ironic jokes. After all, the characters express their relief to be able to express their ideas and to communicate ancient experiences, positive or painful. The viewer is faced with an interesting maze of events and emotions. Ceylan reviews, with many open questions, a range of interconnected issues: the concerns and behaviours of those who live in the province; the relation with the place where one lives; the balance between ethics and pragmatism; the need to cling to small trivial things of life when you are faced with misfortunes, losses, wrongs or absurdities. What emerges is an honest, sharp and sometimes nipping look, pointing to the essence, not only tangible, of human life. More than that, the film shows an ability to tell it outright, without judging.

Awarded the Palme d'Or for best film at the Cannes Festival, Ceylan's most recent film, *Kış Uykusu (Winter sleep)* (2014), is a magnificent fresco of human relations, but also a multi-layered and a brave examination of the contradictions in today's Turkish society. The story takes place in wintertime in a small boutique hotel in Anatolia, in the touristic region of Cappadocia. Aydin (Haluk Bilginer), the fifty-year-old owner, is an intellectual, a former stage actor in Istanbul, as well as a columnist for the local newspaper. His wife Nihal (Melisa Sozen), much younger than him, is visibly frustrated and devotes herself to funding local primary schools. Necla (Demet Akbag), Aydin's sister, is a mature woman, embittered because of the recent divorce. There gradually

emerges a serious conflict between the protagonist and a poor family of tenants of his, living in another building, who haven't pay their rent for months. Aydin is an anguished "thinker" who likes to debate with his sister on the topics of his articles: morality, conscience or good behaviour of Muslim clerics. On the other hand, he is unable to deal with the poorest people because he stigmatises their roughness. So he delegates the management of his properties, and of the related quarrels, to his factotum, the faithful and pragmatic Hidayet (Ayberk Pekan). Necla debates with Nihal the best course of action to deal with a violent act. Aydin and Nihal argue because she doesn't endure the paternalism and the arrogant misanthropy of her husband, while he criticizes her naivety. It emerges that the marriage has been in crisis for some time, with mutual suffering. The characters live with discomfort because they are oppressed by old and new contradictions and because they misinterpret their social position. Feelings and values confront and become complex without any possible mediation or synthesis. The film is entirely characterized by long dialogues, often of literary quality, but exciting, with occasional hints of humour. These conversations, which mostly take place indoors, demonstrate Ceylan's screenwriting skill that goes beyond the story to focus real issues about life and living together, without judgment. Moreover they show a wonderful interpretative actors' game. Visually, the film is a fascinating art work. It offers a masterful composition of images: static shots with a skilful shot - counter shot within closed doors, uncut scenes and occasional widescreen panning shots of the landscape with great depth of field. And yet, an exceptional dark-toned photography, developed by Gökhan Tiryaki. Ceylan declared he was inspired by some of Chekhov's short stories, but he also admitted autobiographical elements. He denied precise implications in the contemporary political situation in Turkey, even though there are some obvious references. He rather specified that he wanted to represent human nature, to touch the soul of the viewer.