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# Truth and Melancholia in Anatolia The Films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan

by Stuart Liebman

When *Winter Sleep* won the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2014, its director, Nuri Bilge Ceylan (pronounced Noo-rih Bil-geh Jay-lahn), had been no stranger to the famous film mecca's audiences for a decade. Already in 2003, his third feature, *Distant*, won the Grand Prix, Cannes's second greatest honor, and his two leading men also shared the award for Best Performance by a Male Actor. In 2006, Ceylan was awarded his second FIPRESCI Prize from the International Federation of Film Critics for *Climates*, the first film he made on HD Video and in which he starred with his wife, Ebru. (His *Clouds of May* had won that award for the first time in 2000.) By 2008, having surpassed Yilmaz Güney as the best-known film director Turkey had ever produced, his stature was further confirmed by the Cannes jury when he garnered the Prize for Best Director of his intense family drama *Three Monkeys*. This recognition proved to be but a steppingstone toward a second Grand Prix for his magnificent *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* in 2011, which in turn presaged his capstone achievement three years later. Ceylan had become a rare sort of wunderkind at Cannes, but over the same decade European critics had begun to publish rave reviews, and juries at other prestigious festivals, from Dublin through Karlovy Vary to Talinn, had also bestowed upon his distinguished body of work a huge haul of prizes—around one hundred in all.

Art-cinema venues and critics in the United States came somewhat late to this international party. Despite the pioneering support of the Chicago Film Festival, which showed a couple of Ceylan's earliest films, American screenings of these first ventures were spotty, at best. That changed in 2004 when New York City's venerable Film Forum programmed *Distant*, the first of his later, larger scaled, increasingly ambitious features that had been acquired for distribution in the U.S. by Dan Talbot's New Yorker Films. Bookings at other art cinemas and film festivals across the country picked up speed and Ceylan's work gained wider distribution. Respectful and eventually enthusiastic critical notices echoing those of their European counterparts followed.

Still, positive critical encomia and art-cinema movie houses that exhibit challenging films by unfamiliar directors do not move the popularity needle very much for

American moviegoers. While some of Ceylan's titles did appear on DVD and were eventually picked up by streaming services, stateside audiences for his films, even those devoted to art cinema, have remained disappointing compared to works by legendary stalwarts—say, Antonioni, Bergman, Bresson, or Ozu, among others, whom Ceylan himself so admires. His films are simply not widely appreciated here. Hollywood apparently does not. Case in point: the Academy Awards committee charged with selecting candidates for the Best Foreign Language Film shortlist have never nominated any of his films for an Oscar. Indeed, that august group snubbed what is arguably Ceylan's paramount achievement, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, in the year it was eligible. Nevertheless,

**A review of a Blu-ray box set of his complete films and a new book establish Turkey's Nuri Bilge Ceylan, director of *Winter Sleep* and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, as arguably the greatest underrated filmmaker of his generation.**

his subtly demanding oeuvre is as distinctive in its thematic concerns and formal strategies, and certainly comparable in quality to the achievements by Ceylan's more celebrated contemporary peers such as Iran's Asghar Farhadi, a two-time Oscar winner. Ceylan has simply not received the recognition his work deserves.

Thankfully, an excellent new Blu-ray edition of all the films—one short and eight features—that Ceylan has made to date offers veteran cinephiles and hopefully a

broader national audience an opportunity to experience in a more accessible, intimate home setting one of the finest bodies of world cinema produced over the last quarter century. The box set is also loaded with illuminating extras, including interviews with the very thoughtful and articulate director. Another striking part of the package are several revealing "behind the scenes" documentaries. They illustrate how exactly Ceylan guides his actors' line readings, gestures, and movements, especially in key scenes, as well as how intensively he works with his production teams to organize set designs, lighting, and cinematography.

Apart from this edition but recommended for those who will be motivated to explore Ceylan's artistic imagination and sources in greater depth is a 2018 monograph—*The Cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan: The Global Vision of a Turkish Filmmaker*—jointly written by British academics Bülent Diken, Graeme Gilloch, and Craig Hammond. Recently reissued in paperback, the book offers inter-

pretations of what the authors deem to be the "philosophical" implications of Ceylan's cinema based on ideas derived from a theoretical panorama ranging from the Frankfurt School through French postmodernism. They also provide a series of compelling—if at times gnomically formulated—readings of all the films except for *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018), which was released after the book went to press.

In the 1990s, Ceylan was a working photographer. I first encountered his photographs fifteen years ago at a superb exhibition at London's National Film Theatre before I had seen any of his films. Most impressive were the expansive provincial landscapes and village views taken at different times of year, but all revealed his uncanny ability to isolate revealing perspectives on his subjects from carefully calibrated angles and distances. In adapted form, he carried over this skill when he decided to try his hand at making works in the related but different medium of cinema. He was, in fact, almost entirely self-taught as a filmmaker; he briefly attended film school in Turkey, but left, preferring to learn by making his own mistakes. From 1995 on, he threw himself into project after project. Scrutiny of the credits for his first half-dozen films discloses an astonishing fact: Ceylan performed virtually all of the major filmmaking functions,





A police convoy, with a handcuffed murder suspect in tow, venture into the remote Turkish countryside in an effort to locate the grave of their victim, in this scene from Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*.

often many at once. Working with a small team of collaborators, family, and friends, he scripted, directed, shot, and edited as well as produced most of his early works. This high level of multitasking almost certainly was required by the extremely modest, at least in part self-financed budgets he had at his disposal at the beginning of his career. His extraordinary efforts to acquire a broad range of professional and technical skills have, in any case, clearly earned substantial artistic dividends. Ceylan's mastery over and determination to control so many dimensions of the filmmaking process allowed him to devise a constellation of working methods, themes, and stylistic choices that define his stature as a significant cinematic auteur.

Diken, Gilloch, and Hammond provide a useful, if incomplete summary of some of the most distinctive characteristics of Ceylan's narrative themes and visual strategies.

The use of monochrome images; the long, slow takes and static camera; the insistence on real time; the focus on duration and inaction; the disclosure of the tensions between and disappointments of family members; the misunderstandings and mismatches of conversations as individuals speak to themselves and past each other; the acute attentiveness to location and setting combined with the pervasive sense of the dislocation of characters themselves; and, above all, the quiet but profound melancholy that suffuses the whole and tests to the limit the patience of the cinema audience...Time seems to slow; every moment seems extended, elongated. This all-pervasive, unendurable ennui is a precondition for...a sense of longing, of wanting to be elsewhere, of hopes or happiness thwarted and/or unfulfilled.

Simply reading a list of features encountered again and again in Ceylan's films, of course, does not adequately convey the variety of ways in which he gives them dramatic and cinematic flesh and blood. And I must quickly reassure potential spectators that the authors' overstated stress on the "unendurable ennui" of his works will not—or at least should not—test their patience "to the limit." The often-lengthy scenes and the protracted tense silences of the dialogues they feature may, indeed, cause *some* to be bored. An alert viewer, however, will use the time profitably to discern the shifting currents of the interrelationships coursing beneath the narrative surfaces as well as to tease out the not always apparent motives of the complex characters that Ceylan scripts. Paying attention to the extraordinary care he takes in framing, lighting, and staging also allows nuances of symbolic meaning to emerge.

Ceylan's films share themes and visual strategies to a surprising degree, albeit with variations and shifts of emphasis over the course of his now quarter-century-old career. Despite these recurring thematic and stylistic preoccupations, his oeuvre can be usefully divided into three loose, often overlapping categories: the early films about provincial life; the distinctive mid-career riffs on genre conventions; and finally, the more expansive, quasi-novelistic works of recent years.

The twenty-minute black-and-white *Cocoon* (1995), Ceylan's resonant debut film, the first made in Turkey ever selected to appear among the short selections at Cannes, anticipates the settings and moods of what Diken et al. persuasively describe as a "cinematic quartet." In addition to *Cocoon*, they include his first three features. Modest in scale, they have small, largely amateur casts, often featuring Ceylan's rela-

tives and friends. Their loose, episodic plots focus on provincial life, its small pleasures, and its major discontents. Sometimes the atmospheric landscapes—the starkly handsome widescreen vistas, the wind rustling through leaves on the trees, in short, nature—emerge as epiphanies available in the Turkish countryside. More frequently, however, the stories focus on the constraints and despair of small-town life. The scripts center on individual members of fragile families, who have lost a sense of agency over their lives. Futility and melancholy are the predominant moods. Some characters can reconcile themselves to the limitations of the realities they face. Others dream of escaping, of making a transition, however painful, to a hopefully more satisfying life elsewhere. Few succeed.

In *Cocoon*, no one speaks, though there are bursts of sound effects and classical musical excerpts, a regular presence in Ceylan's cinema. Still images, borrowed from the Ceylan family's scrapbooks, and staged scenes (played, incidentally, by Ceylan's parents, Emin and Fatma) convey a story of an elderly couple's early love and marriage that faces serious challenges as the wife cares for her husband's apparent illness. Puzzling images of an unidentified boy, whose appearance is often linked to the father's gaze, are intercut with these scenes. Who is this boy? Only a local kid playing? Or does he represent the man's memories of a carefree youth while he lies ill and fearing death? Is he perhaps the couple's son or grandson who abandoned them or died? Or should such images be interpreted as purely a fantasy of the couple's disappointed hopes for a child who was never born? These questions are never resolved. Without clear answers, viewers are left in a gently ambiguous, one might call it poetic, suspense.

*The Small Town* (1998), Ceylan's modest first feature, and *Clouds of May*, his second, offer more expansive panoramas of provincial life. Developed from a memoir by Ceylan's sister, *The Small Town* unfolds over the course of a year's changing seasons. In its first episode, children cavort happily on the snowy paths of a backwater village. The mood, however, soon shifts when they cause the town's hapless simpleton to slip and fall on the ice and then cruelly mock him. Such shifts from tranquil or playful events to more ominous or troubling actions become a recurring pattern. When spring arrives, the story follows two children, loosely based on Ceylan and his sister, who taste some of the first fruits growing in a cemetery (of all places) and see a charming donkey (a nod to Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar*) as they return home after school. The boy, however, takes unsettling delight in tormenting a turtle, an action that later haunts him in feverish dreams, the first of several oneiric sequences that Ceylan will represent in his films. Summer brings moments of release at a visiting fair even as one of the main characters, Saffet (played by Ceylan's cousin, Mehmet Emin Toprak), jobless and disaffected, is repelled when he sees goats being slaughtered and roasted in open pits.

The narrative strands climax over the course of a late summer evening when the two children and Saffet take part in a multi-generational family picnic. Conversations begin calmly enough with the grandfather's (once again, Emin Ceylan) reminiscing about his long march home after Turkish army service in World War I. The discussions, however, soon evolve into disagreements. Accusations and reproaches fly and reveal the centrifugal forces at play in the family. Ceylan effectively augments the increasingly tense exchanges by visual means. He throws the flickering light of their campfire onto the participants' faces, limned by inky shadows. His editing reaches a peak of intensity when he frames haunt-

ingly huge close-ups of their lips, foreheads, and eyes, symbolic synecdoches for their angry speeches, thoughts, and agitated souls.

This protracted scene is the first of many in Ceylan's cinema in which characters engage in intensive and lengthy discussions that reveal open rifts and wounds. This is also the first occasion in his work when conflicts, often among men, take center stage. These male characters have foibles. They are often alienated, bitter, condescending, critical, cruel, cynical, despairing, lonely, lying, manipulative, selfish, self-serving, and spiteful. Some are thwarted in their desire for female companions, others have marital problems, past or current. Some are even prone to violence. Virtually all are melancholy, unlikable antiheroes. They are also, however, complex individuals and arresting characters who do not fully comprehend their own mixed motives and unsuspected affinities. Women are part of these masculine worlds, but at this family gathering they are marginalized. Ceylan's compositions literally push them to the periphery or background of the screen space.

*Clouds of May* adds a novel kind of character and a plot line that enhances the self-reflexive, autobiographical dimension Ceylan admits was present in his early cinema. Shooting for the first time in color, Ceylan focuses on four male figures of different ages. All are single-minded, animated by their intelligence and persistence in pursuing what they want, though they can also be manipulative and guileful if it suits their ends. Most interesting, perhaps, is Muzaffer (Muzaffer Özdemir), a filmmaker with little to show for it. He is clearly a fictional projection of Ceylan—whose own father plays Muzaffer's father. Muzaffer pursues all the kinds of essential activities that Ceylan had to do to make the film. In search of regional color, he scouts locations and auditions neighbors to be extras. Similar to what Ceylan does in the behind-the-scenes documentaries in this edition, Muzaffer coaches his friends and rela-

tives, at times growing frustrated when they muff lines. The film climaxes at a scene around a fire on a late summer evening, which conspicuously recalls the conclusion of *The Small Town*. Indeed, some of the coaching scenes, seen through the camera's framing lens, seem to be recreations of, or outtakes from, the prior film.

Once again, the characters' fates are left unresolved although the tone is decidedly more upbeat. Muzaffer has shot his film, though its completion and critical reception remain uncertain. His father, who appeared physically vigorous, but rather bumbling at first, masters all the relevant legal statutes to prepare for a suit against state officials he fears want to take away the trees on his land. Whether he will be successful in staving off the authorities is unclear. Ali, a seemingly sweet and innocent ten-year-old relative whose actions reveal a rebellious streak and a willingness to resort to guile, obtains a promise to get the wristwatch he craves. These are among the most optimistic denouements in all of Ceylan's films. And, after the filmmaking wraps, the film ends as the morning fog hovering over the verdant valley symbolically lifts as the sun rises to cast its beams on the father dozing after a sleepless night. Only Saffet, whom Muzaffer had casually offered to bring with him to Istanbul, is left in despair after his hoped-for mentor, with no more need of Saffet's help, reneges on his pledge. That loose end, however, sets up the premise for *Distant*, the concluding chapter of the quartet.

Longing for the unobtainable—what might have been, what still seems improbable—comes to the thematic foreground in *Distant*. We meet a Saffet-like character, now renamed Yusuf (but played by Mehmet Toprak, the Saffet of the prior features), in a spectacularly long take as he trudges across snow-covered fields from a picture-postcard-worthy small town in the distance. He hitchhikes to Istanbul where he asks for shelter from his relative, the photographer Mahmut (once more, Muzaffer Özdemir), an established but frustrated product photographer for a tile company. He is an evolved version of the filmmaker in *Clouds*, and Ceylan has acknowledged that the character has autobiographical references. The initially supportive relationship between the hardened, disillusioned city dweller and the naive newcomer teeters at times on the edge of comedy before it turns into a sour conflict between the punctilious photographer and his sloppy relative.

Yusuf's work in a village factory only promised repetitive industrial drudgery. He wants an adventure, perhaps on a merchant ship. There are, however, no jobs. Mahmut is also bored with his work routine; Yusuf's presence only deepens his gloom. His arrival reminds Mahmut of his unfulfilled dream of making films and of the family responsibilities he has selfishly tried to avoid. Both suffer from the limited prospects for change. They embark on a brief expedition to shoot provincial mosque interiors. As they drive on a mountain



Istanbul newcomer Yusuf (Mehmet Emin Toprak), in search of employment, walks on the stormy, snow-covered mean streets of the city as his personal situation worsens in *Distant*.



A home haunted by disappointments: Aydın (Haluk Bilginer), while trying to write one of his newspaper columns, finds himself unwittingly drawn into a dispiriting conversation with his sister Neclâ (Demet Akbağ) in this scene from *Winter Sleep*.

road, Mahmut glimpses a particularly enchanting vista as the sun goes down and this epiphany briefly rekindles his filmmaking ambition. Despite Yusuf's perhaps self-serving encouragement, however, Mahmut quickly gives up hope of realizing the idea.

Their personal lives are equally forlorn. With little else to do, Yusuf follows women around the city, but fails to attract their attention. Mahmut furtively watches porno videos at night and arranges liaisons with call girls—a poor substitute for the wife he loved, and still loves. After an abortion he encouraged her to get was botched, she was unable to have children. They divorced. Now, in a poignant scene, she announces to him that she is emigrating with her new husband to Canada where she hopes to find medical help to become pregnant again. They part wistfully. At the end of *Distant*, Mahmut sits on the banks of the Bosphorus, sadly watching merchant ships come and go, ships on which the luckless Yusuf hoped to fashion his future. Instead, he must return to the village he so desperately wanted to escape. He never says that he is going back; he simply leaves a set of Mahmut's house keys dangling on a hook as mute testimony to his failure.

These brief summaries illustrate the continuity within change of the themes and character types in Ceylan's first films. But *Distant's* urban locale, along with that of *Three Monkeys*, is exceptional. Ceylan returns repeatedly to the Turkish hinterlands as the settings for most of his films. *Distant's* style also reflects Ceylan's growing sophistication in articulating screen space through *mise en scène* and framing. Muzaffer and Yusuf march back and forth, down and back the different axes of the main interior set, an apartment Ceylan knew well because he lived there at the time. The characters' movements through it, their entries into or disappearances from the set, articulate the camera frame's limits and the vari-

ous parameters of off-screen space—to the sides, top and bottom, into the depths of the shot and toward the space behind the camera—as Noël Burch described them decades ago. This staging and editing establish and then challenge a viewer's orientation in the apartment, particularly when Ceylan deploys mirrors that shift the respective position of the characters. Elsewhere in *Distant* he offers many variations of this kind of perceptual play, when, for example, Yusuf follows a girl through a mall, and most spectacularly in the sequence in which Mehmet spies on his former wife at the airport when she is about to depart forever. This is a dimension of his stylistic development that Diken and his co-authors curiously ignore, even though similar strategies reappear in *Three Monkeys*.



Aydın repeatedly humiliates his young wife, Nihâl (Melisa Sözen) in *Winter Sleep*.

Ceylan's next three films open a new chapter of his creative evolution. Although Ceylan prefers to work with collaborators on a more intimate scale, the films are longer and more expensive to make. His access to at least partial European financing and distribution helped to fund these larger projects. All are in muted color and borrow certain thematic premises of conventional movie genres: a romantic melodrama about a couple breaking up (*Climates*); a visceral melodrama about political and personal corruption and how it impacts a family's moral disintegration (*Three Monkeys*); and a murder mystery (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*). These genres provide a basic template for the plots although Ceylan bends them in significant ways to serve his scripts' more exacting dialogues and probe the lives of his characters more deeply.

From the first, Ceylan's films have been centered on characters, not on action in its more familiar, overly kinetic connotations. In interviews and in print, Ceylan has repeatedly attributed his interest in more subtle interior dramas to his passion for literature, especially his favorite Russian authors—Chekhov, the first among equals, but also Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. As early as *Clouds of May*, Ceylan signaled his esteem for Chekhov by dedicating it to him, and several subsequent films confirm the enduring influence of the Russian master's stories. Nowhere, perhaps, is Chekhov's inspiration elaborated more brilliantly than in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, arguably Ceylan's best film to date.

*Anatolia* is not an adaptation of any Chekhov story I can identify. Rather, Ceylan has absorbed the lessons of Chekhov's incisive psychological insights into characters and assimilated them into his own personal interest in the dynamics of men in groups. *Anatolia* has four, subtly drawn central figures. All are men. Commissar Naci (Yılmaz Erdoğan)



On return to his hometown, newly graduated college student Sinan (Aydın Doğu Demirkol) encounters Hatice (Hazar Ergüçlü), a former girlfriend, in *The Wild Pear Tree*.

leads an investigation into a death committed by Kenan (Firat Tanis), the confessed killer under custody. Accompanying them on the search for the victim's body are a team of Naci's male deputies as well as State Prosecutor Nusret (Taner Birsell), who ensures that proper procedures are followed, and a local physician, Doctor Cemal (Muhammet Uzuner), who must examine the corpse where it is found. Packed into several vehicles, they move across the rolling hills of the Anatolian steppe seeking the site where Kenan claims he buried the body. Dusk descends, making the search more difficult (the nocturnal scenes also provided a difficult artistic challenge for Ceylan who had to improvise appropriate lighting techniques on the spot). The four men seem very different at first and do not know each other very well. That changes over the course of the night as they disclose, or as the viewers infer, that all are troubled by traumatic losses each has repressed. Eventually, all—including the killer—become bound together in a web of unsuspected emotional and psychological connections.

Like a typical tough cop in a film noir, Naci, frustrated by the suspect's inability to pinpoint the body's location, becomes physically aggressive toward the suspect. The prosecutor quickly rebukes him. Cemal, by contrast, plays the "good cop" role; he senses beneath Kenan's fierce demeanor a sensitivity that belies his presumed identity as a vicious killer; he offers him a cigarette when others refuse. He also understands why Naci was so quick to assault Kenan. Naci has asked the doctor to prescribe medications for Naci's son who is probably mentally ill, hard to control, and potentially violent. Naci punished Kenan the way he must resist punishing his son.

Nusret senses in Cemal's reserve an intelligent man who can help him solve an extraordinary mystery which he is eager to share. Nusret says a friend's wife, while pregnant, predicted that she would give birth and then die. She and her husband were in love, though, he admits, the husband once committed adultery while drunk. Nusret quickly

dismisses this betrayal as meaningless. Yet, shortly after the baby was born, the woman did die even though she appeared to be healthy. Curiously, no autopsy was conducted, supposedly at the family's request, and Nusret, a stickler for following appropriate practices, ironically did not insist that one be performed. Doctor Cemal firmly rejects the idea that the woman could predict her own death; he sensibly suggests that she took pills that stopped her heart. Nusret at first demurs; he prefers her mystical prediction as an explanation. But this is merely his traumatized, defensive evasion of a crucial fact. Once he realizes that Cemal already has discerned the truth, Nusret confesses that the woman was, in fact, his own wife.

Cemal is the most stable, intuitive, and empathetic member of the investigative team. But the doctor, as melancholy as any of the others, also remains the most enigmatic character. When he returns to his office at the hospital to prepare for the autopsy, he examines photos of an attractive young woman in a city—perhaps Istanbul—where he used to live. Cemal silently and sadly looks through these images, and it seems clear that the woman is someone he has lost. Did she die? Did he do something to cause her to leave him? Is her loss the reason he has sought the anonymity of the provinces? Does this explain his loneliness and attraction to a lovely girl serving tea in a village? No more than in *Cocoon* is there any answer to such questions. The absence of the woman in the photos, like that of Nusret's wife, remains an inextinguishable presence haunting his life.

Two last questions remain: why did Kenan kill his friend with whom he had been drinking and carousing in the film's prologue? And why did the murderer turn to the police chief who had bullied him and ask that he take care of the victim's son and wife? Cemal was initially puzzled by the request, but he has a sudden insight when the victim's attractive wife arrives with her son to identify her husband before the autopsy. Prompted, perhaps, by his attraction to the woman, he notes the resemblance between the fiercely

handsome Kenan and the victim's alleged son. Cemal never openly states his conclusion, but it may be inferred from the serious ethical error he commits when suppressing a key fact in the autopsy report: the victim had dirt in his lungs, suggesting that Kenan (and his brother) had buried him alive. This even more terrible crime should warrant a longer prison term, but we intuit that Cemal grasps for somehow exculpating motives for the murder. Was it a crime of passion out of Kenan's lust for the friend's wife? Or did he have reasons to react to the boy's treatment, a serious matter because Kenan was the boy's real father? Did the loss of the woman whose pictures he viewed underlie Cemal's curious empathy with a murderer? Everyone has their reasons; Cemal decides to repress the incriminating facts to lessen Kenan's prison sentence and allow him to return to the broken family more quickly.

As far as I know, Chekhov never wrote a story like the police procedural script for *Anatolia*. Ceylan, however, had embraced many of the stories' key lessons. Their plots minimize external action in favor of delicate, incremental changes that develop through the characters' subtle gestures, speech, and quiet recognitions. Importantly, at the conclusion of many stories, some issues remain unanticipated, unresolved, or unspoken, and thus closer to the way events in our ordinary lives evolve. Chekhov and Ceylan share an aesthetic defined by an essential humanism that acquires even deeper emotional power by the artistic techniques they employ. These are never showy but emerge, barely visible, from the story's emotional roots. In *Anatolia*, cinematography and staging function this way. The undulating landscape in which the action, what little there is, takes place as night descends, sustains the drama by almost invisibly mimicking the uncertain searches of the investigation and the confusing moral ambiguities that surround it and the investigators' consciences, too.

Diken and his co-authors identify at least two Chekhov stories—"The Wife" (1892) and "Excellent People" (1886)—as the basis for *Winter Sleep*, a more traditional, albeit brilliantly crafted adaptation. Ceylan takes key plot elements, character types, even extended dialogues, and transposes them to present-day Turkey. He also draws on hints and allusions in the Chekhov text to imagine several complementary subplots and characters that he grafts onto the narrative to fill in gaps and amplify events in the narrative. *Winter Sleep* is talkier—a feature that has become more apparent in Ceylan's most recent films. The dialogues are more elaborate and at times more mannered. As a result, his scripts are more dependent on professional actors to play major roles. The cast he assembles for *Winter Sleep* is fully up to the intricate tasks he set for them, and the more conventional blocking and editing do not distract from their fine performances. At three hours and sixteen minutes, it is the longest film Ceylan has produced till now.

Aydın (Haluk Bilginer), a former middle-aged actor who apparently never lived up to expectations, may be the most disagreeable, detestable character Ceylan has ever invented. A vain but self-lacerating, petty dialectician manqué, he wears a near permanent smirk on his face, the outward sign of his condescension toward everyone. He has retired to a hotel ("Othello") he inherited that is built into the soft volcanic rock of the exotic Turkish region of Cappadocia where he lives in a cold, virtually colorless world of blue light that bleakly illuminates gray and tan landscapes. No wonder that he is attracted to his younger wife, Nihâl (Melisa Sözen), who also lives in the Othello in her own cozy, warm-hued apartment on a separate floor. The couple, adapted from "The Wife," are estranged. Their contacts are perfunctory. Aydın's sister, Neclâ (Demet Akbağ), adapted from a character in "Excellent People," has moved in after having divorced her abusive husband (a feature not in the original). She is bored and bitterly laments her own absence of passion and direction.

The trio soon fall out. Aydın disdains the hotel's operational affairs, though as a local landowner he gives tacit approval to the heartless eviction of long-term tenants who are behind on the rent, including an imam (Serhat Mustafa Kılıç) and his morose, ex-convict brother (Nejat İşler), aptly named after the biblical Ismail, the one whom Abraham cast out. This sets a ticking dramatic time bomb that will explode at the end. He prefers to write brief commentaries for a small local magazine that few read, as Neclâ points out to wound his pretensions. His plan to write an ambitious history of Turkish theater has foundered in part because of his fear to commit himself to the project. Neclâ, seething because she feels neglected by Aydın and Nihâl, decides to sacrifice her life by returning to her alcoholic husband. Nihâl, a woman in search of herself, devotes her energies to mounting a fundraising drive to help local schools, an initiative that Aydın, jealous of her social connections, wants to co-opt. He demeans her competence, calling her naive, and spoils the one activity that provides her with any solace for their loveless marriage. But without money, she cannot leave him, and Aydın, who theatrically announces that he is leaving, ultimately cannot. No exit exists for them; hell is each other. As in so many scenes in Ceylan's films, dogs furiously bark in the distance, lending a grace note of menace and melancholy to the characters' frozen fates.

Aydın, Nihâl, and Neclâ are each, in their own ways, *Luftmenschen*—people who pay lip service to ideas and ideals, using them only to fill their aimless hours of acrimony and self-loathing. Central to the film are a series of their rancorous, unnerving discussions. Sometimes the three debate the morality and purpose of deciding not to resist evil, a high-minded theme that might

have been taken from a lesser-known Dostoevsky novel, but in fact its dialogue was lifted almost verbatim from "Excellent People." Other interactions are less lofty and turn into visceral quarrels, especially when the characters remove their masks and speak painful truths to each other, even as they resist absorbing the justified reproaches made against them. And like many "idealists," they dance on the edge of a dangerous volcano by failing to understand the true nature of the society in which they live. The nihilistic evil that breeds there, and which they talk about so blithely, emerges in an astonishing denouement that you will have to watch the entire film to appreciate.

Ceylan has generally avoided any direct engagement with contemporary Turkey's social and political problems, though careful exploration of his films reveals many glancing allusions to social anomie, lack of opportunities for meaningful work, and, as in *Winter Sleep*, significant class differences. *The Wild Pear Tree* also quietly—I am tempted to say slyly—recognizes inequities and the resulting despair in a coming-of-age story about Sinan (Doğu Demirkol), who has just finished his education at a teacher's college. He is first shown as he sits in a café behind a window that reflects the rippling waves of a river. The image's layers blur his face, implicitly suggesting an identity in flux. He has an outsized opinion of his writing talents, and has already written a novel about the region, but he must return home to prepare for the exams that will determine whether he will qualify for a teaching job.

Sinan's family is financially distressed and emotionally stressed. His father, İdris (Murat Cemcir), a teacher in the local primary school, is addicted to gambling and has brought the family to the brink of poverty. He has become a kind of pariah in the close-knit town. As soon as Sinan descends from the bus, he learns that İdris has failed to repay yet another loan. Only the work and wiles of his wife (Bennu Yıldırım) sustains their home life, which is filled with petty quarrels and scarcity.

Sinan's sense of futility burgeons. He fails his exams. He meets a girl he once liked, but she is getting married and leaves after briefly tantalizing him with a kiss. He fights with friends. His tendentious comments and cocky insinuations alienate the most famous local writer he encounters by chance in a bookstore. Local officials cannot raise money to publish his book. His mother's father is a retired imam, but religion offers no solace. Sinan catches the current imam and his colleague from another town stealing apples and then listens to them debate about Islamic principles that yields no enlightenment, only a descent into disheartening dogmatism. In desperation, Sinan resorts to a treacherous act: he steals İdris's dog and sells it, leaving his father to grieve. The book fails to sell a single copy. His only options are military service in the

East to repress the Kurdish population or a police position where, as one of his friends in the force says, they beat up leftist demonstrators. Sinan later appears in silhouette in combat gear slogging through the mud in the cold mist against a gray sky.

İdris, demoralized by the loss of his dog, struggles. His retirement allows him to pay off his debts, and he has left his wife and daughter to raise sheep on the small farm he owns. This is hardly promising since his attempt to dig a well through the stony ground fails. Nevertheless, he stubbornly persists, addicted to gambling on eventual success. Sinan's return leads to a relatively happy ending. Sinan realizes that his father is the only one who has read and appreciated his book. They reconcile by embracing a shared symbolic identity as the misshapen fruits of the wild pear tree like the one standing alone and defiant against the hillside. The last shot pictures a surprised İdris staring down the well as Sinan valiantly continues digging for water as a gesture of his fidelity.

André Bazin once championed a "mixed" cinema in which literature and cinema would fuse to create "novels...written directly into films." I do not know if Ceylan was aware of this notion that is far more demanding than the adaptation of existing novels, but he implicitly accepted the challenge. If *Anatolia* may be said to have been the first of the kinds of "novels" he made that was fully achieved, *Winter Sleep* is its worthy successor and the equally ambitious *The Wild Pear Tree* is only marginally less successful. It certainly bears virtually all the hallmarks of Ceylan's narratives and the performances—particularly by the alternately sad, sneering, and awkwardly laughing Murat Cemcir and the stoic Bennu Yıldırım—are exceptionally fine. The characters, however, wear their underlying infirmities too much on their sleeves. The religious disputation also seems far too long and frankly unnecessary, while the evocation of the wild pear tree's misshapen fruit as a symbol of the male protagonists seems forced and overly literal. Perhaps audiences should not begin their exploration of Ceylan's work here, but they should not hesitate to enter his extraordinary and moving cinematic world. ■

#### Nuri Bilge Ceylan: The Complete Films

A PAL format Region B Blu-ray box set distributed by New Wave Films, [www.newwavefilms.co.uk](http://www.newwavefilms.co.uk), that includes *Cocoon*, *The Small Town*, *Clouds of May*, *Distant*, *Climates*, *Three Monkeys*, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, *Winter Sleep*, and *The Wild Pear Tree*. Alas, an all-regions Blu-ray player is necessary to screen these box set discs in the United States.

Several of Ceylan's films are available on Region 1 Blu-ray and DVD or streaming and can be found by searching [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), [Reelgood.com](http://Reelgood.com), and [JustWatch.com](http://JustWatch.com).

#### The Cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan:

##### *The Global Vision of a Turkish Filmmaker*

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