

New Cinema in Turkey

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Filmmakers and Identities between Urban and Rural Space

By

Giovanni Ottone

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PREFACE

From the mid-1990s, Turkish cinema has seen a notable growth in confidence and in international recognition. New generations of independent filmmakers, who share a cinematographic ethos – despite the absence of common programmatic or aesthetic manifestos – have emerged. This is a personal cinema, which, with a wide variety of styles and approaches to storytelling, addresses issues of identity in a country that is in a crucial phase of its history, both in social and political terms.

The study focuses on this new cinema which can be considered one of the richest and most interesting in the world. Focusing in particular on the films' exploration of urban and rural spaces, a critical assessment of the last twenty years of the "New Turkish Auteur Cinema" is made by comparing the work of the so-called "third generation" of directors born in the early 1960s who individually can boast an impressive filmography (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, Zeki Demirkubuz, Derviş Zaim, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Reha Erdem, Tayfun Pirselimoğlu and others), to a fourth generation of directors, born in the 1970s and 1980s, who, in the great majority, made their debuts in the last decade (Özcan Alper, Seyfi Teoman, Pelin Esmer, Emin Alper, Seren Yüce, Ali Aydın, Mahmut Fazil Coşkun, Sedat Yılmaz, Kazim Öz, Onur Ünlü, Asli Özge, Hüseyin Karabey and others).

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INTRODUCTION

NEW CINEMA IN TURKEY: HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Turkish cinema has a long history. Its centenary happened in 2014 and it is estimated that, from 1914 to date, about 6,300 feature films have been produced. Moreover, from the statistics it appears that 4,425 of these films were made between 1960 and 1986, the so-called “golden age” of Turkish cinema. Particularly significant in this context is the “Yeşilçam system”: this refers to the period of strong economic growth and massive urbanization that took place between 1965 and 1975 in Turkey. Yeşilçam is the name of a short street in Istanbul, located in the central district of Pera/Beyoğlu, where a large number of production companies and movie theatres were established. Many genre films, including dramas, melodramas, and comedies, were also filmed in these locations. During this period, an average of 200 to 300 films a year was made, and a significant “star system” developed, supported by a mass audience. After the military coup of 12 September 1980, which brought a tragic end to a phase of acute political polarization, a forced de-politicization was determined in Turkish society. This corresponded to a progressive crisis in quality and film production, reducing the annual average to a mere 20 features.

However, from the mid-1990s - a time of increasing economic liberalization and development of globalization processes - a significant resurgence in Turkish cinema occurred. This regeneration has been demonstrated in the critical and commercial success that Turkish film has experienced over the last decade. For example, since 2005 there has been a progressive growth of the total audience in the theatres with up to around 61 million admissions registered in 2014 and more than 60 million admissions registered in 2015 (in a country of about 77 million inhabitants). Moreover, from 2009, an average annual production of more than 80 national feature films has been reported (from 69 in 2009 to 86 in 2013, 106 in 2014 and 136 in 2015) and a market share of exclusive audience for national films that ranged, over the past decade, between 40%

to 60% (51% in 2009, 58% in 2014 and 57% in 2015). This revival of national cinema is linked to two phenomena that, over time, have revealed themselves to be connected. The first is the revival of popular genre cinema (melodramas, thrillers, historical dramas, comedies) which has updated themes, styles and methods borrowed from the past, achieving significant box office success: dozens of films that individually exceeded 1.5 or 2 million viewers.

The second factor in the resurgence is the emergence of independent filmmakers who have reintroduced auteur cinema and made quality films with limited budgets. These filmmakers who wanted to experiment with new visions and aesthetics have reworked, in “self-reflective” terms, existential and cultural themes and have obtained independent financing, also through the support of Festivals, Funds and International Institutions.

The present volume focuses on the output of these filmmakers, whose work can be considered as among the richest and most interesting worldwide. The following are directors who in recent years have received awards and prizes from the juries of the most prestigious international festivals: Nuri Bilge Ceylan in Cannes (in three editions of the Festival); Semih Kaplanoğlu in Berlin; Yeşim Ustaoğlu in San Sebastian; Tayfun Pirselimioğlu in Rome; the debutants Seren Yüce and Ali Aydın and also Emin Alper in the most recent editions of the Venice Film Festival; and the newcomer Mahmut Fazil Coşkun in Rotterdam. In addition, Turkish cinema has enjoyed major retrospectives in 2009 at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, at the Crossing Europe Film Festival in Linz, and at the Göteborg International Film Festival.

The reasons for drawing up a critical assessment of the last twenty years of the “New Turkish Auteur Cinema” are two-fold. Firstly, it is fruitful to compare the so-called third generation, the directors born in the early 1960s, which individually can boast an impressive filmography (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, Zeki Demirkubuz, Derviş Zaim, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Reha Erdem, Tayfun Pirselimioğlu, and others), to a fourth generation of directors, born in the 1970s and '80s, who, in the great majority, made their debuts in the last decade (Özcan Alper, Seyfi Teoman, Pelin Esmer, Özer Kızıtan, Emin Alper, Seren Yüce, Ali Aydın, Mahmut Fazil Coşkun, Sedat Yılmaz, Kazim Öz, Onur Ünlü, Asli Özge, Hüseyin Karabey, and others).

A second major motivation for this publication is to highlight the fact that Turkish cinema currently runs the risk of political oppression. After the wave of opposition to the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, leader of the “Justice and Development Party” (Adaletve Lalkinma Partisi – AKP), avowedly Islamic and holding a relative

majority, which started in Istanbul in May 2013 (the so-called revolt in defence of Gezi Park) and then spread to other cities, recently we are witnessing the critical involution of a power system introduced by Erdoğan in 2002. This Prime Minister has implemented several reforms to liberalize the economy, favouring a turbulent modernization programme and an economic expansion of the country, and from 2002 to 2012 the GDP growth has averaged 5.2% annually. However, he is also a politician with strong populist and authoritarian tendencies, whose policies and patriarchal rhetoric have angered large sections of the population of Istanbul, İzmir and Ankara, from the persistent campaign in favour of an increase in the birth rate to the campaign and law against alcohol consumption. Since June 2013, he has implemented brutal police repression against demonstrators, whom he defines as *çapulcu* – vandals and terrorists – and has carried out legal proceedings against many independent journalists (the number of reporters held as prisoners, being accused of crimes of opinion, is one of the highest in the world) and fines for radio and television broadcasters. Then, in early 2014, when an investigation emerged about a vast network of corruption and illicit enrichment that involved family members of government ministers and, apparently, members of his own family, Erdoğan removed hundreds of police officers and magistrates and finally censured and obscured various social networks for allegedly spreading the news of the scandal. Nevertheless, on 10 August 2014, Erdoğan was elected President of the Republic in the first presidential election by universal suffrage. This first-round victory was certainly not unanimous (52% of the votes), but it undoubtedly marks a strengthening of a leader who pursues ambitious objectives and a project of “majority democracy” centred on his own person.

Erdoğan’s road map to a presidential system and long term monopoly of power came to a dramatic halt when, on June 7, 2015, the parliamentary elections marked a disastrous defeat for the AKP. It lost its parliamentary majority, winning only 41% of the votes. Moreover, the new pro-Kurdish left-wing and moderate “People’s Democratic Party” (HDP) easily cleared the 10% threshold and entered Parliament, depriving the governing AKP party of its majority and spoiling plans for a referendum on executive powers for Erdoğan. The AKP responded first by stalling in coalition negotiations to form a government, and then by restarting the war with the “Kurdistan Workers’ Party” (PKK). On July 20, an “Islamic State” (IS) suicide bomber attacked a group of young leftists and Kurds in Suruç in southeastern Turkey. The bombing killed 33 and injured 104. Then a hard-line PKK faction retaliated by murdering two Turkish police officers

whom it accused of collaborating with IS. The government used that killing as the justification to end once and for all the ceasefire with the Kurdish nationalist faction, the Marxist-inspired PKK, launching extensive bombing raids against PKK camps in northern Iraq and detaining thousands of people; these were the most extensive arrests of Kurdish and leftist activists in Turkey since 2011. Kurdish guerrilla insurgency erupted once more and the Turkish Army returned to open the clash. The military and police also launched extensive operations inside Turkish cities in the south-east, laying weeks-long curfews on entire districts, sending in tanks and heavy weapons which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Kurdish civilians. The conflict is also taking a devastating toll on Turkey's civilians. It is destroying a decade of progress on relations with the Kurdish minority inside Turkey and generating a wave of persecution against media, civil society, and academia. For the AKP's part, its political argument was that the 7 June election results were leading to chaos, and it used the return to conflict as proof. With no coalition government able to form, new elections were held on 1 November 2015. The AKP's strategy worked up to a point: it won 49% of the vote this time. But the HDP still cleared the 10% threshold. Thus the AKP had regained its parliamentary majority, but it did not have enough votes to bring a constitutional referendum for a presidential system. All of the opposition parties were completely opposed to this shift. At the same time, dating from spring 2014, violation of human rights, repression of press freedom and freedom of expression and repression against civil society opponents, made by the State apparatuses, had a dramatic crackdown. Prosecutors have opened some 2,000 cases against people suspected of insulting President Erdoğan since 2014. The newspaper Bugün and the TV stations Bugün and Kanaltürk have been seized by the government. Over 108,000 websites are blocked in Turkey. In the last quarter of 2015 alone, there were 93 cases of supposed insult and violation of personal rights of President Erdoğan, including against forty-two journalists. In 2015, nineteen journalists and two cartoonists received prison sentences on accusations of insulting Erdoğan or other high officials. The local monitoring organization Bianet counts at least thirty journalists currently in jail. In February 2016 a bomb attack on a military convoy in the capital Ankara killed at least thirty-eight people. A hard-line breakaway PKK faction - the "Kurdistan Freedom Hawks" (TAK) - claimed responsibility. In March 2016 a suicide car-bomb attack in Ankara killed thirty-seven people: TAK again claimed responsibility.

Finally, on 15 July 2016, a half-baked coup attempt, organized by a minority faction of military officers, failed. Erdoğan was away on

holiday, but he managed to condemn what he described as an uprising by “a small group within our armed forces,” and urged the people to defy the curfew by turning out into the streets. During the night, within a few hours, amid reports of fighting, explosions at the Parliament in Ankara, and anti-coup street protests in Istanbul and in other cities, it was plain that the soldiers had failed to swiftly establish control. However, there was bloodshed: at least 200 dead and more than 2,000 injured. By early morning of 16 July, the main state broadcaster, which had aired the coup leaders’ announcement, was back in the hands of the government. With fighting still taking place in Istanbul, Erdoğan made a triumphant return to the city, appearing on television to announce that those responsible for the coup attempt would pay a “heavy price.” For the President, the failed coup was a golden opportunity to unite a deeply divided society. Practically the entire political class, as well as the overwhelming majority of Turkish citizens, Erdoğan supporters and opponents alike, spoke out against the coup. Erdoğan took advantage of this sense of unity by calling for vengeance. He accused the Gülen community, a Muslim sect known as Hizmet (meaning service in Turkish) headed by a cleric, Fethullah Gülen, who had been his erstwhile ally before falling out with him in 2013 and becoming his mortal enemy, of spearheading the coup. Gülen currently lives in self-imposed exile in the United States, residing in Pennsylvania. According to some reports, an estimated 10% of the Turkish population, almost five million, supports Hizmet. The Turkish government had already labelled the Gulenists a terrorist group at the beginning of 2016. On 16 July, the Prime Minister, Binali Yıldırım, demanded that the United States government extradite Gülen. The “Alliance for Shared Values,” the US arm of Gülen’s Hizmet movement, was quick to deny any involvement in the coup, insisting that the group did not support the military intervention. Within two weeks after 15 July, the authorities detained 10,000 soldiers and 5,000 army officials, fired 9,000 police officers and suspended 2,745 judges on suspicion of involvement in the coup attempt. As such, the coup provides an opportunity to eliminate what remains of Turkey’s independent judiciary. The purge expanded to include further elements of the Turkish military service, as well as almost 46,000 civil servants, including teachers and University deans, and various private businesses. These later actions affected personnel who were neither active in, nor aware of, the coup as it happened, but who were since alleged to be linked to the coup via connections to the Gülen movement. The government also shut down more than one hundred media outlets, including sixteen TV channels, during a continuing crackdown in the wake of the failed coup. After 15 July, therefore, Erdoğan can now claim a popular mandate for

amassing even more power and eliminating the remaining centres of opposition. His long-running quest to grant himself even more political power by changing the constitution to create an executive Presidency therefore has a large chance of success.

From this political framework comes a substantial danger of a possible boycott by the political power against scriptwriters and independent filmmakers, including the reduction of the public financial support to production and possible barriers to the distribution of films in theatres or bans to minors under eighteen. Erdoğan, aiming to normalize the society and to promote a model of Turkish *grandeur*, certainly cannot share the realist and reflective-critical approach and the “hardship of life” that characterises Turkish auteur cinema.

At present, *New Cinema in Turkey: Filmmakers and Identities Between Urban and Rural Space* is the most complete and up-to-date English language book that explores the subject, presenting a full specific examination of all the auteur films of the last two generations of Turkish filmmakers, in the period 1994 – 2014, and exploring themes and issues with a strong relation to the political and social context in contemporary Turkey. It joins a few other books published during the last decade that, in an international context, are investigating Turkish cinema. *Years of Collapse and Renaissance of Our Cinema: Turkish Cinema 1990 – 2004* (2004) and *Our Cinema Change Winds: Turkish Cinema 2005 – 2010* (2010), both by Atilla Dorsay, the most eminent Turkish film critic, are excellent works providing critical examinations of all the films produced in Turkey during those periods. However, both texts are only published in Turkey and are not translated into English. *Turkish Cinema, 1970 - 2007: a Bibliography and Analysis* (2008), by Ekkehard Ellinger and Kerem Kayi, published in Germany and also distributed in the USA, is a large critical encyclopedic work that comprises two parts, a bibliography and a study of the history of Turkish cinema and a comprehensive study focusing on various aspects and subjects of Turkish cinema including its beginnings, genres, directors, and producers. *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (2008), by Gönül Dönmez-Colin, published in the UK, presents a comprehensive analysis of Turkish cinema since the beginning, 100 years ago, interweaving cinematic history, aesthetic analyses, theoretical approaches to identity, and explanations of ever-shifting political and social contexts. However, it does not take into consideration the last generation of filmmakers, the new films that confront political matters and the Kurdish films of the last decade. Perhaps the closest publication in subject matter is *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory* (2010), by Asuman Suner, published in

the UK and also distributed in the USA, which provides a significant examination of contemporary Turkish cinema and explores the emergence of this new wave cinema against the backdrop of the drastic transformation of Turkey since the 1990s, including both commercial and independent production and addressing the divergences between popular and art-house cinema. However, Suner's book does not focus on the work of the younger generation of filmmakers.

CHAPTER ONE

FEATURES OF THE NEW AUTEUR CINEMA

In Turkey the issue of auteur cinema has been historically controversial. In the 1960s and 1970s filmmakers with distinctive personal poetics and styles (for example, Metin Erksan, Atif Yılmaz, Yılmaz Güney, and Ömer Lüfti Hakad) have had to accept compromises with the film industry to protect their expression and their careers. Even the few filmmakers (Ömer Kavur, Yavuz Özcan, Erden Kiral) active in the '80s, during the production collapse, have encountered difficulties in developing their own themes and aesthetics. Incidentally, although in those decades many filmmakers were influenced by the French “Nouvelle Vague” or by Italian “Neo-Realism” and by European avant-garde art movements, intellectuals and critics at that time often viewed the claim for an auteur identity with suspicion, criticizing the alleged bourgeois tendencies and the lack of a precise political consciousness. This constituted a further difficulty for the filmmakers who wanted to reflect original perspectives in their work, but had to depend on the requirements and limitations imposed by the industry.

Therefore, when in the mid-1990s – at a time of questioning the concept of auteur cinema in many European countries – a new generation of independent filmmakers proved themselves able to produce films with an objectively personal connotation and with very limited budgets (the debuts of Derviş Zaim and Nuri Bilge Ceylan and, years before, Reha Erdem), their auteur status was not immediately and clearly recognized by the majority of Turkish intellectuals. This initial uncertainty, with respect to their positioning in the cultural context, has favoured their expressive freedom and experimental flexibility. Moreover, the directors themselves express different individual approaches and awareness of their work and questioned themselves about the limits and the forms of their filmmaking.

In any case we can affirm that, over the last two decades, the new Turkish auteur cinema has shown a constant search for an autonomous space, reflecting and introducing many themes from the social, the political and the cultural spheres. It is a cinema that reflects perspectives that are in a continuous process of clarification, reformulation and

proposition of new ways of vision, even across ambiguous and unstable territories. Although each film is a distinct project and the connections between the filmmakers cannot be said to constitute a true cultural movement, it is notable that the directors largely share similar aspects and tendencies. These include: the partial or non-attendance at film schools (especially in the case of those of the third generation); an apprenticeship through the production of short films; the constant and decisive reference to their autobiographical experiences, hence the fact that they are very often also scriptwriters for their films; the sharing of a cinematographic ethos related to the use of limited budgets and the direction of the actors; residence in Istanbul where, in recent years, the technical and distribution facilities have increased in favour of independent cinema.

In general terms, new Turkish cinema has introduced elements to represent the different facets of the nation's identity and the power conflicts at various levels, in the domestic, social, religious and political fields. It addresses, in particular, the crucial issues of being Turkish, historically determined and accrued over the last fifty years, and primarily the complexities of life and identity in the metropolis of Istanbul (the most represented urban space), in the province and/or in the countryside and the aspects of this dichotomy.

In this regard, it is worth highlighting that the Turkish word *taşra*, which corresponds to province, assumes a more elusive, but also a more complex, undertone. In fact, it literally means “the outer space” and, during the time of the Ottoman Empire, it indicated the distant lands. Thus arises a broader concept of the “Other” that identifies and includes the countryside, the villages and even the small provincial towns in Anatolia. Finally, *taşra* alludes to an outer periphery opposed to a centre, a symbol of “Western modernity” or, in more extreme terms, any place outside Istanbul. Historically, in Turkish cinema, the province was often represented as a stifling and limiting space, characterized by primitivism and traditionalism, and a source of sadness and desolation. By contrast, contemporary generations of filmmakers have often considered it to be a place of creative inspiration, and have highlighted its existential contradictions and multi-dimensional features in a complex manner. The same tension between the metropolis and the province has led many filmmakers (such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Seyfi Teoman, Ahmet Uluçay, and Çağan Irmak) to reconsider the provincial rural areas of their childhoods through young or adolescent characters, exploring a complicated attachment to the past and the impossibility of a return to it. In other cases (such as Semih Kaplanoğlu, Reha Erdem, Yeşim Ustaoglu, Özcan Alper, and Belma Bas), the province is represented as a

monotonous and claustrophobic space where the lifestyle is unchangeable and where nature, rich and cruel at the same time, is repeated rhythmically. Conversely, Istanbul is an ill-defined space that can be understood only on a fragmented basis, a space that is represented in a disenchanted and realistic manner (by Zeki Demikubuz and Tayfun Pirselimoglu) or as an inhospitable place (by Nuri Bilge Ceylan).

New Turkish cinema is a personal cinema with a wide variety of styles and narrative approaches, but, from a thoroughly modern perspective, it expresses a common trait: the visual representation of the unsaid and the undone, thus of the emotions that the deep feeling or the monotony of daily life prevents from being openly expressed. Almost all of the most important films of the last twenty years focus on characters who find it difficult to communicate, who are uncomfortable with words, or who are unable to make other people understand their feelings even when they speak about them. The absence of real conversations is directly related to the inability to express personal troubles in terms of communication. This is the sign of a naturally limited language, but also of sadness and frustration. Furthermore, in many cases, what is unsaid mostly concerns socio-political issues connected to a specific Turkish context: discrimination, prejudice, hidden violence, identity crisis and cultural amnesia. These films show a constant representation of unexpressed feelings, lack of belonging and resistance to the identification with predetermined social codes. Therefore, the attempt to bring to light the disguised dynamics of hegemony and to question what has been accepted as “natural behaviour” is a recurrent feature.

CHAPTER TWO

VISIONS AND STYLES IN COMPARISON: THE NURI BILGE CEYLAN GENERATION

The so-called “third generation” of Turkish cinema refers to filmmakers born in the early 1960s, who made their debuts in the mid 1990s. As already mentioned, these filmmakers reintroduced auteur cinema, making quality art-house films with limited budgets. The third generation is composed of individual personalities firmly established through substantial filmographies whose works can also be usefully compared, as this chapter will demonstrate. Also, many of the directors expressed themselves through the choice of a specific path, the trilogy of films, although revealing different purposes in the filmmaking context.

The overview begins by analysing the paths of Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Zeki Demirkubuz who, despite their very different approaches, share the same concern with the limitations of the cinematic gaze to describe and understand the existential complexity of the individual. Moreover, while Ceylan places his characters, and himself as a director, in a large, but distant, living space, Demirkubuz imprisons his protagonists, in spatial and psychological terms, under an intense duress that is relentless and without any exit.

Born in 1959, Nuri Bilge Ceylan studied electrical engineering and later became a photographer with partial and interrupted film studies. He considers cinema to be a tool that allows him to express things that he would not dare to say, and one that enables him to explore the most intimate and dramatic spheres of his personal condition and vision of reality. He directed and produced, almost single-handedly, his first short film, *Koza (Cocoon)* (1995), casting his parents, Mehmet Emin and Fatma Ceylan. Addressing the difficulties of cohabitation, this film immediately and distinctively establishes Ceylan’s interest in exploring emotional dysfunction and alienation. He followed the short film with his “Provincial Trilogy.” *Kasaba (Small Town)* (1997), his first feature film, in black and white, of which he is also screenwriter, co-editor, director of photography



Figure 2.1: *Mayis Sikintisi (Clouds of May)* (1999), by Nuri Bilge Ceylan

and producer, exhibits a minimalist and poetic approach to the observation of the details of everyday life in the village of Anatolia where his family is living. Divided into four episodes, corresponding to the seasons, the film presents characters and landscapes from the perspective of two young boys, witnesses of the “mysteries” of life and nature. It is vibrant, not lacking in irony, and boasts an extraordinary visual sensibility that favours static shots, slow, long takes and uncut scenes. *Mayis Sikintisi (Clouds of May)* (1999) returns to the context and setting of the previous film, offering a double vision of the countryside as a site of boredom, misery and frustration yet also a peaceful place that can nourish the soul. The protagonist is Muzaffer (Muzaffer Özdemir), alter ego of Ceylan himself, a forty-year-old director who returns to the village of his elderly parents, Mehmet (Mehmet Emin Ceylan) and Fatma (Fatma Ceylan), to make a film about them. The film is a self-reflexive exploration of the continuous and vain effort to describe the “essence” of life in the countryside, with its rituals, obsessions, desires and worries. Moreover, the presence of the sound equipment and of the camera highlights the distance and the dichotomy between the protagonist’s present condition as a city-dweller and his past in the family home. Shot in black and white, it’s an extraordinary film which focuses on the slow passing of time, on the observations of nature and on the interaction of the characters, all the while enhancing the importance of apparently insignificant objects. Throughout, *Clouds of May* offers a deliberate incompleteness to show the viewer the failure to achieve the objective of truth. Both the film’s humour

and its melancholy stem from the way in which it highlights the ultimate superficiality of any attempt to capture the reality and the complexity of ordinary life through cinema.



Figure 2.2: *Uzak (Distant)* (2002), by Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Uzak (Distant) (2002) takes place in Istanbul and privileges desolate, misty and rainy autumn atmospheres. Again it explores the rural / urban divide by staging the impossible encounter of two taciturn and contrasting individuals. Mahmut (Muzaffer Özdemir) is a forty-year-old photographer in professional crisis, oppressed by melancholy and by the obsessive routine of a lonely life of straitened circumstances. Yusuf (Mehmet Emin Toprak) is his younger cousin, who suddenly arrives from the countryside to look for work as a port labourer. He is someone who reminds the photographer of the rural background from which he, Mahmut, now feels “distant” and who forces him to consider the individualistic aridity of his present existence. Trapped in the vain search for a job and in the inability to solve an ancient emotional bond, the two share both Mahmut’s old apartment and an intense feeling of failure, unable to communicate in any way. Their distance is developed through different levels of moral conflicts. The taste for the detailed observation of behaviours, spiked with subtle humour, frees the director from the temptation of resorting to the predictable or the hackneyed, allowing him to find the way to a tangible authenticity. The film is an intense reflection on loneliness and the impossibility of escape and offers a pessimistic view of the Turkish male. Echoes of Tarkovsky’s and Ozu’s works are evident. The sharp

photography has a stark contrast with the sordid nature of the depicted environments.

With *İklimler (Climates)* (2006), Ceylan takes another step in his path of bitter self-reflection. Once again, he presents the inability to support an affective and emotional attachment, telling the story of a couple that faces a crisis due to the end of the relationship, and tries in vain to reassemble it. Isa (Ceylan himself) is a forty-year-old university assistant, while his younger partner Bahar (the director's wife, Ebru Ceylan) is a production assistant in a television company. They live in Istanbul, but the film opens with images of their solitary summer holiday on a magnificent sandy beach of the Mediterranean coast. From that moment, in which one clearly perceives the gap separating the couple, Ceylan articulates the narration in three moments, climatic and existential seasons, which make up the story. The lack of communication between the couple clearly connects to the inexorable and slow temporal succession. Summer realizes the separation; autumn is the time of independent living and of the vain search for an escape from frustration and desolation, while winter shows the attempt to recompose the fracture. Ceylan confirms his brutal honesty in dealing with the theme of the male/female relationship, with an avoidance of any obvious psychological explanations. He represents with merciless bitterness, and occasional irony, the superficiality and the fake intellectualism of the character he plays. The film shows an exceptional quality through its quiet, clear and intense visual and narrative style. Dialogues are scarce, terse and raw, indicating the existential wear and tear of the characters. The universe defined by the shots, meticulous in details, is not cold and narcissistic, but rather expresses an exceptional photographic definition that makes the viewer feel the physical sensations condensed into images. The long shots and the extended sequence shots define alienating landscapes and capture the empty disenchantment of the characters that also show flashes of vitality, sometimes feral, but to no avail. The soundtrack is essentially composed by ordinary noises, but extremely present and precise, with the aim to amplify the effect of the images.

In *Üç Maymun (Three Monkeys)* (2008) Ceylan expands his horizon, moving from the focus on a small group of relatives and colleagues, and also on himself, to the close observation of the destinies of other, diverse characters. This film is a melodrama-noir, the result of a measured and controlled presentation, which challenges the canon of genres. It is a bitter apologue about the moral decay of a society gradually stifled by avarice and weakness. As is clear from the title, the story aspires to the status of a parable, based specifically on the well-known Asian legend of the three



Figure 2.3: *Üç Maymun* (*Three Monkeys*)(2008), by Nuri Bilge Ceylan

monkeys: one does not see, the second does not speak and the third refuses to hear. Therefore, the film strives to show the escape of people from responsibilities and from sorrows which are too hard to bear, and the negative consequences that are the result. The story begins with a car accident in which a fifty-year-old politician hits and kills a pedestrian in the middle of the road. Servet (Erkan Kesal) convinces his driver Eyüp (Yavuz Bingöl), absent at the time of the accident, to assume the responsibility and to serve the prison sentence, offering in exchange a substantial financial aid to his family. This agreement triggers a chain of consequences, according to a morbid psychological game that echoes Dostoevsky, between betrayal and passion, ambition, distorted loyalty and suppressed anger. The politician and Hacer (Hatice Aslan), the driver's wife, begin a sexual relationship. Ismail (Ahmet Rifat Şungar), the woman's teenage son, discovers his mother's adultery, but he is unable to tell the fact to his father when he visits him in prison. In the film, all the characters are somehow corrupt, guilty and involved in a complex web of lies and subterfuges. The dramatic irony of the story is surrounded by an overall atmosphere of torpor not lacking in symbolism. Ceylan re-proposes his aesthetics, emphasizing again the observation of nature and the passing of time. He chooses a very careful, and often maddeningly slow, composition of the images. Thus, he introduces a very suggestive "realism" characterized by static shots with motionless camera, long sequence shots, a pivotal role of glances and silences and a dark and sepia-toned photography.



Figure 2.4: *Bir zamanlar Anadolu'da* (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) (2011), by Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Bir zamanlar Anadolu'da (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) (2011) focuses on characters who are much more developed. Their interaction is functional to a specific desire of the director to tell a story alongside many smaller stories. In addition this film is a parable about humanity, although less bitter, not because falsely optimistic, but because more explicitly vital. At the same time Ceylan proves to be uninterested in any attempt to mythologise his country or its people. It is a drama which plays with crime thriller and road movie conventions. However, it looks very atypical if compared to those genres, because it rejects their schemes and their conventional articulation of events.

The plot is apparently very simple. It follows the course of a judicial inquiry supported by the police, with a site inspection, which lasts from dusk to noon of the next day. Moreover, what should be a routine situation becomes, in the film, a subtle game of chess that, as the events will focus, provides a broader picture of the people, involved in the action or encountered, and of the places. A small caravan of cars goes along peripheral roads in the countryside, among barren hills and fields of ripe wheat, on the outskirts of a small provincial town in Anatolia. Some police officers, a judge and a forensic doctor accompany a man, a self-confessed murderer, in search of the place where he buried the remains of the victim, after killing him during a fight. The group goes from place to place because it is obvious that the murderer is unable to remember the exact place where the body is buried. The itinerant investigation proceeds slowly