

# ***Once Upon a Time in Anatolia***

(Turkey/Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2011)

Director: Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Written by Ercan Kesal, Ebru Ceylan, Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Cinematography: Gökhan Tiryaki

Run time: 157 minutes



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

An overnight search for a missing body yields a quietly poignant autopsy on the human condition in "Once Upon a Time in Anatolia." Nuri Bilge Ceylan's sombre, rigorous new feature is a meditative procedural that expands what would normally consume the first five minutes of a "Law & Order" episode into a slow-moving, nearly three-hour portrait of men at work, taking stock of the enormous social and moral burdens they bear.

"Anatolia's" imposing title and 157-minute running time would seem to signify a butt-numbing endurance test for all but the most hardened festival and arthouse patrons. Doing little to quell this perception, more than half of this intensely male-centric film unfolds under cover of darkness, as a prosecutor, a doctor, several police officers and two murder suspects navigate the sloped, winding roads of the Anatolian steppe in search of a corpse

Ceylan's characters themselves would probably sympathize. Though never less than professional, they're an impatient, exhausted bunch, having spent hours driving around with two self-confessed killers, Kenan (Firat Tanis) and Ramazan (Burhan Yildiz), who can't remember exactly where they buried the man they bumped off a few days earlier. In the film's many establishing and re-establishing shots, the darkness is penetrated only by the high beams of three cars winding across this barren yet beautiful terrain, where trees are sparse and each landscape looks more or less like the last (hardly a complaint, given Gokhan Tiryaki's stunning widescreen compositions).

Along the way there's plenty of downtime, during which these glum officials crack jokes, bicker over their next course of action and make revealing personal disclosures. Commissar Naci (Yilmaz Erdogan) gruffly orders his men around and occasionally rebukes Kenan, whose connection to the crime supplies one of the few surprises in the script (which the helmer penned with his wife, Ebru Ceylan, and Ercan Kesal). The two most developed characters are older prosecutor Nusret (Taner Birsal) and younger doctor Cemal (Muhammet Uzuner), whose mild disagreement over the meaning of a seemingly random anecdote speaks volumes about their disparate worldviews: one hopeful, one skeptical.

Ceylan is as calculatedly withholding a storyteller as ever, and as one might expect, "Anatolia" never comes right out and explains itself, though the men's free-ranging conversations suggest the film has much on its mind: the consequences of adultery; the suffering of children and the limited hope for the future they represent; the shortage of resources in a rural village where the men enjoy a latenight repast with the mayor (co-scribe and Ceylan regular Kesal); or the recessive role of women in Turkish society, underlined by the presence of only two actresses in brief, virtually

dialogue-free performances. However specific its concerns, the film feels universal in its diagnosis of collective malaise.

After the intense dramatic exertions of "Three Monkeys," Ceylan seems to have deliberately moved into less accessible, more oblique territory. The drama unfolding just offscreen is, in fact, as rife with deception, betrayal and violence as that of "Monkeys," but this time the helmer seems to be observing it all from a mournful side angle. Yet despite or perhaps due to its relative lack of incident, "Anatolia" feels like the more mature work, suffused with a wry, tolerant humanity that finds its chief expression in the strong, character-rich performances. As aimless as the men's wanderings feel, there turns out to be nothing arbitrary about the carefully chosen timeframe. From first moment to last, this is a story overshadowed by death, allowing its characters the space in which to reflect on their lives.

Though its glacial pacing will represent a significant hurdle for many viewers, the film grows steadily more involving as dawn breaks and the men make their way back home, and its unflinching observations of the legal and medical establishment at work frequently rivet. Visually, it's as gorgeous a film as Ceylan has made. Tiryaki works a steady stream of miracles in the night-time passages; rarely have faces been more beautifully illuminated by firelight, in images that have the graceful glow of a Vermeer painting.

From a review by Justin Chang, *Variety*, 20 May 2011

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**Next Film Club screening: *Coriolanus*, Monday 8 October**