

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Once Upon a Time in Anatolia 2011 Nuri Bilge Ceylan

OVERVIEW

Once Upon a Time in Anatolia is based on a story by Ercan Kesal, who also plays the village head and who is one of the scenario writers. The sixth feature film of Nuri Bilge Ceylan, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* has won the Grand Prix in the Cannes Film Festival.

The action in the film revolves around finding the body of Yaşar, who has been murdered and buried in a field somewhere, and writing an investigation report on the murder. However, during this investigative adventure, we learn about past events which allow us to get to know the characters while the themes of the film are revealed. During this investigation, we learn about Doctor Cemal's relationship that has ended for unknown reasons some time ago, that Prosecutor Nusret cheated on his wife and she committed suicide, that police captain Naci's child was born disabled, that Arab Ali is married to a woman from the village head's village, that Yaşar has been buried alive, that Kenan has a relationship with Yaşar's wife and a child from her, and all these past events become more important to the story than the search for the corpse. In other words, the meaning of the film is revealed through past events.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

Ceylan has been working with cinematographer Gökhan Tiryaki since *Three Monkeys* released in 2008. Tiryaki is also the cinematographer for *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*. The night scenes in the film, and shots in dark places "visualize the isolation of the characters" (Mercer, 2012). Close ups and single shots also reinforce the feeling that the inner lives of these characters are entirely sequestered from their environments.

Like in so many of his films, the director uses nature to great effect. He creates metaphors out of natural elements. Just like the characters of the film, after a long journey the apple finds its way next to other apples to rot away, tree branches and plants swaying in the wind expresses the mental turmoil of the characters, and the light of the oil lamp represents the village head's young daughter Cemile: these are all perfect examples demonstrating how powerful images are in creating meaning.

CHARACTERS

<i>Doctor Cemal</i>	In his forties, doctor.
<i>Prosecutor Nusret</i>	In his fifties, prosecutor.
<i>Captain Naci</i>	In his forties, police officer.
<i>Kenan</i>	In his thirties, murder suspect.
<i>Mukhtar</i>	In his fifties, village head.
<i>Arab Ali</i>	In his forties, police officer.

SYNOPSIS

Yaşar is a tire mechanic in a small town and he has been murdered by his friends. The murder suspect Kenan has a son from his relationship with Yaşar's wife. The night they drink together, ending with the murder of Yaşar, Kenan has confessed the affair to Yaşar. A convoy of military police, prosecutor and police cars search for the place the body is buried all through the night. Kenan is unable to recall exactly where they buried the body so he stops them in a couple of places. When the night falls, they stop off in a village and go to the village head's house. The village head offers them food and tea. The men in the convoy are all affected by the village head's daughter Cemile. In the early morning hours, they get back on the road again and find the body. They turn back to the town. The autopsy is performed. It is found out that Yaşar has been buried alive but the doctor does not include this in the report.

THE PLOT

Raki table. Its night. In a rundown workshop of a tire mechanic, three men sit around a raki table, drinking and eating. One of them is telling something; the others are listening to him and laughing occasionally. A dog barks. The mechanic puts some food in a container, goes outside and feeds the dog tied at the front of the workshop.

A buried corpse in the steppe. Three cars are moving along a road swerving around small hills, in the middle of a land without trees. They stop by a drinking fountain. One of the cars belong to the military police, the other two belong to cops. They bring out a handcuffed man and ask him to look around. The man says "This isn't the place". From their talk, it is understood that they have looked at other places as well.

The murder suspect. Interior of the car. In the back, sandwiched between two men, the suspect sits, his face covered in bruises. There are police and a doctor in the car. While they talk among themselves, the camera very slowly zooms in to the suspect's face. The man's eyes are closing and he is about to doze off but the noises and laughs of the others keep waking him up.

The evening. They stop at another location. They are looking for the place that the suspect Kenan buried the body. Kenan is not sure if this is the right place, he was drunk that night and he can't remember. They bring Kenan's brother Bayram from the military police jeep and ask him. Bayram says that he was asleep and he did not see where the body was buried. The prosecutor gets out of the front car. He snaps at Captain Naci because the search is taking too long. Naci is helpless. They get back on the road.

Ali's gun. Captain Naci is vexed by the prosecutor's rebuke. While he complains to the others, his wife calls. She is angry at Naci for not being home and for forgetting to get prescription medicine from the doctor for their son. After a while, they stop somewhere else and start the search again according to Kenan's directions. The doctor gets out of the car and goes behind some rocks to urinate. There are thunderclaps and flashes of lightning. When a lightning illuminates everything, the doctor is unnerved by a rock formation resembling a human face. While the others are searching, Arab Ali and the doctor have a chat. Arab Ali talks about how he comes to these parts often and how he vents off by shooting his gun. He tears up. The others come back and they drive off someplace else.

The woman who knows her time of death. Following Kenan's directions, they stop at a grove. The military police jeep lights up an area and the soldiers and the police go towards there with digging tools. The doctor and the prosecutor get out of their cars and start talking. The prosecutor talks about a woman who, he says, is the wife of a friend. The woman had foretold her time of death while she was pregnant and she had actually died at that date, a few days after giving birth. The prosecutor says that she was educated and really beautiful. The wind picks up. The doctor asks how the woman died. Just than a commotion is heard. The prosecutor runs toward the sounds. Naci is fuming and bashing Kenan around. The prosecutor takes Naci away from the suspect. Ali shakes an apple tree. While he gathers the fallen apples from the ground, one apple starts to roll down a ravine. It falls into the stream and floats on the water until it is stopped by some rocks, alongside other apples who had fallen already. The prosecutor has calmed Naci down. They decide to stop and take a break in a nearby village. The prosecutor asks the village head to be informed of their incoming visit. While the others are preparing to take off, Kenan asks for a cigarette from the doctor. Doctor Cemal gets one from Ali and lights it. While he offers it to Kenan, Naci intervenes. He does not let the suspect smoke.

The oil lamp. They arrive at the village. The village head greets them. They all sit on the ground around a floor table. While they eat, the village head tells the prosecutor that they have been waiting for funds to repair the cemetery and asks him to talk with the district governor about it. The power goes out. The village head asks his daughter to bring a lamb. Some of them go out to smoke. A little later, the village head's daughter Cemile comes in the room with an oil lamp and tea on a tray. The lamp is illuminating Cemile's face. The men she offers tea are mesmerized when they see her beauty and cannot take their eyes of her. Kenan starts crying and he is surprised to see that Cemile also offers tea to Yaşar, the man he has murdered. Yaşar's breathing becomes ragged as if he is being choked to death. Naci comes into the room and calls Kenan outside, together they go to the barn next to the house.

The cause of death. The prosecutor and the doctor also go outside and talk, praising Cemile's beauty. The doctor asks about the dead woman again. The prosecutor goes into more detail this time. Doctor Cemal says that the woman may have poisoned herself. The prosecutor refuses the idea, mentioning

that doctors identified the cause of death as a heart attack. Cemal says that some drugs can cause heart attack when taken in high doses.

The child's father. Naci comes out of the barn and approaches the prosecutor. He says that Kenan is the real father of Yaşar's kid. The night of the murder Kenan has let it slip. The prosecutor enters into the barn to talk with Kenan. The doctor is left alone. Cemile goes out to pick up the laundry fluttering with the wind. Cemal watches her. A while later, the ones in the barn come out. Naci asks Ali for a cigarette, he lights it and gives it to Kenan.

Yaşar's dog. The sun is up and the team is on the road. A Neşet Ertaş folk song is playing on the radio. Kenan is on the verge of crying. They stop and get out of their cars. Kenan looks around. A dog nearby barks at them. It is Yaşar's dog. Naci picks up a stone and drives the dog away. Kenan points to the place they buried the body. The dog has dug a hole on it. They dig up the body. The dog is still barking at them from a distance away. When Naci sees how the body is tied up, he starts shouting at Kenan. The prosecutor moves him away and starts dictating the crime scene report. One of the officers puts a laptop on a stool and writes down the prosecutor's words. Occasionally, the prosecutor asks the doctor about some terms. In order to do an autopsy in the town, they put the body in the trunk of one of the cars. Because the officers have forgotten to take a body bag with them, they wrap the body in a blanket. They have trouble fitting Yaşar's body into the trunk.

The stone. Early morning. When the cars get into town, the streets are empty. At the front of the hospital, Yaşar's relatives are waiting. They carry the corpse into the morgue. They also bring Kenan out of the car. Yaşar's relatives hurl insults at him and try to attack him. The military police intervene. During all this, Yaşar's son throws a stone at Kenan's face. They put Kenan back into the car and drive away.

A gloomy morning. Cemal enters his office in the hospital building which he also lives in. He is troubled. He looks at some old photos in his drawer, photos of his childhood, his youth, and his ex-wife. They let Cemal know that Captain Naci has come in to get a prescription. He goes down to the outpatient clinic. Naci's son has a disability that requires constant use of drugs. While Cemal writes the prescription, they talk about Kenan and the stone that Yaşar's son threw at him. Kenan has cried all along the way.

The cruelty of women. Cemal washes up in the Turkish bath. On the way back to the hospital, a gun shot is heard. Cemal drinks soup in a small restaurant. He goes to his office. The prosecutor arrives for the autopsy. While they wait for the preparations to be completed, the prosecutor Nusret opens the subject of the woman again. He asks the doctor what kinds of drugs result in heart attack. He talks about how the woman caught her husband cheating on her. Cemal says that people often commit suicide in order to punish someone. At the end of their talk, Nusret says: "Sometimes women can be so cruel". From Nusret's reactions, we understand that the woman she talks about was her own wife. They go down to the morgue for the autopsy.

Being buried alive. They bring Yaşar's wife in to identify the body. During this, the prosecutor dictates the investigation report. After the identification, they take the woman out. The prosecutor leaves too. The autopsy technician starts the process. They learn that Yaşar has been buried alive but Cemal does not put it in the report.

THEMES

The rural. All of Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films intersect with the rural in some way. Even in his most urban films, it is possible to find an event, a scene, a character, or a behavior pattern that belongs to the rural. As the name implies, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* takes place in a rural geography. What kind of "rural" is this one? Unlike the first films of the director, this rural has lost its innocence (Bora, 2011). Through concepts such as guilt, masculinity, duplicity, and death, he unearths the rural in front of our eyes, as if digging up dead bodies buried under the earth secretly. On the other hand, beginning with the film's name, he tells us that the story being told on the screen is not some distant and past rural story, that what is history is only a now being repeated constantly, "presenting us with a landscape unfolding along 'the present tense' rather than the 'past'" (Argın, 2011). In the last scene, Doctor Cemal looks out the window and sees Yaşar's son and wife. From a nearby school garden, a stray ball belonging to some playing children lands in front of them. The boy kicks the ball back to them. There is no way to know what happens next but we are left with the feeling that this picture is incomplete, that it should be going on. At that point, it is on us to look back into our life, at the geography we live in, to consider the times we are living in, the present. The film asks us to do this,

asks us to understand that the rural life we have watched in the film is not in some separate geography distant from the society we live in, asks us to see that all that has happened and that has been talked about will never stay in the past. "We are still at the same place and playing the same games. There are still buried bodies under our feet, there is a stream of bodies being buried under us, and we are still running from this drinking fountain to that one, hopping over the bodies and trying to go around them with all the "chit chat" we make" (Argın, 2011). Therefore, the words "once upon a time" and "Anatolia" in the film's title forewarns the audience as a play of irony; letting the audience know beforehand that the story they are going to watch, and the things they will see are not related to some distant past or geography, they are about their own lives.

Death. The film's narrative is structured around the search for the body of a dead person. However, the concept of death in the film is not limited to this. In the autopsy, it is revealed that Yaşar has been buried alive and left to die under the earth. Maybe in order to prevent an even bigger trouble in the town, Cemal does not let this fact to be included in the report. However, this choice actually represents the choices that the characters make throughout their lives: skirting around the truth, covering up reality. Prosecutor Nusret has turned a blind eye to the strangeness of his wife's death; Captain Naci has resigned to the disability of his child as a twist of fate and has never questioned the biological causes behind it; it is revealed that Yaşar's son is actually Kenan's but both Kenan's and Yaşar's wives have kept this as a secret. In addition, being buried alive brings to mind someone who lives with endless repetitions, unchanging, unhappy, constantly complaining and merely trying to get by, just like the characters of the film. In this respect, the scene where Arab Ali puts a few melons into the trunk, next to the dead body, can be considered as a representation of this condition. Doctor Cemal is the only character in the film who is aware of this condition, that of being buried alive. But he does not do anything to change this situation.

The woman. Some critics find Nuri Bilge Ceylan's filmography problematic in terms of representations of women. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* has been criticized in this same respect. Two women characters of the film are unlikeable figures: Captain Naci's wife, who is just a voice on the phone who berates him, and Yaşar's cheating wife. Naci's wife is just a voice on the phone who gives the impression that she is an unpleasant, domineering woman. And Yaşar's wife sits on the bank across the autopsy room with her legs crossed, her thick heeled pumps incongruous with her clothes, shaking her leg calm and indifferent, as if her husband has not been murdered. Her attitude bothers us. The director has cast an unfavorable light on these women. On the other hand, just like his approach to males, the director strives to reveal the truth of this geography, and the struggle of these women to express themselves in this life they are trapped in and how they try to survive by stretching the truth. Women are not so different from men. The other woman in the film is the village head's daughter Cemile. She looks very beautiful, youthful and innocent (a virgin from the male perspective). When she enters the room, the oil lamp on the tray she carries illuminates her face. The men look at her as if they are being bewitched. This representation of Cemile, merely through her looks and innocence, has also been found sexist. Yet after a few scenes later, we see the oil lamp hanging on the wall. A moth flies into the lamp a few times. The wind picks up and the glass around the flame almost falls down and the lamp is about to go off. In this shot, the lamp can be a representation of Cemile and the moth representing the men who are drawn to her. The shot may also be read as representing the potential light that women carry within that would illuminate this dark geography yet being objectivized and snuffed out anyway.

Crime. Every character in the film commits an offence or becomes involved in one. Kenan murders Yaşar. Kenan's brother becomes an accomplice. Yaşar's wife cheats on Kenan. Doctor Cemal hides the truth from the authorities when he does not include in the report that Yaşar has been buried alive. Prosecutor Nusret has cheated on his wife and driven her to suicide. During the search for the body, Captain Naci gets angry and attacks Kenan. The misdeeds of the characters may also be related to criminality. The police officers forget to bring a body bag; Arab Ali puts melons next to the body as if it is nothing more than ordinary baggage; everyone talks behind everyone's back and they constantly complain about others: the autopsy technician complains to the doctor about the accountant, Naci complains about the prosecutor to everyone, Nusret complains to the doctor about his wife who has committed suicide, the village head to the prosecutor about district governor. The characters are all hypocrites, acting like they are unaware of their crimes and faults.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Doctor Cemal Around his forties, doctor and chief physician of the state hospital in the town. He is rational, quiet, and reserved. Interested in literature. Unhappy.

Unhappy. After finding the body, the whole group returns to the town. Cemal goes to his room. He is miserable. According to the old photos he takes out of his drawer, he has lost a woman in his life, because of her death or a break-up. This is the only scene where we clearly see his despondency, his unhappiness

Rational. Cemal reacts to situations and events in a calm and collected manner. Other than his fright and surprise when he sees the naturally formed or sculpted human face on the boulder, and his adoring look at Cemile, we do not see him showing his emotions. In their talk with prosecutor Nusret, we cannot be sure if he knows the dead woman is Nusret's wife or not but in their last talk at the hospital there is a sense that he knows, and that he tries to consciously force Nusret to face reality or simply hurt him. In this scene, Cemal does not show any empathy.

Prosecutor Nusret Around fifty years old. A conceited character who has narcissistic tendencies, he is very much aware of his advantageous place in the hierarchy of bureaucracy.

Narcissist. His wife tells people when she is going to die and she dies after childbirth. Doctors have diagnosed her cause of death as heart attack and the prosecutor has not allowed an autopsy. Doctor Cemal tells him that some drugs can cause heart attacks when taken in certain amounts, that the woman may have committed suicide. Nusret is forced to face a reality that he had not considered or refused to confront until that day. His reaction after this revelation is just to say: "Sometimes women can be so cruel." He has cheated on his wife but he considers it as a trivial matter.

After they find the body, while they are writing the investigation report, he tries to crack some jokes by saying some meaningless things to the scribe. When the man goes on writing down what he says, he humiliates him. During his talks, when he finds an opportunity, he brags to everyone about how they used to say that he looked like an American movie star.

Kenan In his thirties. He has a child from his affair with Yaşar's wife. When Yaşar learns about the affair, Kenan kills him. There is no explanation about the history of the event or the characters. We do not learn what kind of a relationship Kenan had with Yaşar and Yaşar's wife. Yet from a moral standpoint, Kenan is both a traitor and a murderer. On the other hand, we also see that he feels remorse. Considering his remorse, it may be argued that he has more conscience than Nusret.

Remorse. While the village head's Cemile brings everyone tea, Kenan sees Yaşar sitting beside the window and he cries. When they get back to town, his eyes are full of pain and understanding when he looks at his child throwing stones at him, believing that Kenan has murdered his actual father Yaşar.

Captain Naci Forty something years old. He is married and has a disabled child. A sycophant who grovels to those in power and who shows his actual feelings for them behind their backs.

Submissive. On the phone, his wife gets angry at Naci for forgetting to buy their child's medicine. The woman talks loudly and berates him. Naci takes it lying down and does not defend himself. When they hang up, he repeats what she said about their disabled son to the people in the car and humiliates her. As the search for the body drags on, Nusret snaps at Naci. Naci reacts respectfully to the prosecutor but while he talks to the others, he says what he really thinks.

Arab Ali A police officer in his forties. Although we do not know his past, we understand that inside, he is angry at something or even resentful. It is unclear whether his rage is about money, being insulted, or being wronged.

Vengeful. During the search at night, while he chats with the doctor at a stop they made, he says that he comes around here from time to time, shooting his rifle at nothing particular. The way he tells it, it is as if he does it to protect himself from some people, as if he has enemies and he has been wronged.

Mukhtar A village head in his fifties. He tries to guarantee his reelection by toadying to town officials with power.

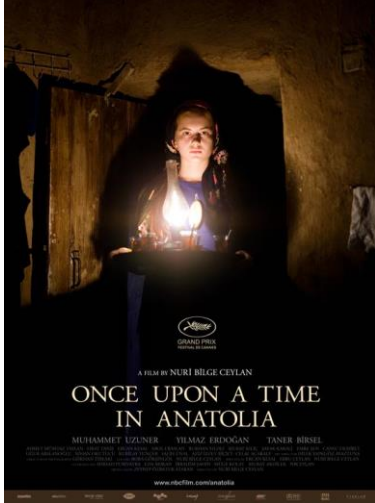
Dissembler. He appeals to the prosecutor to have a talk with the district governor so that he allocates funds for the repair of the cemetery wall. To make sure that the prosecutor carries out his appeal, he gifts him a jar of honey making it look like an act of generous hospitality.

References

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Once Upon a Time in Anatolia, poster. Cemile puts everyone under her spell.



Kenan.



Doctor Cemal reckons with himself.



Prosecutor Nusret. The marks on his face become more pronounced as he faces reality.



The wife and son of Yaşar who has been murdered.



Investigative team: Military police, police officers, diggers, the prosecutor, suspects



Captain Naci.



When the power goes off, the oil lamp illuminates the surroundings. The lamp is a feminine symbol.