

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Nazlı Bayram, Ph.D.

Nuri Bilge Ceylan (1959-)

Biography

He was born in January 26, 1959 in İstanbul. He spent his childhood in the Yenice district of Çanakkale, as his father Emin Ceylan, who was an agricultural engineer, wanted to continue his profession in his hometown. The family then returned to Istanbul for Ceylan and her older sister Emine's education.

Ceylan graduated from Boğaziçi University Electrical Engineering Department in 1985. His passion for photography, which started in high school, does not stop at university. The cinema classes he took at the university and his activities in the photography club allowed him to get a deeper understanding of the visual arts. After graduating, he travels abroad for a while, then returns to Turkey and enrolls in mandatory military duty. During his military service, he decides that he wants to work in the field of cinema. While making a living by taking promotional photos, he starts getting an education in cinema but drops out after two years.

He buys a film camera and shoots his first film *Cocoon*. The film is screened at the Cannes Film Festival. Two years later, he made his first feature film *The Small Town*. Creating eight feature-length films, he is now recognized as an auteur not only in Turkey but also in global cinema circles. He won numerous national and international awards, among them Palme d'Or (Cannes), International Adana Film Festival (Adana), and Golden Orange (Antalya).

Starting from *Koza* up to 2008's *Three Monkeys*, in his films he mainly works with a team of family, relatives and friends. In this period, he undertakes almost every aspect of filmmaking by himself. He writes his screenplays, he does cinematography, he operates the camera himself, and he does sound design, editing and even acting.

Nuri Bilge Ceylan was a member of the jury at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009.

Filmography

Cocoon (1995)
The Small Town (1997)
The Clouds of May (1999)
Distant (2002)
Climates (2006)
Three Monkeys (2008)
Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (2011)
Winter Sleep (2014)
The Wild Pear Tree (2018)

Cinematic Narration

As a director who became involved with cinema through photography, it is not surprising that the aesthetics of the image in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's filmography has been the most remarkable aspect of his filmmaking. Long and distant shots, rural landscapes, editing with a slow rhythm, and close-ups of human faces have to be the main elements in describing Ceylan's style.

“What defines Ceylan's cinema is that it is a personal and unadorned cinema” (Akbulut, 2005:19). His focus on mise-en-scène elements that will effectively convey the dramatic meaning of the scene instead of self-emphasizing camera movements and complex, fast editing in cinematic narration, and his choice of using autobiographical elements in his subjects, themes and stories, confirms this idea.

Long shots and scenes, the stillness of the camera and small amounts of dialogue has led to the idea that Ceylan's filmic style has been influenced by Tarkovsky and Bergman. In his first films, this style has been

more evident, and because of his fictional structure, which contains little dialogue, long shots and breaks with causality, he was considered a festival filmmaker and not a box office director. Although his films become more talkative starting with *Three Monkeys*, his cinematography, his emphasis on images has not changed.

Themes

In Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films, we see that the themes of rural life, nature, evil, crime and masculinity are repeated. Some of these themes are quite dominant in some of his films, while in others they act as an alternative theme or motif feeding into other ones.

The rural. The rural is a concept that we frequently encounter as a place, motif, and theme in Ceylan's films. *The Small Town*, *Clouds of May*, *Distant*, and *The Wild Pear Tree* are all films where both a detailed description of the rural life and the desire of escape and its impossibility are told. In *The Small Town*, especially in Saffet's statements about the town and his plans of escape, descriptions abound when he talks about the unvarying routine of the countryside, how these places are unable to answer for the needs and dreams of young people, and the foreignness of cities. The roots of the family are in the country, nature is beautiful, but the countryside is suffocating, boring, monotonous, like a "prison". Poverty, rigidity, hypocrisy, being stuck, and having no hope of change appear as the main elements of this representation. When these elements are represented through the characters, we can understand that the countryside has been unable to preserve its former innocence and that rural life is perhaps a more visible reflection of what goes on in the center. Saffet (*The Small Town*, *Clouds of May*), Yusuf (*Distant*), Sinan and Hatice (*The Wild Pear Tree*) are the most obvious representations of the desire to break away from the countryside. For the others, the countryside is a place where one merely survives, voluntarily or not, and for those like Süleyman, Veysel (*The Wild Pear Tree*), Muhtar (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) it is a place transformed into an opportunity. Sinan summarizes the countryside with these words: "I'm a peasant, I'm poor, I'm unemployed". This sentence, which does not contain any sign of hope, stands like an umbrella over the narratives of these four films from beginning to end.

Nature. In Ceylan's films, nature appears as a thematic, cinematographic and semantic element. In *The Small Town*, nature is one of the means of depicting the countryside. Each characters' relationship with nature is present. Although it means different things for each of them, nature is their horizon, their external world, the main force that determines how they live. The story of *Clouds of May* revolves around nature. Emin's concern throughout the movie is to prevent his trees from being cut down and prevent his land from being grabbed by the state. His son Muzaffer's problem is the film he is trying to shoot. Yet he uses the woods on his father's land as the location for the shoot. Weather conditions and the amount of daylight at the time of shooting will directly affect the look and budget of the film.

Once Upon a Time in Anatolia is the story of a search for a corpse that takes hours. A few trees that we can see on the narrow road stretching out on the steppe, the wind that gets stronger from time to time, the sound of leaves swaying in the wind, rotting apples falling from a tree, and vast plains accompany people's stories full of anger, disappointment and betrayal.

The tree that gives its name to *The Wild Pear Tree* is an enduring one that grows all over Anatolia. It would not be wrong to say that this tree represents the people who live on despite the difficult natural conditions of Anatolia, social and economic deprivations, injustices, hopelessness and lack of solutions for any of these problems. The efforts of Sinan's father İdris to extract water by digging a well on his land in the village can also be read as an endless struggle fated to those who are a part of nature while also disappearing even deeper in the countryside. While İdris has been a good teacher, he loses hope because of poverty and injustices, which turns him into a man who spends whatever money he has left betting on horses. Following his father's steps, Sinan falls to the bottom of the same well as the author of a book that no one has read and as a teacher who cannot be appointed by the government. Just like millions of people all over Anatolia.

Crime and Evil. The concepts of crime and evil in Ceylan's films range from unlawful acts such as murder to treacherous behaviors in class and gender relations. *Three Monkeys* is based on crimes committed by killing, lying and deception. Still, it can be said that the biggest crime in the story is the trade of criminality. First, Servet kills someone but in exchange for money, he transfers his punishment onto

Eyüp. At the end of the film, İsmail kills Servet. Then Eyüp pays the coffee shop apprentice Bayram to take the blame, so that he is punished instead of İsmail. All the characters know the truth, but they play the three monkeys: "I didn't see, I didn't hear, I don't know". Perhaps the elemental evil is playing the three monkeys. As unseen, unheard and unknown evil, until some third party witnesses it, perpetrators of crime get away with it all. The striking point that *Three Monkeys* makes is that after the crimes are revealed, they go on causing other crimes and thus perpetuating evil.

In *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, each character is guilty of a crime or they are connected to one. Kenan kills Yaşar. Kenan's brother becomes an accomplice. Yaşar's wife cheats on him with Kenan. Doctor Cemal hides the fact that Yaşar has been buried alive from the judicial authorities by not including this information in the autopsy report. Prosecutor Nusret has cheated on his wife and he drove her wife to suicide. Commissioner Naci gets angry and attacks Kenan while they are looking for the body. The evil of murder has turned into a greater, appalling crime because the victim has been buried alive.

In *Clouds of May*, Muzaffer abandons Saffet when the filming is over although he has promised to find a job for him in Istanbul. Saffet has both lost his job and his dreams of going to Istanbul has been ruined. On the one hand, Muzaffer predicts that Saffet will not be able to make it in Istanbul, and on the other hand, he does not want to have a young man from the village as a problem in his life. Saffet remains unemployed.

In *The Small Town*, little Ali, like other children of his age, is discovering life by observing people and nature. This process includes experiencing evil. The egg in Ali's pocket breaks when one of the women in the village gives him a rather heavy basket of tomatoes to carry. Instead of taking the basket to where he should take it, he deliberately knocks it over and causes the tomatoes to scatter. He has learned from his sister that when a turtle turns upside down, he cannot save himself and will die. They turn over the turtle they find on the way and abandon it to its fate. This bothers his conscience and causes him to dream that his mother has similarly turned upside down and fallen.

In *Distant*, searching for his lost pocket watch, Mahmut acts as if he blames Yusuf. He finds the watch in a box, but does not tell Yusuf about it. Yusuf is troubled by being accused of theft and leaves the house the next morning. Instead of apologizing for suspecting him, Mahmut lets Yusuf get upset. Maybe he uses this as an opportunity to get Yusuf leave his house, whose stay has extended.

In *Winter Sleep*, Hamdi, his mother, his brother İsmail, İsmail's wife and their child İlyas, have been living together in a cave made into a house as Aydın's tenant for a long time. When the rents they were not able to pay accumulated, Aydın's lawyers took the matter of the debt to court. İlyas gets so angry at his house being foreclosed and the police officers who come with the lawyer beating up his father İsmail, that while they are passing by in the hotel's car, he hides by the road and he throws a stone at the window by the passenger seat where Aydın is sitting. Hamdi comes to Aydın several times to ask him to stop the eviction order. Aydın tries to get rid of the responsibility by saying that his housekeeper Hidayet and his lawyers take care of the rental business. Although he often talks about concepts such as conscience, principle and honor, Aydın neither refuses to stop the evacuation process, nor does he hesitate to expect Hamdi to pay the 170 Lira for the broken car window.

Masculinity. The theme of masculinity in Ceylan's films should be handled together with other themes such as indifference, apathy, evil, and sexism. In general, masculinity contains the conflicts and tensions created by these concepts.

In *Climates*, İsa's sexism is revealed in his didactic, critical, controlling attitude toward Bahar as if she is a little girl; his dominating and possessive behaviors in his affair with Serap; his colleague Mehmet's remarks about his girlfriend and İsa's derisive remarks are all moments that strongly convey the sexism inherent to androcentric perspective. By deceiving Bahar, İsa loses her trust, but still he accuses her of exaggerating insignificant stuff. While Bahar is unable to cope with feelings of insecurity and the pain of being cheated on, İsa does not care about her feelings and he even gets bored of them.

When Hacer tells Sinan that she is about to marry a jeweler in *The Wild Pear Tree*, we understand from her attitudes and words that she hopes Sinan will save her. Maybe Hacer has been romantically interested in Sinan during her high school years, but she did not receive any response. Sinan remains

indifferent to what Hacer tells, her mood, and her sexual invitation; he acts as if he doesn't get it. His mind is preoccupied with escaping the countryside and with the book he wrote.

Mahmut in *Distant*, Servet in *Three Monkeys*, Aydin in *Winter Sleep*, Prosecutor Nusret and the murder suspect Kenan in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* have all caused grief for women because of their crimes and they have considered them, not as equal individuals, but as helpers who take on the role of a wife, a lover, or a "prostitute". These characters are selfish ones who cannot realize that they may have a chance of escaping their problems of loneliness, depression, anxiety, or apathy by changing their perspectives.

Fathers and Sons. The tension between father and son is also one of the recurring themes in Ceylan's films. Strained relationships between fathers and sons are revealed in *The Small Town*, *Clouds of May* and *The Wild Pear Tree* in different contexts.

In *The Small Town*, Saffet is angry with his father for abandoning his family by leaving their village but he also defends him for escaping the countryside. His father is dead so in his place, he feels the need to defend him against other members of the family.

In *Clouds of May*, Muzaffer does not have enough money and equipment, so he asks his parents to act in his film and to help him during the shooting. When he comes to the country house to convince them, he works on his scenario instead of doing chores and helping out his father, who is dealing with trees in the garden of the house in the village. Muzaffer is not like his father, who is firmly attached to that land, that is, to the land where he was born and raised; he has become a person who has migrated to the city and is engaged in photography and film business. He does not care about the possibility of the state seizing some of the land, and even advises his father not to put up a fight. His father Emin, on the other hand, resists despite his age and tries everything to hold on to his land. In the scene where his father tells something about the past, he takes the scene a couple of times because it is not what he wanted. At that moment, while his father was worried about not missing the arrival of the land registry officers, Muzaffer's concern was to make a good movie. Neither cares about each other's problems.

One of the main themes of *The Wild Pear Tree* is also the conflict between father and son. Sinan has tense moments with Idris many times throughout the movie. The main subjects of the conflict are Idris' irresponsible spending of money betting on horse races, his debts to everyone, and his stubborn project of extracting water from their field. Sinan is so angry with his father to the point that he insults his mother for "hitching up" with someone like his father. Sinan resents being stopped by people who lent money to his father and their complaints about Idris; the feeling of being the son of a disgraced father; the fact that Idris condemned his family to lack of money. However, perhaps most of all, he resents the fear of being like him, of having to endure this life without opportunities just like his father. By secretly selling his father's dog, he both compensates for the printing money of the book and takes a kind of revenge on his father. The end of the film resolves the conflict between father and son as Sinan inherits his father's life. More importantly, only his father has read the book written by Sinan. This is an important reason for Sinan to reconcile with his father, even to make peace with him.

Characters

When we try to group the characters in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films, it seems possible to create two basic categories, to separate the characters as those who are from the country and those who are not. However, it is not that easy. The tense relations of the characters in his films with the countryside, their class positions, education levels, and gender related problems require a more complex classification. Ceylan's films mainly tell stories about life in the countryside and people from there. Because of the changing social structures and consequent problems, these stories are also related to the city (the center) and urban characters. His films are full of characters that reflect the tension between the center and the countryside, such as those who settled in the city a long time ago but who are of rural origin, and those who are urban but work and live in the country. We recognize the good and bad features of each of them, their guilty and innocent qualities, their helplessness and treachery. Therefore, Ceylan's characters have considerable depth.

Characters who represent the rural. As can be seen in the rural theme, characters from the countryside are in a vicious circle of deprivation, poverty, and being stuck in a deadlock.

Those who are trying to escape the countryside: Saffet (*The Small Town*, *Clouds of May*) and Yusuf (*Distant*) seem like a single person in different stages of a life. Saffet represents the youth who cannot find a proper education, a job, future, money, prestige, entertainment, or sexuality in the countryside, a youngling who is overwhelmed by provincial boredom and the suffocating life of a monolithic community. On the other hand, Sinan (*The Wild Pear Tree*) is a variation on Saffet and Yusuf, as a someone who has graduated from university and who is trying to fulfill his dream of becoming a writer by writing a book, but just like them, he cannot find a way out of the small town and the provincialism. He is a character who has lived in the city during his university education and has gained self-confidence and knowledge enough to question his family, society and art. These do not change things that much in Sinan's life. His father is the only one who has read the book he self-published; he has no choice but to take over his father's dream of digging up a well in the village field and finding water.

Those who have left but could not escape the countryside: In Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films, there are characters who have traveled from the countryside to the big city, managed to cling to and live there, and who have known the difficulties of both being in the city and the countryside. Muzaffer (*Clouds of May*) and Mahmut (*Distant*) are the most typical examples of these characters. Perhaps these characters best represent the tension between the rural and the center. Because the fear of returning or having to return to the country has rendered them even more attached to the city. Just like Saffet and Yusuf, they know all about the gloom and the deadlock of rural life. They are afraid of being condemned to such a life again and losing their way of being in the city. Their emotional ties to the place where they were born and raised have weakened. For Muzaffer, the province and all those in it mean nothing more than being a prop and a subject for his film. Mahmut, on the other hand, is almost disgusted by the provincialism that has become close and visible again with Yusuf. We think that when Yusuf leaves, who represents the things he wants to leave in the past, Mahmut would be relieved. However, Mahmut now realizes that he cannot erase his past and his provincial mindset neither from his mind nor from his relationships. This is like always staying in the Purgatory, living in the in-between.

Those who will not leave the countryside: The mother and father characters, Fatma and Emin, Ali's parents in the films *The Small Town* and *Clouds of May*, do not complain about being in the country. Although Fatma complains about the difficulty of dealing with the land, they have always stayed there. Emin is an agricultural engineer who has also studied abroad. Still, he has returned to his lands in the village, back to his life in the country. Ali's father also received a doctorate abroad after graduating from university, but he also returned to his village like his father and chose to live there. The true reasons for these returns are not fully disclosed. In their speeches, they talk about the places where they were born and raised, their ties to the nature of those places, and their purpose to serve the country.

The village headman (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) has procured for himself a relatively privileged position among the power relations in the provinces. He is trying to bring services to the village that would flatter the religious feelings of the villagers. In addition, by appearing tolerant of civil servants such as the district governor and prosecutor, he tries to maintain his position as headman. On that windy night, when the officers who were searching for the place where the body was buried, together with the suspect, get tired and are welcomed by the headman in his home, the power goes out. The headman is trying to get money, not to solve the electricity problem of the village, but to repair the wall of the cemetery and build a Muslim funeral prepariton facility in the village. He asks the prosecutor to talk to the district governor. He also does not neglect to give a gift of the village honey to ensure that his wish is fulfilled. Of course, he will act as if the gift is a necessary part of hospitality. Muhtar is a simple and small-scale representation of the relationship between politics and religion in Turkey.

The elite

Those who provide their own means of comfort and who use the labor of people in accordance with their interests are the owners of power. The nature of the relations between the oppressors and the oppressed manifests itself clearly in the fields of power, authority, values and crime.

When Servet (*Three Monkeys*) crashes his car and causes someone's death, he puts forward his political career as an excuse, and makes sure that his driver Eyüp takes the blame in exchange for money. Eyüp goes to jail instead of Servet. Eyüp's wife, Hacer, asks Servet for the money he promised her husband so that she can start a business for her son. Servet compensates for paying that money by having a sexual

relationship with Hacer. Eyüp ensured that Servet could live as a free and "honorable" person, while Hacer met his sexual needs. The one who wields power over others gets what he wants under any circumstances.

Necla (*Winter Sleep*) scolds the employee of the hotel they own for breaking his favorite teacup. Necla, who has been living with the income of the hotel and her father's property without producing anything for a long time, tries to establish superiority over her brother Aydın and his wife Nihal through contempt and criticism.

Aydın (*Winter Sleep*) is a character who was an actor in Istanbul's theater community in his youth, who makes his living through his father's assets, and he writes articles for the local newspaper to keep himself entertained. The subjects he deals with in his writings are full of ideas that defend a society existing only as a place he idealized in his mind, falling far off from the class and cultural reality of the society. His speeches and some of the expressions in his writings create the impression that he is a conscientious, thoughtful, fair person. However, he ignores the poverty of his tenant İsmail and his elder brother İmam Hamdi. On the other hand, in order to maintain his power over Nihal, he donates a large donation to the village-school aid campaign organized by Nihal. Despite these contradictory behaviors, Aydın acts in accordance with his social position.

Nihal (*Winter Sleep*) is a woman who married Aydın at a young age, did not have to work because of her husband's wealth, and did not make any effort to gain her economic freedom. Years later, she starts to complain of the pressure and depression that her dependence on her husband caused. As a reaction to this situation, she tries to show how she is a conscientious member of the upper class by taking care of Aydın's tenant İsmail's sick son, by collecting donations for the village school, and by giving Aydın's donation money to İsmail. These magnanimous efforts of Nihal serve the same purpose as Aydın's newspaper articles. These behaviors are one of the ways elites legitimize their power. Thus, the poor and oppressed will feel gratitude, respect, and thankful for them, and they will once again confirm their sovereignty, albeit with a shame lame with guilt. The reproduction of the dominant ideology through discourses occurs precisely through such relationships and behaviors.

Lonely and Guilty Men

In most of Ceylan's films, the male characters are without women and alone, or they are left alone after a while. Sometimes it is their own choice. The common point of men is that they are characters who cause women grief and subject them to injustices.

Doctor Cemal and Prosecutor Nusret (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) have come to the provinces for civil service. Because they are both university graduates and senior civil servants, those around them respect them. Doctor Cemal is a quiet, calm, observant and attentive character. He is content to listen while others complain about many things. His scarcity of words makes it seem like he is a bit distant and cold. When he returns to his hospital office in the morning of the night when he, the prosecutor, the police and suspects searched for the body, he pulls out photos of a woman from his drawer and looks at them. It is not revealed who the woman is, whether she is alive or not. Cemal is troubled and thoughtful.

On the other hand, Prosecutor Nusret has cheated on his wife, so the woman has committed suicide after giving birth to their child. Nusret describes the death of his wife under the guise of a lie, as if he is talking about an acquaintance. Maybe because he realizes the truth, or maybe because he has committed a similar crime himself, Doctor Cemal clearly tells Nusret that the woman he talks about has taken her own life. When Nusret hears from the doctor a truth that he knows but does not accept, the scars on his face become uncomfortably visible. Admitting this truth will mean admitting his guilt.

Although Aydın (*Winter Sleep*) is married, he leads an almost solitary life. He is holed up in his study and spends most of his time there, and they sleep in separate rooms with Nihal. Through the economic power that he established over Nihal, he has made his wife into an unhappy woman. Although Nihal did not care about this at first and even found it comfortable, she has started to question her life and her marriage especially after leaving Istanbul and coming to the countryside, and she has grown distant from Aydın.

Mahmut (*Distant*) earns his living as a photographer in Istanbul and leads a lonely, isolated life. His estranged wife has married another man. When she and Mahmut were about to divorce, we learn that

she has been pregnant, and that they have had an abortion because Mahmut did not want children, which prevented her from having children later on. A woman whom Mahmut has made love to goes to the bathroom after sexual intercourse and cries. We do not know why, but Mahmut is troubled. It is clear that there is something upsetting to the woman.

İsa (*Climates*) also makes a woman unhappy when he ignores and does not care about the emotional needs of his partner Bahar. They break up. Later, obsessed with the idea that Bahar is with another man, she follows her to Ağrı. Although he says he has changed, he does not have credence. When he is with Bahar, he also sees another woman. Because Bahar knows this, she realizes that İsa is lying. Moreover, he meets the other woman only for sex and humiliates her in those meetings.

Servet (*Three Monkeys*) takes advantage of Hacer's weakness and has sex with her. Both of them are married. Eyüp is in prison. Hacer cannot understand Servet's intentions and wants to continue the relationship. Servet humiliates and sends her away.

Kenan (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) had an affair with his friend Yaşar's wife Gülnaz and had a child from this relationship. Kenan kills Yaşar and then is arrested. Gülnaz, who does not have economic freedom, a job or an income, is left alone in the countryside



Nuri Bilge Ceylan



Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Cannes Film Festival

Reference

Akbulut, H. (2005) Nuri Bilge Ceylan Sinemasını Okumak; Anlatı, Zaman, Mekan, İstanbul: Bağlam.

Argın, Ş. (2011). "Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da: Asimetrik Şikayet Toplumu", Birikim, 272, December 2011, pp. 18-25.