



Crime seen: **Firat Tanis**

Once upon a Time in Anatolia

Turkey/Bosnia and Herzegovina 2011

Director: Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Certificate 15 157m 32s

Having already spent hours on the cold, dark mountain as part of a team carrying out what seems to be an endless, often farcical search for the burial spot of a murdered man conducted by the murderer himself, the melancholic, city-trained doctor Cemal (Muhammet Uzuner) is startled by the sudden revelation of a rock sculpture of an unknown face, illuminated by a flash of lightning. In the context of the leisurely, naturalistic flow of the scenes preceding, it's a creepy moment, suggesting supernatural horror, but not as gently unsettling as what's said by police driver Arap Ali soon afterwards: "There's good people and bad. You can never tell... That's what it's like around here, doctor. You're kind of forced to take matters into your own hands." Director Nuri Bilge Ceylan makes the plain meaning of Arap Ali's words mysterious by disembodiment, taking the camera away from the

talking driver to behind his darkened back and then cutting to an unmatched shot of the silent, crying Arap Ali from another angle entirely.

It doesn't seem to add up. At least, not a first. It feels as if Ceylan is pulling the rug from under the viewers here – especially those used to the orthodox (if elliptical) minimalist naturalism of his earlier movies (the country diptych *The Small Town* and *Clouds of May*; the Istanbul-set *Distant* and *Climates*; the more genre-friendly *Three Monkeys*). What territory is Ceylan moving into now? In his earliest pair of films critics had him down as occupying Bresson land or following in the footsteps of Kiarostami; by the time of *Climates* it was Cassavetes who was the influence; now he seems to be annexing tropes associated with Kieslowski, and even, given his insistence on hidden and highly questionable (and almost exclusively male) motives, the uncomfortably probing social critiques of Michael Haneke. Whatever the influences – great filmmakers, as Ceylan has become, can't be subsumed by mere reference to their peers or predecessors – this is certainly his most ambitious and experimental (and longest, most expensive and most talky) film to date.

Soon after the scenes quoted above, the doctor, Cemal, is moved to quote a Romantic poet: "Still the years will pass and not a trace will remain of me. Darkness and cold will enfold my weary

soul." Overhearing him, the Prosecutor reproves him: "One day you may get a kick out of the stuff going on here. When you have a family, you'll have a story to tell... You can tell it to your son as if it were a fairytale."

So is *Anatolia* a fairytale? A ghost story? A parable about modern Turkey, or about corrupted fathers and their suffering sons? It's certainly not your usual police procedural. In scenes that brilliantly border-raid across satire and tragedy, farce and naturalism, Ceylan pokes serious fun at police/army/prosecuting department methods, protocols and procedures – for instance in the scene where hapless helper Hayrettin bickers about who left the body bag behind, or when Prosecutor Nusret argues the toss with a gendarme sergeant about whether the team is a kilometre over the communal jurisdiction. You could call it Chekhovian 'comedy'. Ceylan is using detail here to make a larger point, one in concert with the conversation he dramatises in all his films between the 'sophisticated' urban Turkish landscape and its 'backward', impoverished or otherwise 'culturally other' ancient 'homeland' (magnificently shot at dusk, night and dawn in widescreen by Gökhan Tiryaki). He has his own way with 'talk' too, not least the character-revealing banter in cars. What's most startling, perhaps, is his sense of mystery – most notably, most intriguingly, the mystery surrounding women for his uniformly bemused male characters. We see this in an irreducible (and irreducibly beautiful) sequence showing the effect on the men of an 'apparition' by lamplight of the local mayor's 'angelic' young daughter (Cansu Demirci). It's an example of magical filmmaking, set quite firmly in the all-too-real world.

♦♦ Wally Hammond

CREDITS

Producer
Zeynep Özbatur Atakan
Written by
Ercan Kesal
Ebru Ceylan
Nuri Bilge Ceylan
Story
Bora Gökşingöl
Nuri Bilge Ceylan
Director of Photography
Gökhan Tiryaki
Art Director
Dilek Yapkuöz Ayaztuna
Sound Editor
Thomas Robert
Costume Designers
Meral Efe
Nildag Batur
Özlem Batur

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Production Companies
A.Zeyno Film, Production2006 d.o.o.Sarajevo, 1000 Volt Post Production, Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu (TRT), İmaj, Fida Film, NBC Film co-production
With contributions from Eurinimages
In collaboration 1000 Volt Post Production

CAST

Muhammet Uzuner
Doctor Cemal
Yilmaz Erdogan
Commissioner Naci
Taner Birsel
Prosecutor Nusret
Ahmet Mümtaz Taylan
Arap Ali, driver
Firat Tanis
Kenan, suspect
Ercan Kesal
Muhtar
Erol Eraslan
Yasar, victim
Ugur Arslanoglu
Tevfik, court driver
Murat Kilic
Izzet, police officer
Safak Karali
Abidin, court recorder
Enre Sen
Sergeant Onder
Burhan Yildiz
Ramazan, suspect
Nihan Okutucu
Gülnoz

Dolby Digital
In Colour
[2.35:1]
Subtitles

Distributor
New Wave Films

14,177 ft +9 frames

Turkish theatrical title
Bir zamanlar
Anadolu'da

SYNOPSIS Central Anatolia, early winter, at night. Yasar, Kenan and Kenan's slow-witted younger brother Ramazan are sharing drinks and a meal.

On an evening some time later, at dusk, a train of three packed cars – containing Doctor Cemal, Prosecutor Nusret, local police commissioner Naci, driver Arap Ali, Kenan (who has confessed to Yasar's murder and burial), Ramazan and various army gendarmes, grave diggers and helpers – pulls up on a lonely mountain roadside to carry out the first in a series of searches for Yasar's burial place. The official party later spend the early hours as guests of the mayor of a local village, where Kenan – moved to tears by the ghostly appearance of the mayor's pretty daughter – lets out that he is the father of Yasar's son. Kenan then takes the party to the place where the victim is found in a shallow grave. Ramazan cries, mainly unheard, that he is in fact Yasar's murderer.

Later, outside the town's courthouse, Kenan spies among an angry crowd Yasar's son and widow; the boy hits Kenan with a rock. Cemal concludes a running conversation with Prosecutor Nusret about the self-predicted and mysterious death of the wife of Nusret's 'friend'; it becomes clear that Nusret has in fact been talking about his own wife, who may have committed suicide. Cemal performs an autopsy on Yasar. He fakes evidence to suggest that Yasar was buried alive, so that presumed perpetrator Kenan will face lesser charges.