

A Cinema Guild Release



# Once Upon a Time in Anatolia

A film by Nuri Bilge Ceylan

157 minutes / 35mm / 2.35 / Dolby Digital / Turkey / Not Rated  
In Turkish with English Subtitles / Stills available at: [www.cinemaguild.com/downloads](http://www.cinemaguild.com/downloads)

The Cinema Guild, Inc.  
115 West 30<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 800  
New York, NY 10001-4061  
Tel: (212) 685-6242, Fax: (212) 685-4717  
[www.cinemaguild.com](http://www.cinemaguild.com)

### **Synopsis**

Late one night, an array of men- a police commissioner, a prosecutor, a doctor, a murder suspect and others- pack themselves into three cars and drive through the endless Anatolian country side, searching for a body across serpentine roads and rolling hills. The suspect claims he was drunk and can't quite remember where the body was buried; field after field, they dig but discover only dirt. As the night draws on, tensions escalate, and individual stories slowly emerge from the weary small talk of the men. Nothing here is simple, and when the body is found, the real questions begin.

At once epic and intimate, Ceylan's latest explores the twisted web of truth, and the occasional kindness of lies.

### **About the Film**

*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* was the recipient of the Grand Prix at the Cannes film festival in 2011. It was an official selection of New York Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival.

### **Biography:**

Born in Bakırköy, Istanbul on 26 January 1959, Nuri Bilge Ceylan spent his childhood in Yenice, his father's hometown in the North Aegean province of Çanakkale. His father, an agricultural engineer, had been working at the Agricultural Research Institute in Yeşilköy, Istanbul. But when, with idealistic aspirations, he requested a transfer to Çanakkale, the family uprooted and moved to Yenice. Nuri Bilge was just two at the time.

For Nuri Bilge and his older sister Emine the move meant a childhood of freedom roaming the Yenice countryside. It was only to last, however, until his sister finished middle school. Since there was no high school in Yenice in those years, the family was forced to return to Istanbul in 1969, as a result of which Nuri Bilge spent the fifth grade of primary school, as well as his middle and high school years at state schools in Bakırköy. All the same, he generally chose to go back to Yenice for at least some of the summer holidays.

In 1976, having graduated from high school, he began studying chemical engineering at Istanbul Technical University. These, however, were turbulent times; and lectures were constantly interrupted by boycotts, clashes and political polarization. His course was based at the university's Maçka campus, where incidents were at their most intense, and two years slipped by with little opportunity for study: circumstances simply didn't allow. In 1978, he re-sat the university entrance exams and switched courses to electrical engineering at Boğaziçi University, where there was relatively little trouble at the time.

His interest in the art of photography, kindled during his time at high school, blossomed at the Boğaziçi University photography club, where he also took passport-style photos to earn some pocket money. As well as photography, he also became involved with the mountaineering and chess clubs. The university's extensive library and music archive played a significant role in fuelling his passion for the visual arts and classical music in particular. Meanwhile, the elective film studies course he took with Üstün Barışta and the film club's special screenings did much to reinforce his love of cinema, which had taken root earlier during showings at the Cinémathèque in Istanbul's Taksim. These were the years before DVD and video when films had to be watched at the cinema.

Having graduated in 1985, Nuri Bilge started contemplating the question of what he should do in life first in London, then in Kathmandu. His travels in the east and west lasted months and on return to Turkey he put the agony of indecision to rest by resolving to do his military service. And during those 18 months in the army in Mamak, Ankara, he found out how to give shape to the rest of his life. Through cinema...

With military service over, he set about putting the decision into practice. And while studying film at Mimar Sinan University, he took commercial photographs as a means of livelihood. But at 30-something, he was the university's oldest student and in a hurry to make a career for himself. After two years he abandoned the course.

He began by acting in a short film directed by his friend Mehmet Eryılmaz, but at the same time participating in the entire technical process from beginning to end, thus building on the knowledge he already had. He later bought the Arriflex 2B camera that had been used to shoot that film in order to make his own short film. In those days, video cameras were not yet an option.

Towards the end of 1993, he began shooting the short film KOZA (Cocoon), using a combination of negative he brought back in a suitcase from Russia and some stock long past its expiry date

that he was given by the state broadcaster TRT. The film was screened at Cannes in May 1995 and became the first Turkish short to be selected for competition at the Cannes Film Festival.

Three full-length feature films followed that could be cast in terms of a sequel to KOZA; they have also been described by some as his 'provincial trilogy': KASABA (The Small Town, 1997), MAYIS SIKINTISI (Clouds of May, 1999) and UZAK (Distant, 2002). In all of these films, Ceylan enlisted his close friends, relatives and family as actors and took on just about every technical role himself: the cinematography, sound design, production, editing, writing and direction...

When UZAK, the final film of the trilogy, won the Grand Prix at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival, Ceylan suddenly became an internationally recognized name. Continuing on the festival circuit after Cannes, UZAK scooped a total of 47 awards, 23 of them international, and so became the most award-winning film in the history of Turkish cinema.

Next to follow in 2006 was İKLİMLER (Climates), which again premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, this time scooping the FIPRESCI Prize. The lead roles in this film were shared by Nuri Bilge and his wife Ebru Ceylan.

Competing at the 61st Cannes Film Festival with his 2008 film ÜÇ MAYMUN (Three Monkeys), Nuri Bilge won the Best Director award. ÜÇ MAYMUN later went on to become the first Turkish film to make the Oscar shortlist in the Academy Awards Foreign Language Film category.

In 2009, the director returned to Cannes, this time as a member of the main competition jury.

At the end of 2003, in the course of location scouting for 'Climates', Nuri Bilge returned to photography for the first time since military service. From this point on, he began devoting his time to both cinema and photography.

**Filmography:**

Cocoon (1995), short film  
Small Town (1998)  
Clouds of May (2000)  
Distant (2002)  
Climates (2006)  
Three Monkeys (2008)  
Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (2011)

**Cast**

Doctor Cemal  
Commissar Naci  
Prosecutor Nusret  
Driver Arab Ali  
Suspect Kenan  
Mukhtar

Muhammet Uzuner  
Yilmaz Erdogan  
Taner Birsell  
Ahmet Mumtaz Taylan  
Firat Tanis  
Ercan Kesal

**Crew**

Director  
Screenplay  
Photography  
Sound Editor  
Editing  
Art Direction  
Produced by  
Co-producers

Nuri Bilge Ceylan  
Ercan Kesal, Ebru Ceylan, N. B. Ceylan  
Gokhan Tiryaki  
Thomas Robert  
Bora Goksingol, N. B. Ceylan  
Dilek Yapkuoz Ayaztuna  
Zeynep Ozbatur Atakan  
Mirsad Pruivatra, Eda Arikan, Ibrahim  
Sahin, Muge Kolat, Murat Akdilek, N. B.  
Ceylan

An Investigation  
in Anatolia

Turkey's Acclaimed Nuri Bilge Ceylan  
Returns with a Cerebral Mystery Tale

By Maria Garcia  
Film Journal International

In *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, Nuri Bilge Ceylan draws on his childhood memories of small-town life. Set in a village in rural Turkey, the movie is about a love triangle, a murder, and the search for a body. It is not a thriller. The grim details of a crime of passion hold no interest for the writer-director. Instead, Ceylan is preoccupied with his central characters—a police captain, a prosecutor and a doctor—who continually sift through past deeds in an attempt to define the present. Their investigative routine, which breeds in them a certain arrogance, a feeling of detachment from those who act on impulse, renders insight and earthly redemption evanescent, yet these men are undeniably compelling. Their stories unfold with the veracity and humanity Ceylan is noted for in each of his carefully crafted films.

*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, which The Cinema Guild releases in January, is Ceylan's sixth feature, the title a nod to Sergio Leone. It shared the Grand Prix award at Cannes in 2011 with the Dardenne Brothers' *The Kid with a Bike*. Ceylan is best-known for *Climates* (2006), a FIPRESCI prize-winner, in which he co-starred with his wife Ebru Ceylan, and *Distant* (2002), which garnered him his first Grand Prix. The filmmaker was born in 1959 in Istanbul, and spent his boyhood in the Black Sea village of Yenice, Turkey, where his father was an engineer.

In October, Ceylan was in New York City for the New York Film Festival screenings of *Anatolia*.

"I know these people in the film very well," Ceylan says in an interview at The Cinema Guild's midtown office. "The village I lived in was like the one in the film, and my father was like the men in the movie." Mehmet Emin Ceylan, his father, and Fatma Ceylan, his mother, were the couple at the center of his first movie, a short entitled *Cocoon* (1995), and have appeared in several of his subsequent films.

"Anatolia," a geographical area that dates to antiquity, is the Turkish word for "motherland," and refers to the country's arcadian landscapes from which Ceylan's characters emerge. The men are provincial authorities recognizable to everyone who has spent time in rural townships anywhere in the world. "With my characters, I am trying to understand human nature," Ceylan says in lightly accented English. "Also, when I make films, I try to understand myself and to find a better life." One measure of how deeply his movies spring from his personality is his admission during the interview that the male characters' costumes in *Anatolia* were taken from his own closet. Well-read and disarmingly candid, Ceylan's equanimity fails him when he is asked about the implied criticism of men in his films, evident in *Anatolia* in the petty power struggles among the characters. "I am glad you say that," he replies. "In Turkey, women say that my films are macho."

*Anatolia* opens in a service station where three men are engaged in an apparently amicable conversation, although there is a sense of unease in the dark, thundering sky. Ceylan cuts to the credits, accompanied by the barking of the garage's guard dog, and then to a long shot of the countryside at sunset, the yapping giving way to the sound of insects and birds. A cavalcade of police vehicles enters the frame—Ceylan's camera is often stationary—and soon we see one of the three men in the back seat of a car. Kenan (Firat Tanis) has murdered Yasar, the garage owner, but because he was drunk that night, he does not remember where he buried his body. The police captain, Naci (Yilmaz Erdogan), and his forensic team, which includes Dr. Cemal (Muhammet Uzuner) and Nusret (Taner Birsell), the prosecutor, are led by Kenan to different sites in a futile effort to uncover the remains.

Embarked on a ghastly task, the men nevertheless chat, gossip and spar, often to humorous effect. Their remarks are sometimes subtle ploys for hegemony, as each man represents differing positions in the hierarchy of civil authority. "I think a man is like a child whatever their age," Ceylan says. "I am, too." The filmmaker points out that the men's banter, in addition to representing their rivalries, is intended to give a flavor for country life. "They live with the dead," he explains, "and they accept it as destiny. Country people create a lot of rituals around it, as when animals are sacrificed. Now, that's changing in Turkey but not in the rural areas." As the movie progresses, the men grow irritable from hunger and Naci physically abuses Kenan. The prosecutor admonishes him for it, and afterward the men agree to halt the search in order to eat at the home of a *mukhtar*, or village leader. The choice of villages is also an occasion for competition—and humor—this time among the drivers.

After dinner, tea is served by a lovely young woman, the daughter of the *mukhtar*. The sequence, which marks a turning point in the movie, is lit by an oil lamp, the soundtrack isolating the clinking of tea glasses and the barking dog outside, the latter a reminder of the body's proximity. "That scene is very complicated and works in many ways," Ceylan observes. "The suspect admits that he was hiding something, but I had to come up with a reason why he confesses it at that moment in the film." As part of his research, Ceylan spent time with a real-life police captain who told him a story that provided the motive. "This police chief said he might hit a suspect for three days," Ceylan explains, "and the suspect would say nothing. Suddenly, the man would hear the voice of a child, or he would see a woman, and then he cried and confessed." It is in this scene that the prosecutor also begins to tell the doctor a story which will later lead to a confession.

The woman's youth and beauty, especially in contrast to her relatively crude surroundings, is startling and unexpected. "The men's souls are changed," Ceylan says. "Also, the girl creates a kind of break. The film slows down. There are many meanings. She can also be seen as a madonna." In *Three Monkeys* (2008), and in *Climates*, which is about a married couple, women also figure prominently in the fate of the male characters. "In life, it is like that, too," Ceylan observes when asked about this aspect of his work. "Man is lost in the dark. He wants to connect himself always to a woman. On the surface, it seems that this is just about desire, but it is much more than that." In *Anatolia*, wives are at the center of the prosecutor's life story and the doctor's as well. In the case of Naci, the one call he receives on his cell-phone is from his wife. The ringtone leaves no doubt about the role she plays in his life. It is the theme from *Love Story*.

Ceylan admits to being continually befuddled by critics' choices when they compare his work to that of other filmmakers, but when asked about Robert Bresson's influence, he welcomes the analogy. "All roads lead to Bresson," he says. "He is the most important director of all, and he is my mentor." The French master's cinematic style is apparent in *Anatolia* in Ceylan's uses of sound—and its parity to image—as well as in the absence of a musical score, and in his approach to actors. "Actors love to express their feelings, and this is a problem," he declares. It's a sentiment Bresson often articulated, and was the reason he rarely cast trained actors. Ceylan casts some professionals, but in his direction of them minimizes their emotive techniques, believing as Bresson did that the character's inner life will then be more completely exposed. "Actors must be chosen carefully," Ceylan explains, "because characters should be very similar to what they are in real life."

Ceylan downplays, as Bresson did, dramatic events that in most films define the personalities of the characters. In *Three Monkeys*, the death that so profoundly affects the members of a family happened years before the time period of the film, and in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, while the murder is recent, it happens off-screen, before the main action of the movie. The motive for the murder is mentioned only briefly, and the circumstances leading up to it are dispensed with in the short sequence before the credits. "Many of the men's motives in the movie are presented as possibilities," Ceylan observes. "We trust what people say, but most of the time we don't know why they say things. In life, things are uncertain."