

Exploring Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Style Via the Auteur Theory

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“The films that bored me the most in the past became my favorite movies later on. So I don't care about boring the audience. Sometimes, I really want to bore them because out of boredom might come a miracle, maybe days later, maybe years, when they see the film again” (Ceylan, 2012). Based on Nuri Bilge Ceylan's oeuvre, which consists of seven feature films, it can be supported that he is an auteur due to his directorial style. The elements that define his work as an auteur are his minimalistic style, and similar characteristics in his cinematography, mise-en-scene, and theme. To comprehend these films, it is necessary to examine the broader cultural, political, economic, and social context of Turkey in the time period in which these films were made. I will focus on the years 2002 to 2014 because the films I have studied are *Distant* (Turkey, 2002), *Climates* (Turkey, 2006), *Three Monkeys* (Turkey, 2008), *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (Turkey, 2011), and *Winter Sleep* (Turkey, 2014). I will discuss how the director was influenced by these conditions as far as style is concerned, and how are they manifested in his work. Furthermore, I will support Ceylan's auteurship by following Andrew Sarris's account, and by providing an analysis of the films that I viewed while examining the aesthetic, thematic, formal and stylistic elements that are consistently woven into Ceylan's oeuvre. I will then examine how the director was influenced by the work of other filmmakers, genres, and styles. Lastly, I will provide my personal impression and evaluation of the films that I have studied.

During the years 2002 to 2014, under which Ceylan developed his work, Turkey has been regressing in terms of political, cultural economic and social conditions. Since the 1990s, there has been a rise of political Islam in Turkey. In 2002, according to BBC News, “Islamist-based Justice and Development Party (AK) wins landslide election victory. Party promises to stick to secular principles of constitution” (BBC News, 2017). In 2004, “New lira currency introduced as six zeroes are stripped from old lira, ending an era in which banknotes were denominated in

millions” (BBC News, 2017). Amidst all the secularist protests in 2007, against Prime Minister Erdogan to not run for the presidential elections because of his Islamist background, and the headscarf disputes of 2008, Turkey was split culturally, politically, economically, and socially. The split continued to strengthen due to Erdogan's presidential victory in 2014. These issues, including the oppression of women, divided the country's population by the religious, and the secularists. These social conditions are evident throughout all of Ceylan's films. He tends to focus on the juxtaposition of the European Turks versus the Anatolian Turks. The social sensibility that these films evoke is that they subconsciously encourage the viewers to criticize Turkey's cultural, political, economic, and social conditions; rather than to overtly criticize them. They serve as a manifestation of identity, both personal and collective, because in *Three Monkeys*, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, and *Winter Sleep* these issues are addressed. Through his films, he comments on the poverty evident throughout Turkey, and how the villagers live minimalistic lives. It is also shown that women are often oppressed, and absent in Turkish society. In *Climates*, “The point of view of the female partner, her feelings and her dilemmas, are felt through her silences” (White, 2011).

In *Three Monkeys*, while the characters, İsmail (Ahmet Rifat Şungar), and Hacer (Hatice Aslan), watch television in their living room, Erdogan's victorious election is heard. In addition, when Servet (Ercan Kesal) is heard speaking on the phone about his upcoming campaign, he is heard saying “I will sacrifice anything for the party.” This can be interpreted as a sacrifice for the AK party because he also has their posters in his office. In addition, the whole film concerns the concept of bribery. According to Asuman Suner, “Despite its seemingly apolitical story, has indeed profound political connotations since its narrative and visual organization serve to display the prevailing mood of silence, oblivion and complicity in Turkey” (Suner, 2011). Furthermore,

in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, the themes are the corruption, and disregard of the police officers in relation to the murder case. In *Winter Sleep*, the script is filled with “blunt references to tensions in Turkish society, including economic inequality, the official role of religion, and the fear of censorship” (Brody, 2014). Lastly, although there are women in all of his films, they play minor roles, and are almost always in the background. By not placing women in the foreground, Ceylan comments on the oppression of women in Turkey, and depicts how their roles are limited to mother, mistress, wife, housewife, and so forth. This is evident in all three of the films; however, in *Winter Sleep* the women become more prominent. In *Three Monkeys*, there is only one woman, and she is depicted as an adulterer while her husband is in prison (for a crime he did not commit). Even though he is in prison, she is still not allowed to make decisions without consulting her husband. In *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, there is rarely a woman seen throughout the entire film. The first time a woman is seen in the film is when the ‘Mukhtar’s’ young, and beautiful daughter is seen serving tea to the men, and to the murderer. This is a commentary on social norms in Turkey because women are burdened with serving tea. The second time a woman is shown in the film is when the victim’s wife is introduced. However, she is merely introduced, and addressed as the victim’s wife.

Ceylan’s influence by these conditions as far as style is concerned is evident throughout his hidden exposition. All of his films exhibit limited dialogue. The effect this has is that it forces the audience to constantly engage with the film, whether that concerns the dialogue, or the visuals. According to Ceylan himself, “The truth lies in what’s hidden, in what’s not told” (Ceylan, 2004). This reinforces the necessity for intellectual involvement when watching his films. According to Phillip French, “Ceylan used pared-down narratives with long takes and sparse dialogue to explore the ethical dilemmas of middle-class Turks, studying the social and

geographical contexts of their personal lives and the larger world that is shaping them” (French, 2012). Another defining technique of Ceylan's style is his stunning cinematography. It is important to note that before Ceylan became a filmmaker, he was a photographer. His photographic influences are manifested in his work through the use of pensive visual aesthetics, and lush landscapes. He is extremely well-known for his slow-paced films that are made up of static shots that can last for minutes. However, these static shots do not take away from the films, but they make them even more interesting. The static shots allow for the viewers to continuously be engaged in a particular scene by not having to focus on editing, or abrupt movements. It allows for the viewers to almost feel like they are in the scenes themselves. Furthermore, Ceylan has a minimalistic style of filmmaking in general, which is seen through his use of *mise-en-scène*. However, this does not take away from the impact of the films. All of his films are generally dark, and low-lit. This comments not only on the psyches of the characters in the films, but also on Turkey's dire situation.

In 1962, Andrew Sarris wrote *Notes on the Auteur Theory*, and he described an auteur's three criteria of value. These three criteria of value can be thought of “as three concentric circles: the outer circle of as technique, the middle circle, personal style, and in the interior circle, interior meaning” (Sarris, 1962). Following Andrew Sarris's account, Nuri Bilge Ceylan can be defined an auteur due to the aesthetic, thematic, and formal and stylistic elements of the three films I have studied: *Three Monkeys*, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, and *Winter Sleep*. There are elements such as his minimalistic style, and similar characteristics in his cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and themes that are consistently woven into his films. Throughout all three films, these three values of auteurship are consistent. Lastly, it is incredibly easy for the viewer to identify a Nuri Bilge Ceylan film because his expressivity, and signature

are extremely prominent in each of his films. Moreover, I will provide an in-depth analysis of the films under study to prove Ceylan's authorial expressivity, and signature.

In terms of the outer circle, his technique, can be identified from the slow-paced, static shots, and photographic influences. *Three Monkeys* displays Ceylan's authorial expressivity, and signature through the use of his minimalistic style, and similar characteristics in his cinematography, mise-en-scene, and theme. The film features his signature static shots, limited dialogue, darkness, and slow-paced scenes. An example of this would be when Hacer (Hatice Aslan), and her son İsmail (Ahmet Rıfat Şungar) are having breakfast. The scene lasts approximately five minutes, and the camera does not move once, and there is no editing. It is a one-shot take of them having breakfast, however, the effect it has on the spectator is that they feel immersed in this scene. As for the cinematography, it is obvious that Ceylan's experience with photography is a major influence. The scene in which the ferries are shown passing by demonstrate his use of deep-focus, which create a depth of field, and therefore create a realistic environment for the characters. This is further exemplified by his use of shooting on location, which is a similarity to Italian Neo-Realism. He strategically chooses to do so because it highlights the feel of the city, and of Turkey as a country. The sky is notably very dark in this scene, and most other scenes. This is a reflection of the characters' dilemmas, and their portrayal of the feelings of Turkey's population. As for the middle circle, personal style, up until *Three Monkeys*, Ceylan had mostly cast non-professional actors. This was a decision that was made by directors in the Italian Neo-Realism film movement in the mid-1940s, and early 1950s. Ceylan chose to work with mostly non-professional actors, including his own parents Fatma Ceylan and Mehmet Emin Ceylan, and his younger cousin Mehmet Emin Toprak, in the first few of his films; including *Uzak* and *Climates*. For example, in *Climates*, he cast himself as İsa, and his

wife as Bahar (Ebru Ceylan). This minimalistic, and simplistic approach to casting allows for his films to have a very naturalistic approach to acting. However, during *Three Monkeys*, and the films which followed, he started to cast very famous Turkish actors. In terms of the interior circle, Ceylan's signature demonstrates interior meaning through his use of themes in his films. *Three Monkeys* is a self-reflexive film because it is filled with political commentary. According to Vuslat D. Katsanis, "I do insist that the affective dimension of his time-images offers a rich avenue for political reflection, especially at this critical juncture in the history of Turkish political modernity and widespread uncertainty for what is to become for the region's diverse publics" (Katsanis, 2015). Furthermore, Ceylan's limited use of dialogue is evident in *Three Monkeys*, and the audience is left to interpret the meaning of the film by themselves. However, the meaning is exemplified through the reflection of the characters, and this is why their acting is very naturalistic.

In terms of the outer circle, his technique, can be identified from the dark scenes, slow progression, static shots, and the photographic influences. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* consists of mainly nighttime scenes in the vastness of the Anatolian steppe. Ceylan's shots resemble photographs because they are vast, stunning, and realistic depictions of the Turkish countryside. His cinematography is picturesque, and captures the nature of the country, therefore placing the viewer in these locations with the murderers, and the policemen. His personal style is evident through the use of on-location shooting, which includes the nature, and artistic qualities such as the sculptures that are seen through the immense Anatolian steppe. The scenes are dark, as they are in *Three Monkeys* also, and are only illuminated by the headlights of the police cars. This serves as a self-reflexive method to reinforce the corruption, bribery, and inefficiency evident throughout the Turkish police force, and judicial system. Ceylan himself states in an

interview in 2011 that “It was written by a doctor [Ercan Kesal, who also has a role in the film, having previously played the politician in *Three Monkeys*], who witnessed such an investigation at that time. But when we went to that area, we saw that nothing had changed in the province since then” (Ceylan, 2011). This is an example of his criticisms of Turkey's regression, which is a major theme of the film. Moreover, this is further exemplified throughout the use of limited and non-expository dialogue. For example, the scene in which the policemen, and the murderer are all cramped in the car driving, and the policemen discuss yogurt for five minutes. Although this is Ceylan's form of adding humor, it displays that he refuses to expose meaning through dialogue. These are all factors of his signature, and help highlight his expressivity as an auteur because they contribute to his delivery of the film's interior meaning. Furthermore, Ceylan constantly reinforces through the length, and themes of his films, that he has no concern for his films to generate a large monetary return at the box office. In addition, he has no concern for recognition. His films often do not appeal to the general public, but are intended for more artistic audiences, and artistic purposes. Ceylan achieves these goals through the slow progression of his films. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* runs for two hours and forty-three minutes, which allows the audience to take away their own meaning, and message of the film.

Lastly, *Winter Sleep* is a culmination of all of these factors because it is regarded as Ceylan's masterpiece. *Winter Sleep* displays the similarity in the aesthetic, thematic, formal and stylistic elements that are consistently woven into Ceylan's films. *Winter Sleep* is three hours, and 16 minutes long, however, it does not bore. In the three hours, it examines the psyche of several characters, and questions their belief in religion. By doing so, Ceylan comments on the current state of Turkey, and the division of the country between secularists, and the religious. However, this is done extremely subtly, and is intended to be extrapolated by the audience using

the meaning they gather from the visuals, and the dialogue that Ceylan provides in the film. The film is set in visually stunning, and snow-covered central Anatolia (in Cappadocia). In terms of the outer circle, this film is similar to both *Three Monkeys* and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* in terms of technique because it exhibits similar dark scenes, slow progression, static shots, and the photographic influences. This is achieved through Ceylan displaying the vastness of Cappadocia, and its nature. He uses deep-focus, and depth of field to capture the wilderness. However, this is juxtaposed with the tiny hotel that Aydin (Haluk Bilginer), Nihal (Melisa Sözen), and Necla (Demet Akbag) run. Once snow begins to fall in central Anatolia, these characters are stuck in this hotel with each other, and they become claustrophobic. Through solely their interactions, static shots, and long scenes, Ceylan extrapolates a deeper meaning from these characters. His personal style is the same because the shots of the wilderness are shot on-location, and the cinematography is visually stunning. However, this film has a lot of dialogue in comparison to his other films because it is used to comment on the division of Turkey's people. Tensions arise when Aydin, a middle-class to higher-class character, exhaustively tries to collect rent from his lower-class, and struggling tenants. Whereas, his younger wife, Necla fights to help them, and is constantly involved in charities. Through these contradictions, the reflection of Turkey's immense poverty, and the privilege of the middle-class and higher-class Turks collide. This is furthered by Aydin's constant dwelling of the poor tenants' inability to pay their rent, and how he connects it to Turkey's regression, and constant dwelling of religion in his writing. This proves that Ceylan is subtly commenting on Turkey's current situation, and the growing division between the educated, and the non-educated. In addition, it is important to note that the protagonist's name 'Aydin' in Turkish means "intellectual". In an interview in 2014, Ceylan states "Well, Aydin is a very typical modern Turkish intellectual, and there's a big gap between

him and the poor people in the village. But this kind of gap between the educated well-off and the poor exists in most countries; it's not just Turkey. Then there's the fact that he's apparently not religious but writes about religious matters. In Turkey, if you're Muslim, you're not really free to write about religion” (Ceylan, 2014). Lastly, this is a part of Ceylan's signature because he subtly comments on Turkey's situation through his films to create interior meaning.

Ceylan's style has been influenced by the work of other filmmakers, genres, and styles such as “Anton Chekhov as well as influential modernist film directors such as Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Andrei Tarkovsky” (Encyclopedia, 2017). For example, both *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* and *Winter Sleep* pay homage to, and are partially adapted from a number of Chekhov's short stories. In addition, the opening sequence of *Three Monkeys* is an extensive, and dark driving scene, which is extremely similar to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (USSR, 1972), in which the highway scene lasts approximately ten minutes. Also, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* is a thriller similar to Michelangelo Antonioni's challenging *Blow-Up* (Italy, 1966). Furthermore, the sensibility of Yasujiro Ozu's films is evident in Ceylan's. Lastly, his static shots, and long takes are similar to Chantal Akerman's *23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels* (Belgium, 1975), when a housewife peels potatoes for fifteen minutes, and the camera does not move once. Finally, “His films have a sublime and observational style of art-house quality” (Encyclopedia, 2017).

Since Ceylan's films are very recent, it is very difficult to name a contemporary film that Ceylan's style has influenced. However, I have been greatly influenced by Ceylan's films, and hope to become an auteur like him. According to Kenneth Turan, “Though you'd never know it by looking at its pristine images, Ceylan made "Distant" on a \$100,000 budget, partially by serving as writer, producer, cinematographer and co-editor” (Turan, 2004). Since Ceylan usually

takes on all the roles of filmmaking, he serves as an influence for me because this is similar to the production of student films. I have often had to take on all the roles while making films, however with a much lower student budget.

In conclusion, Nuri Bilge Ceylan is the most important contemporary Turkish filmmaker, and auteur. According to *Flashback*, “Only a few Islamic filmmakers have reached a worldwide audience, most notably Turkey’s Yilmaz Güney” (Giannetti, L. D., & Eyman, S., 2010). However, I believe that Ceylan not only reached a worldwide audience in the recent years, but has been a great influence in Turkey’s cinema moving past being associated with Islam. My personal impression, and evaluation of Ceylan’s oeuvre is that he has established Turkey as a force in the emerging cinemas worldwide. He has created only seven masterpieces, but I believe he will continue to do so, and gather worldwide recognition as he does. His films can be viewed as cultural artifacts, which mirrors the realities of their times. In the years to come, Nuri Bilge Ceylan will continue to collect accolades, such as the Palme d’Or at Cannes, and will continue to comment subtly on the situation of Turkey through his films. According to María Gil Poisa, “Nuri Bilge Ceylan is very important for the Turkish film industry, and is probably the nation’s most important and internationally recognized auteur” (Poisa, 2015).

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