

ONCE UPON A TIME IN ANATOLIA

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Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (2011)

Original Title: Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da

Director: Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Starring: Yılmaz Erdoğan, Taner Bırsel, Fırat Köksal, Muhammet Uzuner, Ercan Kesal

Language: Turkish

Turkish auteur Nuri Bilge Ceylan's last movie *Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da* (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) is a story of a murder and the officers' efforts to find the place where the victim was buried. The story was based on the 12 hours of the event happened in Keskin, a small town of Kirikkale, in Central Anatolia Region of Turkey. The co-authors of the script were partly inspired by a true story. In an interview conducted with the director, Ceylan said that one of the co-writers had worked as a doctor in the town where the movie took place. So, the story benefited a lot from the doctor's memoirs concerning the murder while some conversations were built on quotes from Anton Chekhov (Proimakis, 2011).

The Turkish-Bosnian production takes 150 minutes and it can be categorised as a thriller. Unlike Ceylan's general tendency in casting, Turkish celebrities Yılmaz Erdoğan and Taner Bırsel play two of the leading roles in the movie. Erdoğan's skill contributes a lot to the movie as it can be argued that nobody

could have acted the local commissar of this movie as good as him. Similarly, Taner Bırsel gives a perfect performance as usual. Murderer, Fırat Köksal, might be seen as the most arguable character. He confessed that he was the murderer but he played the innocent in the whole story. That is why while watching the movie, you feel a meaningless sympathy for him. Ercan Kesal played a mayor candidate in Ceylan's previous movie *Three Monkeys*. This time, Kesal plays the *Mukhtar* of the village and his speech to the officers can beam you up to the heart of Anatolian villages. Including the *Mukhtar's*, several conversations of the movie reveal the hypocrisy and selfishness of Anatolian men. The characters, especially the prosecutor and the commissar do not care about others' problems as they are only focused on their simple personal life.

It can be argued that this is a very realist movie in terms of its characters, script, conversations, and covering a relatively short period of time for a movie. The only surrealist example might be the scene when the

murderer sees the victim in front of the window in *Mukhtar's* house. Concerning this scene, Ceylan's comments contribute to the movie's realist character. He said that it was the murderer's dream and dreams were part of real life (Proimakis, 2011). Yet the movie's realist spirit does not demolish its visual aesthetic. Although Ceylan's visual materials are remarkably restricted in the steppe landscape and darkness of the night, he successfully employs the rolling apples, flying leaves, and the light coming from cars and the train in his visual representation of the story. It can even be argued that every single frame of this movie can be a picture on your wall if you cannot afford to pay for a Caravaggio or Rembrandt painting. In particular, the establishing shot in front of the auto-tyre repair shop resembles a painting. This is Ceylan's creativity of transforming ordinary places into aesthetic frames.

The Grand Prix and the inadequate interest in Turkey

The movie won the Grand Prix at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival but Ceylan could not gain the same suc-

cess at Turkish movie theatres. It is clear that Ceylan puts his art first and is not very interested in what the general audience wants to watch. However, there is an interesting contradiction comes to my mind when I look at Ceylan's international success and his humble fame in his own country. Although Ceylan's narratives consist of Anatolian stories, his movies only get attention from a remarkably restricted group of Turkish society. Therefore, the issue should not be related to what his movies tell us but how they tell. At this point, one can argue that an average Turkish audience grows up with the fast cuts of American movies and the banal story telling of Turkish soap operas. Thus, influenced by the famous Russian director Andrei Arsenyevich Tarkovsky, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's movies' speed, editing, camera angles, and the visual materials are too unfamiliar for an average audience in Turkey.

All in all, even though the movie is very successful, I still have question marks in my mind. First of all, I wonder how much of the conversations can be fully understood by the non-Turkish audience. The characters are remarkably local as the conversations are so. The second question is Ceylan's style in producing his movies. We are getting more used to his style in every new movie. Can Ceylan transcend himself in the following projects? Or is he going to continue to be attached to his own tradition. After watching this spectacular film, I started to worry if *Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da* is going to be his peak in his career.

Notes:

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1. Aslanyürek, Semir (2011) "Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da veya 'Bir Ülkenin Otopsi'". Sol Portal. Accessed on: 15-02-12. <http://haber.sol.org.tr/kultur-sanat/bir-zamanlar-anadolu-da-veya-bir-ulkenin-otopsisi-haberi-46922>
2. Proimakis, Joseph (2011) "Maybe this is a Turkish western". Cineuropa. Accessed on: 15-02-12. <http://cineuropa.org/2011/it.aspx?t=interview&lang=en&documentID=204434>

