

Radu Jude Tells Us Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World

CINEASTE

America's
leading magazine
on the art
and politics of
the cinema
Vol. XLIX, No. 2
U.S. \$8.00
Canada \$9.00



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Draw What You Know Well

An Interview with Nuri Bilge Ceylan

by Stuart Liebman



A snatch of dialogue in a brief, seemingly incidental scene of Nuri Bilge Ceylan's latest film, *About Dry Grasses*, might well serve as a credo animating his entire cinematic oeuvre. It is spoken by the film's lead character, Samet, a disillusioned art teacher who feels marooned in a provincial town in Turkey's Far East. He posts on the blackboard a photograph he has taken of the local surroundings that he asks the students to use as the basis for drawings they must prepare. Nearly everyone in the class immediately protests that they have already performed this exercise many times. Knowing that he will not be able to convince them to complete their work as he has asked, Samet morosely grouches that they can do what they want, but he still sternly insists on his conviction that the foundation of the art they are making should be to "draw what you know well." Behind this short speech, one can almost hear the voice of Ceylan himself, for it precisely defines the sort of artistic principles and practice that he has followed over his distinguished, quarter-century-long filmmaking career.

Anyone familiar with almost any of Ceylan's prior eight features will not be surprised to learn that for *About Dry Grasses*, to be released in the United States in February 2024 by Janus Films, he has returned to a milieu populated by a set of characters that he knows very well indeed. Set deep in a rural backwater of his native Turkey, the town and rugged landscape distantly recall the small provincial town of Yenice and its surroundings in which he grew up. The locale portrayed in *About Dry Grasses*, however, is certainly even more bleak. From the very first shot, a deep layer of packed snow covers the terrain for almost the entire film. Snow falls intermittently throughout, often reducing the nondescript structures of the town to smudges on an indistinct horizon. It is a cold, starkly monochromatic world whose skies are perpetually gray; even the warmer interiors are cramped and dark. As the drama proceeds, Ceylan only momentarily suspends the gloom by staging brief scenes set on high points in the mountains that afford magnificent, if desolate, vistas of vast fields of snow covering the nearby peaks while a setting sun beckons the eye through clouds toward distant horizons. The images alone provide an intimation of what Samet must feel: hell is where he is; any possible escape to his future must aim toward a faraway elsewhere. Detractors of the Romantic poets often mocked using images to reveal the inner

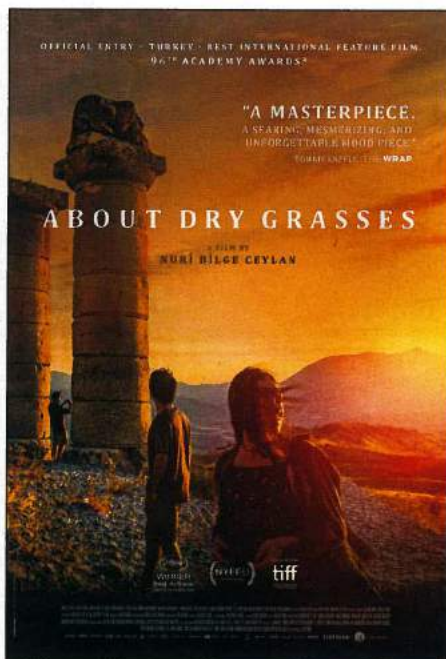
He began as a young movie fan in a small town in Turkey and has today become one of the world's great filmmakers. As his new film, *About Dry Grasses*, goes into U.S. release he reflects upon his career, his inspirations, and finding new ways of cinematic expression.

life of characters as a "pathetic fallacy," but here, at least for me, the device works. Only at the very end does a coda set in summer decisively shift the film's narrative strategies and open possibilities for a character who, despite one's misgivings, one has come to care about.

Samet (played by a beguilingly maleficent Deniz Celiloğlu) is not always easy to like. Like many of Ceylan's self-involved protagonists, he is a character unable to endure a stultifying, isolating milieu to which he, as a government employee, has been assigned to work. Intelligent and educated, he longs to escape to a more cosmopolitan city like Istanbul or Ankara. Though capable of fellow feeling, and at times even generous (especially with a rebellious secondary character to whom he has loaned money that will never be repaid), Samet only momentarily earns our empathy. His condescension to others, his willingness to deceive and even to wound his roommate, Kenan (Musab Ekici), makes him eminently dislikable, if not unredeemable. He seems incapable of recognizing—at least, perhaps, until the film's end—that his dissatisfactions lie unreconciled within him, not without. A close cousin to the complicated, dark anti-heroes of Ceylan's earlier movies, he is a character whose motivations Ceylan candidly admits he personally understands all too well.

Ceylan's great talent as a filmmaker, however, has in part rested on his ability, through dialogue and telling incident, to make Samet and all his other self-absorbed characters, each of them with unique quirks and problems, into some of the most palpably alive, psychologically complex, and engaging presences in contemporary cinema. Their obvious foibles and flaws are, he seems to suggest, what make them all too human. In Samet's case, some obscure (even if intriguing) longings and impulses draw him to Sevim (Ece Bağcı), a flirtatious teenager. He seems to want to be this village Lolita's object of desire by inappropriately bringing her little presents and favoring her in class. What motivates him to do so is never clarified and raises questions that cast a harsh shadow over the unraveling drama. When the two fall out, he will be forced into a reckoning with the authorities, his small circle of colleagues, the few he can call friends and, most importantly, with himself.

Ceylan wrote the scripts of all his early films; they favor incident over plot and the subtle interplay of characters above all. As he announced in an interview, his fascination lay with ordinary people—many of his actors at the time were nonprofessionals—doing ordinary things: children mock a mentally disabled man who slips on an icy path, or a family picnicking, remembering, and disagreeing around a fire in a grove on a late summer evening. Dialogue was sparse (and mostly postsynched). For the last fifteen years, however, the best and most





In an early scene in *About Dry Grasses*, when the students in the art class of Samet (Deniz Celiloğlu) complain about his latest assignment, which they feel is repetitive, he replies in exasperation that they can do what they want, but that they should “draw what you know well.”

intricate of his films have been co-written with his wife, Ebru (and in *About Dry Grasses*, also with Akin Aksu). These late films rely far more than in the past on often elaborately written (and brilliantly performed) dialogue scenes, replete with telling pauses, hesitations, and revealing gestures punctuated by moments of silence that offer penetrating insights into characters worthy of our emotional investment and reflection. What such figures say and think makes them psychologically compelling, somewhat mysterious, and anything but ordinary, despite the way in which recognizably aggressive, self-serving, sometimes only half-conscious impulses motivate what they do.

In a key scene in *About Dry Grasses*, Samet deceives two of those he should count as his closest friends. He betrays Kenan and schemes to seduce Nuray (in an extraordinary performance by Merve Dizdar) with whom Kenan had become close. He fails to tell Kenan about Nuray's invitation to dinner at her home. At the dinner table, a far from prosaic discussion about the ethics of social engagement espoused by Nuray, and the freedom to be selfish that Samet endorses, reveals the sharp divide in their ways of being in the social world in which they live. This discussion provides a curious glide path from dining room to bedroom in a way that oddly recalls echoes of *Éric Rohmer's My Night at Maud's* [1969]. Here, however, the wordy prelude to sex is completely drained of Gallic irony and charm and conjured with an earnest passion more akin to the tone of a nineteenth-century Russian story. In passing, they touch lightly, yet more directly than in Ceylan's other films, on issues of contemporary Turkish politics. He has alluded elsewhere—most notably in *Winter Sleep* (2014)—to the challenges facing secular intellectuals in an increasingly authoritarian country dominated by an official insistence on Muslim religious faith. But nowhere else I can recall has he ever directly mentioned the tense relations between Turks and the ethnic Kurdish minority that has spawned cultural suppression and violence by the state and those who resist it. These allusions remain just that—glancing references that never become political soapboxes or megaphones which, in any case, Ceylan emphatically rejects. For him, the art in cinema lies elsewhere.

Ceylan began his career in image-making as a commercial photographer and his eye for cinematic composition has only grown more astute over the years. The daring opening image of *About Dry Grasses* is so white that it almost appears at first to be a blank, two-dimensional movie screen. The camera gazes up a barren, snow-covered slope that extends into a leaden, distant sky. The only markers of the space in which the action will take place are two almost calligraphically etched rows of weeds pushing out of the snow that converge, as if to evoke the vanishing point of a perspective diagram. A bus soon arrives at this point to disgorge a distant human figure—it is the first time that we meet Samet—and it is only as he crunches through the snow toward the camera that the fictional space acquires a palpable third dimension in which the drama can unfold. Throughout, under Ceylan's watchful eye, cinematographers Cevahir Şahin and Kürşat Üresin's framing and lighting of the shots create other, equally challenging visual compositions.

One final point of genuine interest in *About Dry Grasses* is the way in which Ceylan's editing (aided by Oğuz Atabaş) alternates interior and exterior spaces with surprising interludes, which in the following interview he refers to as a “game.” Such games, which temporarily disrupt and suspend the narrative flow, have evolved from his efforts in earlier movies to call attention to the act of filming (and photographing). Now, however, he has taken these modernist, self-reflexive ideas in an even more radical direction.

Most striking is the eruption of an extended suite of almost-ethnographic photographs of local inhabitants whose compositions rhyme with those of diegetic characters but who otherwise play no role in the story. These ephemeral characters were apparently photographed while Ceylan and his team explored the region. It is precisely through encounters with these figures and the topography in which they live that—just as Samet had insisted—Ceylan learned how to “draw” a more vivid and dramatically resonant fictional world in which Samet, Kenan, Nuray, and Sevim live for three and a half rewarding hours on screen.

—Stuart Liebman



Sevim (Ece Bağcı), a flirtatious teenager, waits in the hope of meeting her teacher Samet in *About Dry Grasses*.

Cineaste: Let me begin with a fair appreciation of your career to date. It is not only my opinion, but rather a broadly held one, that you have become not only the leading contemporary filmmaker in Turkey but also certainly the most significant and influential director in the history of Turkish cinema to have become so honored on the world cinema stage. How early did your fascination with movies emerge?

Nuri Bilge Ceylan: It's hard to know where to start, but you should know that, as a child, cinema was very important in my life. There was no Internet, there was no television. My childhood was in a small town of about three thousand in population, but there were still one or two cinemas! Today, of course, there is no longer a cinema in such towns at all, or even in the cities sometimes. Then, cinema was very important in people's lives. In my small town, every day the cinema program changed. People used to go to the cinema almost every night. I remember how my clothes were torn many times when I tried to get a ticket. People used to rush to get into the theater—those were nice days! We learned how to live from movies. Afterward, we imitated the characters from the films. I remember, too, that toward the end of the movies, I used to feel a big pain that it would be over, and I would have to face real life.

Cineaste: What directors, Turkish or foreign, were most important to you then, and why?

Ceylan: When I was sixteen, I realized that cinema is something else. I had moved to Istanbul, and I learned this in the Cinematheque. The movie was *The Silence* [1963] by Ingmar Bergman. I was shocked. It was completely different from what I had seen before. It was about my thoughts that I had never talked about to others. I never knew that this could be a subject for the cinema. The meaning of cinema completely changed for me. So, Bergman was a big influence on me at the beginning, and I slowly came to know other filmmakers, of course.

Cineaste: When did you start making films?

Ceylan: From when I was fifteen years old, I started taking photographs. I had somewhat of an antisocial personality. I liked being alone; I thought filmmaking conflicted with this fact and required crowds, so I never thought of making films in those days. But after I finished the university in Istanbul, I did not know what to do in life, so I traveled a lot to the East and the West to get to know myself, and life, and to decide what I wanted to do. When I could not decide for a long time, I returned from Nepal and India and went into military service. During that period, I decided to try making films because I read lots of books there and I thought there could be a way to make films by myself. After the military, I went to London and New York to see movies in cinematheques. In New York, I stayed for two months, but every day, I used to rent VHS tapes. I would then copy them and, upon returning them, take another ten videos. At that time, I read *Transcendental Style in Cinema: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* by Paul Schrader, which made a huge impression on me. Reading that book was an important step for me. I was amazed by Bresson and Ozu as well as Dreyer, but it was not possible then to find their films in Turkey. So, I made an archive of all the taped films of these directors for myself, which I carried back to Turkey.

Cineaste: Why were the works of these three filmmakers as explained by Schrader interesting to you? How did you interpret what Schrader called their "transcendental style"?

Ceylan: For me, style was usually the most important thing in art. As a photographer, Susan Sontag's books like *On Photography* and her essays "On style" and "Against interpretation" were already important for me. The library in my university was very rich and it was possible to find all these books and essays. Later, I found Schrader's book in the library, and I liked it so much that I couldn't resist the impulse, and I stole the book. His book is important because it seeks the transcendental element in the styles of these directors. When I watched the films of these three directors after reading Schrader's book, they became something else and somehow greater.

Cineaste: Were there other filmmakers who also made an impression on you at the time?

Ceylan: I also knew Abbas Kiarostami's work, which was a great influence. Kiarostami was different because the culture featured in his work was not that different from my own. His work persuaded me that everything could be a movie, and that was a good thing.

Cineaste: How did you start making films yourself?

Ceylan: I bought a small film camera—there was no video in those days—and made a short film. The crew on my first movie was very small—just two people. I used the camera and all I needed was a focus puller.

Cineaste: As I was looking over the credits of your early films, your name seems to appear on virtually every line, from cinematography through direction and editing, and even extends to the production and financing. What was your sense of responsibility to the film you were making at that time?

Ceylan: Actually, back then, I was just trying not to fail or to be embarrassed in the eyes of others. In cinema, I usually try not to feel any responsibility toward anything, because it restricts my freedom as an artist. My responsibility is to do my best to bring my abilities to the forefront and make the best film I can without compromising. I started filmmaking to help myself, as a therapist for my neurotic personality. Maybe it was a way to escape my loneliness and isolation. As you progress in the world of cinema, the expectations from society increase. You are expected to have a particular stance and responsibility in certain situations. The danger of becoming a slave to these expectations is always significant. An artist must preserve his or her freedom and their wildest instincts.

Cineaste: Early on, when there was no money, and the production scale was necessarily smaller, you had to perform so many of the technical production tasks. Has your sense of what you must do to make a film changed now that you are involved in much larger productions? Do you consider working with larger teams a burden, a limit on your freedom?

Ceylan: It is not a burden! With small crews, you have the freedom to spend a lot of time on set, although that freedom might diminish a bit on crowded sets, but many more things become possible. For one, when the budget is small, restrictions start when you're writing the script. You don't write something you can't shoot, for example. But with a small team, when you realize you can't shoot a scene due to impossibilities, you immediately have to shift to a different narrative, find a new way of expression. This sometimes sparks creativity. You discover new and innovative storytelling methods.

On big sets, you can somehow manage to execute whatever comes to mind. That's another kind of freedom. So, both have their merits. If you're compelled to choose one of these options, you make the most of the advantages it offers, whether willingly or out of necessity. Literally translated, an old Turkish proverb says that when you fall into the sea, you will grab onto anything, even an eel or a snake!

Cineaste: So, you did not regard these many production tasks as burdensome but as part of your passion for the project. But taking on responsibility for many aspects of the production also allowed you greater control of the results.

Ceylan: Over time, over the years, you begin to understand which aspects, which stages should be entirely under your control. Even on a large set, you can keep complete control over the stages you want. But there are unnecessary ones, too, like operating the camera, as I did in my early days. Whereas, when you don't operate it, you can better supervise the acting. Everything about image, camera movements, mise en scène, or lighting are, of course, under my complete control. But I don't bother with sound on the set anymore. Just let them record the dialogues well. After all, everything can be done with sound during postproduction. So, as the sets grew, my control over different parameters didn't diminish; it just became more focused on the necessary elements.

Cineaste: What intellectual or emotional impulses motivate you to decide to make a film? You have expressed many times your high regard for literary figures, especially Russian classical writers such as Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Leo Tolstoy. Are your sources generally literary?



In *About Dry Grasses*, Samet (second from right) introduces his friend Kenan (Musab Ekici) to fellow teacher Nuray (Merve Dizdar), with whom he is initially fearful of a romantic involvement, in an effort to manipulate Kenan into becoming interested in her, a decision he later regrets.

Ceylan: It changes from film to film. Sometimes the inspiration comes from literature, sometimes from real life. I never calculate. I just wait passively under the influence of many things. I read books, walk around, travel. I never search for a project. Sometimes a tiny, seemingly insignificant detail develops and evolves, branches out and complicates, and then one day, you find yourself with a screenplay in your hand.

Cineaste: Do you usually start writing the script by yourself and then engage your wife and perhaps other collaborators to join you?

Ceylan: No, I generally start talking with my wife. For my first movies, I used to write the script myself, but when I discovered my wife's potential, it became very important for me to include her from the very beginning of the project. When I decide to make movies, I always talk with her. I don't think I would make a film without her anymore. Working with someone else also makes you work more intensely. Unconsciously, you start to compete with them in some way. Additionally, brainstorming is a good way to find ideas; it makes you think much more efficiently.

Cineaste: You are here in New York for the New York Film Festival to show your latest film, *About Dry Grasses*. Why did you choose this title? What resonance does it have for you?

Ceylan: While reading the teacher's journal that the film is based on, this title was the heading of one section. I loved it as soon as I read it. As time passed, my love for it may have faded, but I wanted to remain loyal to that initial feeling. Maybe "Of Dry Grasses" could have been a better translation. Do you think it's better?

Cineaste: I understand very well why you prefer "of" to "about." In English, at least, there is a distinction. "About" makes the image of the grasses into something incidental, circumstantial. "Of" suggests that it is about something essential. Using "of" heightens attention to the symbolic or metaphorical image of the grasses.

Ceylan: So perhaps I will have to ask Janus to change the title! [Laughs]

Cineaste: Clearly, in this new film you return to certain themes that are distinctive of your work. The action is set in the striking topographies and seasonal climates of the more provincial hinterlands, particularly in the east of Turkey. They create familiar atmospheres for your principal characters who are all classic antiheroes and, I would add, not always likable. I'll come back to them in a moment, but I have several questions relating to these themes and locales. First, was there any specific literary source for characters like Samet and the situation he found himself in, as there have been in several of your past films?

Ceylan: First and foremost, of course, Samet drew inspiration from the teacher who wrote the journal. But I must say that this teacher

actually resembles me quite a bit as a character. Therefore, it can be considered natural for this character to also resemble the characters I was inspired by from my earlier films. I'm drawn to obsessive types who are constantly dealing with themselves. By harnessing the appetite, passion, and chaos in their souls, you can portray various aspects of life in human form. At the end of the day, all my films are my effort to understand myself. Maybe because I am afraid of the dark side of my soul. Maybe because I just want to make my life more bearable, more understandable. I am a neurotic person.

Cineaste: So are we all—

Ceylan: [Laughs] My obsessions make me do it!

Cineaste: Several critics have noted that your work has autobiographical dimensions, an idea you have just confirmed. This is very clear in your early films: it was not simply the inclusion of your parents and relatives who performed key roles, but also, for example, you developed characters who do jobs like those you had. The lead character in *Distant* [2002] was a product photographer, which you had been. You even filmed in your own apartment while shooting the film, one of the only ones so far that you set primarily in Istanbul.

Ceylan: Up to and including *Distant*, I made all my films with my own money. I was earning money by taking product photographs and creating catalogues for a company that manufactures ceramic tiles, and I spent all of it on my movies. So, my productions had to be cheap. It was better shooting in my apartment because I could plan every night. It was the cheapest of my movies, even though it was made on 35mm film and cost ninety thousand dollars. Now, I spend more because I find more, so I spend it. But if I can't find money now, I can easily go back to my old methods and cut the budget. Luxury is generally not good for art.

Cineaste: *About Dry Grasses* is set in a rather desolate, if at moments a beautiful rural area. Your principal characters—the teacher Samet, his roommate Kenan, and Nuray, the female teacher that both court—are all intelligent but burdened with disillusionment to the point of melancholy, resentment, and despair. These anti-heroic types seem to exist in a kind of social and personal exile in their own country. They struggle to regain a sense of agency, often without the support of friends or families. So, regarding such characters in alienating environments, do these types and situations have any political implications? More generally, do you think of yourself in any sense as a political filmmaker?

Ceylan: Never! I do not like politics. I do not like political movies, either. But, of course, in order to create a realistic background, I use them as a tool. I don't want to say a lot about politics. I am not an expert anyway. Although I closely follow current politics and engage in discussions and debates with my friends about these mat-

ters in my everyday life, I don't want my films to turn into a statement on current or transient issues. In my view, art should be concerned with more timeless and eternal aspects of our lives. My characters often, just like in real life, say most of their words or claims not to reveal a truth but to win the argument. Therefore, while not always the case, more often than not, it would be better for viewers to extract the film's issues from the characters' motivations, psychological attitudes, and existential struggles rather than the words spoken in the film.

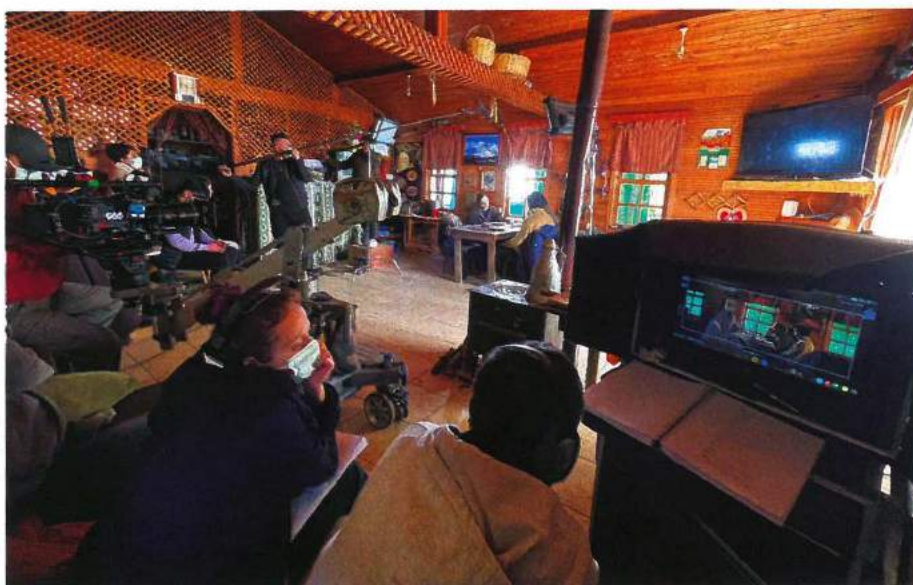
Cineaste: Do you think that your audiences in Turkey think that your films are somehow relevant for political discussion?

Ceylan: Some of them. Turkey is a highly politicized society. Therefore, it's natural for them to expect quite political approaches from artists. Or they may have a tendency to interpret films in a more political direction than the filmmakers intended. Even though I say that I'm not exclusively interested in political cinema, my films are inevitably subjected to political evaluation. The level of political content in my films is always discussed. In this film, there are direct political debates within the story, so there was no way to avoid this. The film, for some segments in Turkey, ended up being reduced to merely interpreting the political and ideological stances and statements of the characters.

Cineaste: One of the most interesting aspects of the wonderful box set of your films [see "Truth and Melancholia in Anatolia: The Films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan in Cineaste, Winter 2022] up to *About Dry Grasses* was to watch the films you included about the making of the films. They provide vivid illustrations of how, for example, you work with actors, how you stage their movements and coax them into speaking their lines, even to the point of frustrating them at times. You make these regularly. Why? What are you trying to reveal in these "making-of" documentaries?

Ceylan: While trying to learn about cinema, I often struggled to find behind-the-scenes videos. Most of these documentaries focused on expensive action scenes, or technically challenging camera movements. What I was curious about were things like what the director says to the actors, what conversations they have, what they do to establish the psychology—perhaps some things that could be considered private. But finding these was very difficult. That's why when I started making films, I began sharing my behind-the-scenes documentaries, using what I was curious about when I first started. As I saw that they generated tremendous interest, I started making them even longer. I believe that there's no need for anything that can happen on a film set to remain a secret. We don't have to sanctify cinema unnecessarily. In fact, in this last film, as you know, I even brought the behind-the-scenes into the film itself. I did this perhaps because I believe that we should watch the movies knowing that they are constructed, and that such a viewing habit can enrich the viewing experience in reverse.

For my previous film, *The Wild Pear Tree* [2018], the behind-the-scenes documentary was more than six hours long. Nonetheless, the incredible interest that it generated makes me believe that I'm not unjustified in thinking that young people who are passionate about cinema are eager to see and learn what actually goes on in the kitchen of filmmaking.



Ceylan (lower right) monitors a scene being filmed for *About Dry Grasses*. (photo courtesy of Nuri Bilge Ceylan)

Cineaste: I found fascinating your interactions, not only with the actors but also with the other crew members.

Ceylan: Just like in real life, we try to pay attention to small details or very small expressions because we hope the audience will derive meaning from even the smallest things. We are all working together to bring this out, but this path is not always smooth sailing. Sometimes, it can lead to tense and conflict-ridden moments as well.

Cineaste: There are typical and striking aspects in *About Dry Grasses*, as in your prior films. First, the music you use seems to emerge from outside the spaces portrayed in your films. It tends to describe or evoke meanings about your characters in ways more familiar to Western ears. Are you the one who chooses the musical excerpts?

Ceylan: Definitely. It is the most joyful part of making films. I generally use classical music because I like it. I requested a score only for my first film, but I did not like it, and so did not use it. I don't want to risk disappointment anymore.

Cineaste: What is it about the classical music you choose that makes it more effective than, say, Turkish music?

Ceylan: I just use what I like most, what seems to me more suitable. Local music means something generally just for the locals. Satyjit Ray used Indian music by Ravi Shankar or others. Probably it means a lot to Indian people, but not at all for me. To feel something from this music you need to have had years of childhood experiences. But now it is just something disturbing for me. Local music is too risky for international audiences. Sometimes, though, I prefer to use it. I used music by [Turkish folk singer] Neşet Ertaş in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, for example.

Cineaste: When you were at the beginning of your filmmaking career, you shot in black and white and the images were inherently monochromatic, even if in richly varied shades of gray. When you started shooting in color, however, you continued to make surprisingly monochromatic images, especially for the scenes shot in the provinces. I recall that was also characteristic of your color photographs of such places, which I saw in your National Theatre of London exhibition about ten years ago. And much of the scenery, even in the Istanbul locations for *Distant*, was essentially monochromatic. What draws you to suppress a wider color range in a color film?

Ceylan: Probably to decrease the complexity—you can control the image better. Nowadays, I find black and white a bit snobbish, but using monochromatic images allows me to control the complexity of the world. In any case, my color selections are quite instinctive. When grading the color in postproduction, if I do not like blue somehow—blue skies, for instance—then I generally eliminate or fade them. I understand the process from my photography.

Cineaste: Last night I rewatched the beginning of *Winter Sleep*, and the stunning landscapes are pale gray and yellow with stretches of white and ochres. If anything, you seem to have added shades of yellow to the Tufa cave-hotel and houses. Here your images are spare and beautiful, even if ostensibly barren, as is true of so many of your films—for example, the sinuous roads threaded through the rolling, neutral-toned landscapes in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*. Is there a narrative function to these striking kinds of images?



In *About Dry Grasses*, Samet and Kenan return from a meeting with the local head of education, who has confronted them with what they claim are unfounded accusations of inappropriate conduct with their students.

Ceylan: I think so. The infiniteness and vastness of nature engender a strange sense of awe in people, making us realize our insignificance in this world, thus humbling our egos. We can use this feeling for both the characters and the audience alike.

Cineaste: You seem to be describing a sublime experience. Was this in any sense related to the transcendental style you admired in the filmmakers Schrader discussed?

Ceylan: Well, I think so. What he means with transcendental style is elements which lead the audience to a sense of transcendence. These directors create this spiritual and cosmic state with the complete style of their films.

Cineaste: Yes, there's that moment when Samet and his roommate travel to a spring high in the mountains with snowy peaks as the scenic background. You add an interesting twist in that scene because they spontaneously decide to focus on themselves by taking a selfie. It is a moment of intimacy as they turn away from the spectacular view to reaffirm their friendship. It is quite remarkable in the context of the scandalous accusations they are facing.

Ceylan: Yes, in order for the location of the fountain to create the sense of awe I desired, I had to have a fountain built in exactly the spot I liked. Scenes of this kind always serve the function of stirring something within a person. In the face of such a landscape, the boundaries of the ego and the spiritual are always flexible.

Cineaste: There is one particularly astounding moment in *About Dry Grasses* that you mentioned a moment ago, one that has little precedent in your career. In earlier films you included images of filmmaking that could be regarded as reflexive, that is, you made viewers aware that they were watching a crafted movie. But the moment I am referring to is, to my mind, much more radical. It is when Samet is at Nuray's apartment. She asks him to turn out the lights in her living room, and afterward, he takes a detour and walks right out of the apartment...into the large movie studio in which you shot these scenes. He jumps right out of the movie and into the scene of production! Why did you disrupt and suspend the drama of the scene in this way?

Ceylan: Why not? I think most cinephiles are professional enough not to be negatively affected or dis-

turbed by such a game. Instead, they like challenges or experiments like this that stimulate their intellects. I thought that, of the three different versions of that scene I had shot, this one had a certain harmony with the film, and I decided to use it. I thought it could be one of the ways to make the relationship between the audience and the film more intricate, more complex, more multidimensional.

Cineaste: I did not mean this as a criticism. I found the gesture quite astounding, and it gave me time to think of the implications for Samet's character and of the large step he was taking with Nuray. Now that you have achieved a large and remarkable body of work, as you look back over your career, do you see it as essentially linear, that is, as a continuous development? Or do you see it as broken into periods? Some critics, for example, regard your earliest four feature films as part of a group they call the "Clouds Quartet," which is defined by certain characteristic themes, character types, and even some stylistic features.

Ceylan: Perhaps one could talk about an increase in dialogue in my recent films, larger-scale productions, and more complex structures. But fundamentally, I think my films are trying to address the same things, wandering in similar muddy pits. When I made my first film, *Koza* [*Cocoon*, 1995], we had to use a camera that lacked synchronized sound recording, so we had to postdub all the dialogue. Because of that, the resulting dialogues in the film bothered me quite a lot. Maybe that's why I was afraid of dialogues for many years. It became an issue for me. That's why I may have tested my ability to create intense dialogue and long, difficult spoken scenes.

But the fact that I have been making dialogue-heavy films in recent years doesn't mean I dislike films with less dialogue. In fact, I might suddenly return to the days of films with less dialogue. Who knows?

In reality, I'm like a fish trying to find its way in murky water. I don't really think I know what I'm going to do next or what I really want to do. ■



Ceylan with his wife and co-screenwriter Ebru, whom he enlists as a collaborator from the start of each new film.

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The Region B Blu-ray box set of "Nuri Bilge Ceylan: The Complete Films," is distributed by New Wave Films, www.newwavefilms.co.uk.