

Turkish Cinema From Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Point Of View

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Every person has something to say about life. Nuri Bilge Ceylan is one of the people who chose to use cinema to tell his own story and his thoughts about life, the country he was born in, and his political views.

Nuri Bilge Ceylan was born in Western Anatolian of Yenice, Çanakkale, where the main source of livelihood is agriculture. Ceylan's father was the first university-educated person in the area. He loved his father and his family very much, however because of his ideals his father always got into trouble and caused the family to suffer a lot. This is the tragedy Nuri Bilge's generation was frequently facing. That is why Nuri Bilge is always trying to keep his distance from his family. (cite in Atam 2014.)

Nuri Bilge Ceylan studied at Boğaziçi University, the best University in Turkey at the time, where he was struggling to find his ideological path. He is always afraid to make the same mistakes as his father and feels guilty because he is thinking like this of his father. However, he is not sure whether what his father is doing is good for society. While he is observing society, he is always asking questions about himself and humanity, between art and society. In the years 1994-1997 he starts to work as a photographer. According to Cetin, he prefers this over filmmaking for he can work alone. He does not want to socialize with other people and filmmaking demands for the existence of a team (As cited in Atam, 2014). He thinks this causes "synthetic relationship" and "can harm inwardness and concentration" .(Erdem, 1997) (as site in Atam 2014)

Ceylan thinks of his father as a man with idealistic goals who has lost his hopes and withdrew himself from everything that gave him the cause to live. He is afraid of ending up a lonely man like his father. His relationship with his father leaves a deep mark on his life. (Erkal, 1999) In real life, he tries to keep away from anything that can put a strain in his inner

world of values. We see the effects of this in his characters where they fear engagement and try to keep away from relationships and their burdens. These characters are neurotic, just like Ceylan, and cannot really achieve their goals. For him filmmaking is the only way to escape from sharing the same destiny as his father. He sees it as a secret way of resistance and creating his identity. Art is the only way to save him from his melancholy (Ceylan in Kızıldemir1997) (cite in Atam, 2014) through making research for a good life. That is how Ceylan's work began.

He describes himself as a lazy person. However, he is not lazy with film making. Instead, he is a hard-working person engaged in screenwriting, camera working, editing and even colorization all by himself. (Atam,2014)

Nuri Bilge started filmmaking at a time when the filmmakers of the time had to work very hard to be able to overcome the impositions of the film business and create their conditions to produce the films. They had to make many sacrifices in order to create films without any artistic compromise. (Kızıldemir, 1997) (as cite in Atam 2014). However, the filmmaking business is a harsh one, and causes lots of wounds in his soul. (Mehmet Erdem, 1997).(as site in Atam ,2014)

This generation of independent film directors were totally against the “oriental” melodrama of traditional Turkish Cinema (known as Yeşil Çam (Green Pine)). The films of Yeşil Çam were mostly remakes of Hollywood movies with the difference that they tried to domesticate them. The film makers (1994-1997) of this generation could not become part of the mainstream cinema sector. Filmmakers like Ceylan, chose to self-educate themselves in cinematic expression and build up their own styles. Being intellectuals from an undeveloped country they had a deep admiration of the west. They mostly excluded themselves from politics at post-1980 when Turkish social history is full of disillusionment in terms of ideals

and benefits. He chose to work on ordinary people and ordinary life (Shrikent, 1999) (Cite in Atam (2014).

Ceylan has great interest in nineteenth century Russian literature. It includes the traditional mind of the West with the values of the East. There was an estrangement in the Russian society due to conflicts between Westernization/westernism/pan-Slavism and Orthodoxy. In the same way Turkey was experiencing the same issue trying to Westernize while keeping its Islamic traditions. Ceylan is inspired by authors like Dostoyevsky and Chekov who create epic narratives about what people think they should do and how they react, and how they try to rationalize their acts. Ceylan thinks that these authors' characters experience the same things as his life and tries to understand and describe his own journey through these characters. (Ceylan, 2012) Hence, Ceylan's cinematographic style has the conflict of the East-West. He tries to examine both as an outsider in his films, to observe.

Coming from a world where his values and ideals have ended up with disillusionment he has to own create his values. We can understand that from his movies *Distant* (2002), *Climates* (2006), *Three Monkeys* (2008), *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011), and *Winter Sleep* (2014).

In 1962, Andrew Sarris wrote *Notes on the Auteur Theory*, and he described an auteur's three criterions of value. These can be thought of "as three concentric circles:

- a- the outer circle of as technique,
- b- the middle circle, personal style,
- c- the interior circle, interior meaning" (Sarris, 1962).

In order to asses whether Ceylan is an auteur I examine three of his films: *Three Monkeys*, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, and *Winter Sleep*. I look at the film narrative form of his films, his cinematic style, and the overall themes that are prevalent in his work.

ANALIZING THREE MONKEYS

One of the three movies I analyze from Nuri Bilge Ceylan is “Üç Maymun “. When we translated that to English language it is, ”Three monkeys”. When somebody who is not Turkish hears this name s/he may think that this movie is about monkeys and their life in the jungle. However, “Üç Maymun” which is the title of movie has completely different meaning because it is used as idiom and it means “I didn't see, I didn't hear, I didn't know anything”. This idiom is used when somebody sees, hears or learns something s/he shouldn't and promises to the other person s/he won't tell anybody about it. When you finish watching the film “*Üç Maymun*” you can easily appreciate why this is the most suitable title for this film.

Three Monkeys marks a turning point in Ceylan's film making career (Romney [15]). This film is remarkably different from his former films because of its “mode of production, visual style and story”. It is shot in high definition (HD) format. The film *Three Monkeys* is Ceylan's most expensive project.[5] Unlike in his previous films, and against his character, Ceylan worked with a team of more than 20 people. Yavuz Bingöl, a popular star, a well-known Turkish folk singer and actor, was part of his cast, where for the first time he included such an actor in his films. It was also the first time he did not use his family, himself or friends to shoot a film and instead used professional actors in the leading roles.

In this film Ceylan uses a minimalist style which even himself characterizes it as 'daring and risky' and it is his most sophisticated film until now. (Ceylan [4]: 30). Critics tend to describe *Three Monkeys* as having a distinctive visual style. Thus, it can be accepted as an 'expressionist' film. [6] This is also seen in his choice of colorization in the film. He uses an earth-color palette, particularly including yellows and greens just as an expressionist painter would do.

The shots of *Three Monkeys* are mostly made from a fixed camera position. The reason for this is that Ceylan wants to focus especially on the psychological condition of his main characters, and thus he keeps the social environment very vague. Only the faces of the four main characters in the story can be clearly seen. The shootings of all other actors are from an angle that masks their faces. There is only one exception in the final sequence where the face of a fifth character is shown. By the use of an extensive timework the film speed is manipulated, introducing another stylistic innovation, where some parts are a little accelerated or reduced in speed causing a particular emotional tone. The film is also sophisticated in terms of its sound editing where it is relying on long silences rather than dialogue. Instead of the dialogues we hear a wide range of background sounds that adds to the peculiar atmosphere of the story. (Suner,A.(2014))

In his films, Ceylan portrays a social world almost identical to his own, which provides an autobiographical quality to his films. [7] This has become a trademark of Ceylan's cinema. On the other hand, for the first time, in *Three Monkeys* Ceylan tells a story about characters who belong to a social world completely dissimilar to his own. He did not focus on ordinary situations of daily life like the previous films. Instead, in *Three Monkeys* Ceylan attempts to tell a highly dramatic story that might be described as “a psychological crime-thriller with melodramatic overtones”.

The movie starts with a car crash, in which one of the most popular minister candidates, Servet (Ercan Kesal), got involved and killed a person just before the elections in Turkey. If it is heard that Servet killed a man, Servet's political life will immediately be over and Servet knows this very well. He finds a solution and gives his car's key to his driver. The driver, Eyüp (Yavuz Bingöl), says he will accept the keys and go into jail instead of him only if Servet gives money to him that will guarantee his and his family's life after Eyüp comes out from jail. Servet accepts the deal and Eyüp takes the blame of the car crash on himself and goes

into jail instead of Servet. While Eyüp is in jail, Hacer (Hatice Aslan) Eyüp's wife, has an affair with Servet in order to get money. She is planning to use this money to buy a car for his son İsmail (Ahmet Rifat Şungar).

Hacer and Eyüp had a son who has died. The dead son consequence stays unknown throughout the film. Although we can understand that this is a traumatic loss for the family members, it does not give any details about the child's death. However, the child's image is constantly connected to the motif of water and it seems to indicate that he may have drowned. The fact that the ghost of the child is seen by his father and brother may be pointing to the fact that they were in a way the cause of his death and they feel guilty about it. Yet, there is no exact implication about this fact. This situation in the story is treated in the film's "narrative style, camera use and dialogue". Instead of showing the facts directly *Three Monkeys* tells us the story using an indirect style. It does not share some very important information with the audience and leaves it to the audience to find certain key events to advance the story. Ceylan's narrative style in this film uses the results of the events without showing the events while they are taking place (Ceylan [5]: 25). That is why the audience cannot see any of the events while they are happening. We never see the hit-and-run car accident at the beginning of the film; when and how Hacer and Servet form a relationship; or the time when İsmail kills Servet.

The first scene shows us what is going on just before and after the accident, never showing us the accident itself. [9] This gives the audience the feeling of missing the event and this feeling follows all through the entire film. We cannot follow the building up of the relation between Hacer and Servet, and when, where and how İsmail killed Servet either, we only know that the murderer is İsmail creating a helpless feeling for the viewer who like the characters- has no knowledge.

The "notion of absence" is also used in the dialogues where we understand the inner world of the characters through their tranquility. The characters cannot really communicate,

they keep on saying the same things getting nowhere. The conversations are usually in the form of questions like: 'What did you say?' / 'What do you think I said?' or 'Well?' / 'Well, what?'

One of the most ironic things in the film is, though the characters do not really talk, a loud audio device is used. Hacer's cell-phone, rings as an arabesque song by Yıldız Tilbe, a popular female singer and songwriter in Turkey, and the audience is obliged to listen to this depressing song time and again. The lyrics are as follows: 'I hope you love and aren't loved back / I hope love hurts you like it hurts me / I hope your heart is made to melt just like a candle.' These lyrics cause the audience to feel deep emotions. It tells about somebody not taking the responsibility for her actions and blaming other people for that. Though the song sounds so emotional when it becomes a loud phone ring it loses its meaning.

In the film the place they live in gives us the feeling that this house is their own prison for each of them in a different way.[10] The strange kind of family life in the film presents the condition of the Turkish society.[13] Turkey is a country that used to hold lots of ethnic and religious minorities which have been lost by the violence committed against them in Anatolia. The denial against all what happened causes the normalization of violence and these violent incidents keep on repeating causing the corruption of Turkish society. The falling apart of the family in *Three Monkeys*, is a small example of the unravelling of Turkish society today which has been silenced under the feeling of guilt.

ANALIZING WINTER SLEEP

Ceylan, as stated before, is an admirer of Chekhov. In his film “Winter Sleep” we see remnants of “The Wife” by Chekhov , where “simple and not strained, but cold, empty, and dreary” are used to explain the relationship of a married couple who have become strangers to each other but are still sharing the same house. The fire factor is at the center of the story causing “all morality, all sociality, and all economy” to disappear in it. We see the crushing down of sociality and the characters. Fire and snow are used together to show the irony. Although everything is cold and covered with snow underneath everything is burning, just like the characters emotionally or even though there is fire inside their hearts are cold. To reveal the motions of the characters Ceylan uses many monologues and dialogues in his film (quoted in Aytaç et al. 2014; my translation) As Badiou (Badiou, 2005) emphasises, Winter Sleep “lets us travel with a particular idea”. (Diken, B. (2017).

The film starts with Aydın (Haluk Bilginer) telling his headman, Hidayet (Ayberk Pekcan), that they need a horse and Hidayet talks with a guy who will catch a wild horse for them. Then they drive to collect rents from some tenants. While Hidayet is out of the car, Aydın sees a boy looking at him angrily. On the way they talk about a tenant who is not paying the rent and how they can make them evacuate the house using force and violence. Although Aydın does not describe himself as an ‘evil’ person, by letting Hidayet act however he wants to, he causes moral neutralization.

Suddenly, Aydın and Hidayet are astonished by the noise of a stone breaking the window. Hidayet chases the boy who has thrown the stone and the boy falls in a stream. They find out that the boy is İlyas, the son of a tenant.

Hamdi (Serhat Kılıç), the uncle of İlyas (Emirhan Doruktan) and the İmam of the village, is an easy a target to use for Aydın for critiquing religion. Aydın writes to a newspaper to criticize religion through Hamdi, saying that an İmam should be a good example

to his population by how he acts, how he should be clean, how he should get dressed and how knowledgeable he should be. He thinks that Hamdi does not have any of these characteristics and combines this with the weakness of religion.

Aydın is not the only one speculating on religion in *Winter Sleep*. Necla (Demet Akbağ) is involved in this topic, too. Aydın's sister Necla is a woman who has been divorced and returned to live in her father's house. Necla is an interesting character who thinks that forgiving what people do is the best way of punishment. She even says "Instead of struggling against evil, why not do the exact opposite? Say you don't want a painting to be stolen. It's maybe better to hand it to the thief. Maybe it's a better solution." She even thinks that although her husband used to treat her very bad, she should go and ask his forgiveness. That way she believes that he will understand what he did wrong and try to be a good person. She is afraid of being left alone for the rest of her life. As the movie goes on, we never see her again making us think that she has committed suicide.

Nihal (Melisa Süzen), Aydın's wife, who is 14 years younger than Aydın, teases her sister in law because of her thoughts. Before coming to live in this village, Nihal used to live in Istanbul, the metropolitan of Turkey. When she moved to the village with Aydın, she no longer had something to do. She wants to work, however her husband is always criticizing her for everything she does. He does not accept that she can do anything right without him. She tries to take part in a project where they will fix the schools around the village and they do fund raising. When Aydın finds out about this, he insults Nihal, saying everything they have done is illegal and will get them in trouble. He says that he should take over everything and become the person in charge of the project. Nihal starts crying, telling him she should not have married a person so older than herself and left her life back in Istanbul, where she could get a job and earn her own money. This way she thinks she would feel more useful. Then she starts telling him that maybe they should get a divorce. He tells her that he is giving her all the

freedom she needs and even goes on telling her that he is going to pass the winter in Istanbul. His cause is, he needs to finish his book and publish it. It is a book about the Turkish Drama History and he says that nobody has written such an intellectual book before. It is the center of his life and he is very proud of this work. He also keeps on talking about the days he was an actor and all the plays he has put on stage. The meaning of Aydın's name is very important to the character. Aydın means both light and is used to define educated people.

Nihal feels guilty of what has happened to İlyas and Hamdi and goes to visit them. Instead of Hamdi she meets İsmail (Nejat İşler), İlyas's father who recently has been out of jail. Her desire was to help this family by giving them a big amount of money which Aydın wanted to donate for the fixing of the schools. However, İsmail throws all the money, which is the cause of all evil and capitalism, in the fire and getting rid of it all in his way.

The day Aydın is trying to go to Istanbul, it starts to snow very hard and there is no way that he can leave. Instead of going back home, he goes to visit Suavi (Tamer Levent). He tells Hidayet not to let anybody know that he has not left for Istanbul. At Suavi's house he meets the Teacher (Nadir Sarıbacak) that has been working together with Nihal for the project. He is very jealous of him being around Nihal. All together they start drinking and arguing. When they get drunk The Teacher tells Aydın how selfish, rude and arrogant he is. Although Aydın responds to him that none of these is right, on his way back home he starts thinking that everything the teacher said was true. When he arrives home, he goes to Nihal and meanwhile we hear his inner voice telling her that he would even be her slave. All he wants from her is for her to stay with him. She is the only one he feels like his friend. This is the moment where he wakes up from his "winter sleep" and understands the importance of his wife in his life. It is time to take a new route in his life.

In the film *Winter Sleep* Ceylan used striking landscapes very sparingly this time alternating between exterior and long frequently intense and occasionally funny interior scenes outdoors wide in doors intimate soft and warm colors. (Ceylan,N.B August 5 2015)

During the 1970s, certain scholars sought to reinstate the director as author by revising auteur theory to accommodate the objections of the poststructuralists. Peter Wollen stated a theory of “auteur structuralism” in which the author is taken as an orchestra director of trans-individual codes and binary structures such as the contrasts between; culture-nature, civilization-wilderness, settler-nomad, and so on.(Fox, A. (2011). Likewise, Ceylan uses these in *Winter Sleep*, Aydın a very wise man, representing culture, is stuck in the middle of the snow unable to travel, representing nature; Aydın and his family are civilized people very involved with arts like drama and writing, however, the place they live in is in the middle of the wilderness.

ANALIZING ONCE UPON A TIME ANATOLIA

The film starts in a small car where five people are stuffed like in a sardine box. The people cannot actually be seen, however the voices are heard very clearly letting the audience feel like they are in the car, too. On the other hand, the use of the distant view lens causes a strong sense of dislocation. They are looking for Yaşar (Emre Şen), the man Kenan (Fırat Tanış) has killed but does not remember where he buried the body because he was drunk at the time. The scene is very beautiful. They keep on winding through long paths, these make us think of life's harsh and steep ways which is the metaphor for life. The journey appears more tortuous than it first appears. In this regard, a more proximal comparison, for Ceylan, is the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's film “The Wind Will Carry Us”. That film opens with a series of wide shots: hilly, dry landscape, marked by thin, winding roads craved into

the parched soil, with a single car navigating them like an ant in a vast sand box.(Kickasola, J. (2016)). Ceylan, too, uses a simple small car, stuffing a whole bunch of people in it, making them drive through winding dry landscape until they find their way in the guidance of a large tree, springing up unexpectedly and astoundingly in the hills. One of the passengers quotes from a poem, at this point: “Near the tree is a wooded lane, greener than the dreams of God.” Ceylan, too, uses the same metaphors on a darker tone. (Wood, 2007: 25; Suner, 2010:90).

He constantly uses small cars against “vast landscapes on winding roads” and their struggling headlights trying to overcome the darkness: In Ceylan’s case the “light” of truth confirms “the worst of fears”. The “immediacy of light and darkness as experiential metaphors” (or corporeal metaphors, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson [2003] have described them)

have a long history of significance in religion. Ceylan is aware of this, questioning the metaphors themselves. For instance, at the third stop in the search for the body, the Doctor (who is the central character), stands away from the group, trying to relieve himself next to a rock. A lightning illuminates the rocks, and startles everyone. These rocks might be aligned with the Biblical sentiment that the murdered Abel’s blood “cries out” from the ground (Genesis 4:10), as well as Jesus Christ’s suggestion that the rocks will “cry out,” if humans fail to give proper praise to God (Luke 19:40). The Doctor later describes these rocks as “sculptures,” but the thing is that he is bothered by his own reaction to the lightening.

A little later Arab Ali pulls on the tree branch, and some apples fall. In what appears to be a metaphorical reference to the Edenic story (told in the Old Testament and alluded to in the Qur’an), “an apple rolls down a hill, enters a stream, and snarls in a swampy area of detritus and other rotting fruit”.

Ceylan says “I wanted to show that the fate of the apple is not so different from our fate.

Everything created in the world has the same destiny—animals, trees, humans all have the same kind of destiny. In some way, the apple represents human life, as it goes to rest with the other, rotting apples. Actually, in the rest of that shot, the apple moves back into the stream, but we didn't use that not to create more hope; it's not realistic.” (Wigon, 2012: n.p.)

Their last stop is the house of the local mayor, where they eat and get some rest till the morning. All the men (guilty and innocent) share the same meal together around the same table. It is like a religious feast or sacrament (be it communion, Passover, or Eid ul-Fitr), “the Feast of Nuri Bilge Ceylan. We can end up saying that “Once Upon a Time in Anatolia”, is a film that serves as a “site of negotiation for contemporary belief and doubt”, and can be seen as a type of existential ritual. (Kickasola, J. (2016).)

Yet, despite his obvious skepticism of institutional religion, Ceylan's work is also filled with gestures that can be seen as religious, broadly speaking.

“Filmmaking, for me, is to tell the indescribable things,” Ceylan says (Wigon, 2012: n.p.) To know the human is to pluck an apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and to track its fall. From the mythic title (“Once Upon a Time”), to his theologically suggestive use of natural forces (wind, fire, lightning), to his complicated relationship with the aesthetics and power of the religious artifacts, we see a formal articulation of timeless, yet urgent, existential issues. What emerges is not religious faith,

in the conventional sense, but something like an agnostic faith in the religious search, a call to repeat the rituals again, as a Sisyphean struggle against meaninglessness. It at once employs genuine religious hope and existential nihilism, co-present as hammer and anvil, able to create or destroy the shield of faith.

In *Once Upon A Time Anatolia* we see Ceylan use long quiet scenes where the characters look at each other for long periods of time, thinking about the situation. Ceylan's point of view about these scenes is; "I wanted the audience to be unsure about whether the characters is thinking or speaking. This allows me to indicate the inner psychology of the character by showing something else in the face of the character than what is being said. It's a way of economizing in my films. But generally, in the next shot it's clear whether this is thought or actual speech. I feel that this method allows the audience to understand several things at the same time, especially if there is a contradiction between a character's expression or thought and what's said. So you're told two things at the same time. And I believe the audience is educated enough to understand such methods. Cinema has the liberty to use such methods and No- but death is always within life in the provincial areas, and we wanted to show that. People there don't really isolate death and they don't hide it like we do in the cities. For the autopsy technician it's normal, it's his job. But, like everybody, he wants better things. I wanted to show that death has different meanings. An autopsy technician doesn't feel pity for the body in front of him. It's something he sees every day. For somebody else, it's something different, and it surprises me sometimes when I see the point of view change. Everybody's relationship with death is different but I like the attitude in the provinces and it influences me. They are right: death is within life. And it should be. There should be many rituals around death." (White, R. (2011).)

In conclusion as we can see the film making is not about only about camera angles and it is mostly about people's feelings and psychology and the auteur's point of view. In my opinion another Turkish filmmaker Çağan Irmak, has the same characteristics of filmmaking as Nuri Bilge Ceylan. He also gives some public messages in his films like Ceylan, while he uses the silence technique to let the audience think. He, too, shows us the deep psychological reasonings of the way his characters act. I have always felt like Irmak is a follower of Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

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