

## Directors of the Year

## Nuri Bilge Ceylan by Jason Wood



Combining unusually modest working methods with a highly distinctive visual sensibility, the films of Turkish auteur Nuri Bilge Ceylan eloquently speak of the emotional impassivity that is an affliction of twenty-first-century living. Uncompromising in their honesty, and imbued with a personal touch increasingly rare in an industry in thrall to the imperatives of populist entertainment, with just five features and a short Ceylan has established himself as one of the major voices in contemporary world cinema.

### Country Life

Born in Istanbul, Nuri Bilge Ceylan graduated with an engineering degree from Bosphorus University. Cultivating a burgeoning interest in cinema and photography, he travelled to London to study film, but found the cost of life in London to be prohibitive and returned

to Istanbul where he enrolled on a four-year cinematography course at Mimar Sinan University. After two years Ceylan dropped out, believing 'the actual process of filmmaking to be more important in terms of gaining an education'.

Initially working as a photographer (he is also an electrical engineer and claims 'an affinity with the technical side of things'), Ceylan's first foray into the moving image was the short, *Cocoon* (*Koza*, 1995). Shot in striking black and white, with Ceylan also acting as the film's producer, co-editor and cinematographer, the wordless film concerns an elderly couple (Fatma Ceylan and Mehmet Emin Ceylan, the director's parents) in their seventies who, due to some painful experiences in their past, now live separately. One day they meet again, but their hope that it will heal the lingering pain and lead to reconciliation does not bring the expected results. The first of many Cannes invitations, *Cocoon* tentatively tilts at the impossibility of companionship, one of the defining thematics of Ceylan's career.

Building upon this interest, Ceylan made his feature debut two years later with the vibrant,



Small Town

poetic and self-funded *Small Town* (Kasaba, 1997). Told from the perspective of two children, and in four entwined parts running parallel to the seasons, *Small Town* served notice of Ceylan's gift for wry comedy and of his distinctive approach to framing characters and landscapes. The opening section is set in a primary school and concerns the struggles of an eleven-year-old girl to adapt to her new social surroundings. The second part unfolds during springtime and covers the journey of the girl and her brother to a cornfield where their family awaits. As they pass through the countryside, they encounter the mysteries of nature before, in the third section, being forced to endure and confront the harsh complexities of the adult world. The final segment takes place in the siblings' home and gently probes the intimacies and intimations of life in a remote Aegean village. Based on a semi-autobiographical story by Ceylan's sister, Emine, the film is evocative of Iranian cinema in its touching portrayal of childhood and adolescence. Premiered at the 1998 Berlin Film Festival, it again featured Ceylan in a wide capacity of roles: producer, writer, cinematographer and co-editor alongside the talented Ayhan Ergüsel, one of the key figures in recent Turkish cinema and the editor on all of Ceylan's films.

Cementing Ceylan's clarity of vision and his sensitivity to the delicate nuances of life, *Clouds of May* (Mayıs Sıkıntısı, 1999) takes another crisply composed look at the vagaries of country living. Muzaffer (Muzaffer Özdemir) returns to his native town to make a movie. His father, Emin (Mehmet Emin Ceylan), is bent on saving the small forest he cultivates on his property from confiscation by the authorities. Muzaffer's nephew, nine-year-old Ali (Muhammed Zimbaoglu), wants a musical watch. In an attempt to secure it, he must carry an egg in his pocket for forty days without it cracking, according to the terms of an agreement made with his aunt, who has promised to convince Ali's father to buy it for him if he is successful. Meanwhile, Muzaffer's cousin, Saffet (Mehmet Emin Toprak), harbours

dreams of making a success of himself in Istanbul, but his endeavours seem doomed to failure through a combination of bad luck and his own rebellious nature. As Muzaffer sets about recruiting family and friends to work on his film, Ceylan deftly observes people coming together, briefly interacting and then gently drifting apart again. Inscribed with a reverence for the lives of its characters, *Clouds of May* is a tale of warmth and beauty that foretells the director's future exploration of the dichotomy between rural and urban living and the import of seemingly insignificant objects.



*Clouds of May*

## Metropolis

Generally casting non-professional actors, many of whom are family members – his parents frequently feature – and continuing to call upon his increasing stature as a photographer to shoot his own films (examples of Ceylan's photography can be found on his website [www.nuribilgeceylan.com](http://www.nuribilgeceylan.com)), Ceylan brought these elements, and his interest in estrangement and communication to wonderful fruition with the vaguely autobiographical *Distant* (Uzak, 2002). Mahmut (Muzaffer Özdemir) is a successful commercial photographer who is nonetheless struggling to come to terms with

the growing gap between his artistic ideals and his professional obligations. Clinging to the melancholic and obsessive routines of his solitary life, the photographer's world is thrown into confusion when Yusuf (Mehmet Emin Toprak), a distant relative, arrives from the country in search of employment aboard one of the port's many ships. Despite the odd gesture towards a sense of familiarity, most notably an uneventful assignment in which Mahmut's apathy envelops him and he resists even setting up his camera despite a wonderful photographic opportunity, the two equally taciturn men struggle to form any kind of connection and inevitably part.



Distant

Rendering modern Istanbul as a desolate, if intermittently picturesque, snow-cloaked metropolis, Ceylan draws on Chekhov and Tarkovsky in his analysis of the alienating effects of urban life: 'City-dwellers try to organise their lives in a way that they don't have to count on anyone but themselves, and end up building their own prison cell. We don't ask anything of anyone, nor do we give anything either. Solidarity is a much more rural trait; it is somewhat of a necessity out in the country.' Minimising costs on the film by working with a very small crew and with available lighting, Ceylan also used familiar props and locations, including his own car and house, complete with photography studio. Claiming that he never sets out to be humorous, but just to reflect the way that he sees life, *Distant*, despite its ability to intelligently probe prescient themes and ideas, is nonetheless incredibly droll, most notably in the moments where Mahmut makes a meal of setting a trap for a resident mouse. There

is also an overt reference to Tarkovsky, who Ceylan admits to admiring whilst citing Ozu as more of a direct influence, when Yusuf walks in on his less-than-benevolent host watching a porn film only for Mahmut to quickly switch over to another channel where a Tarkovsky film is conveniently playing. Another aspect of the film that skilfully blends humour and poignancy is Mahmut's relationship with his ex-wife. He follows her to the airport prior to her departure for a new life and then can't bring himself to actually say 'goodbye', hiding behind various pillars and obstacles to conceal his presence. Ceylan claims that Mahmut has left his wife 'because he thought much more interesting things were going to happen in his life and she began to appear as an obstacle to him; I think many men in Turkey and in the world are like this'. The director's view of men in *Distant* is generally poor. In future films it would get a lot worse.

Highly acclaimed by the international press at the Cannes Film Festival in 2003, *Distant* was awarded both the Grand Prix and the Best Actor prize, which was shared between Özdemir and Emin Toprak. The latter award was tinged with sadness as Özdemir, Ceylan's cousin, was killed in a car crash shortly after the film was completed. Going on to collect numerous other prestigious prizes, including Best Film, Best Director and the International Critics' Prize at the 2003 Istanbul Film Festival, the aptly titled *Distant* firmly placed Ceylan at the forefront of contemporary world directors and helped turn the spotlight on cinema from Turkey, with figures such as Reha Erdem and the veteran Zeki Demirkubuz benefiting from the resultant curiosity.



Distant

## The Penetrating Gaze

Ceylan's fourth feature represents his fullest collaboration yet with his talented wife, Ebru. An acclaimed photographer who graduated from the Film and TV Department of Marmara University, Istanbul, Ebru Ceylan also studied film at Mimar Sinan. Her first short film, *On the Edge* (*Kiyida*) was officially selected for Cannes in 1998. A contributor to her husband's films in a variety of guises, *Climates* (*Iklimler*, 2006) sees Ebru and Nuri stepping in front of the camera's penetrating gaze for an intense and unflinching look at a marriage on the brink of collapse. Comparable to Atom Egoyan's *Calendar* (1993) in its wilful blurring of the distinction between on- and off-screen lives, *Climates* makes for frequently uncomfortable viewing but it is also undeniably bold and brilliant, and arguably stands as Ceylan's existentialist masterpiece.



*Climates*

The Ceylans play a successful Istanbul couple, Bahar and Isa, first seen on a hot and humid summer holiday in Kas. A taut dinner with friends and a tense, startlingly realised motorbike ride imparts that their relationship is on the downward slide and Bahar



*Climates*

subsequently sets off for home alone. In the rainy autumn – the film's seasonal structure reaches back to Kasaba – Isa, an ill-tempered university professor, encounters Serap (Nazan Kesal), a bewitching former flame to whom he is evidently still drawn and with whom, it is suggested, he may have been unfaithful. In an extended, technically perfect take characteristic of Ceylan's work, Isa forces his sexual attentions on Serap at her apartment. Though far from explicit and assiduously avoiding any overtures towards titillation, the sequence is, in its own way, very difficult to watch. Finally, in the bleak midwinter snow, Isa tracks Bahar to a remote, snowbound province where she is working on a TV programme. A rapprochement appears to be in the air, but it's clear that Isa is not nearly as capable of change as he insists.

It has been commented that Ceylan's stories and his films may be considered relatively small in scale but that their impact is devastating. This is certainly true of *Climates*, which takes the prevailing mood of ennui and disappointment common to Ceylan's universe to courageous new heights. Far from a potentially self-indulgent attempt at therapy, the film reveals Ceylan as a master storyteller who recognises and investigates the great potential for loneliness and self-destruction within us all. A brutally honest dissection of the failings of man – this is unarguably more Isa's story than Bahar's – Ceylan's casting of himself at the film's centre offers what Jonathan Romney describes as one of the most 'merciless self-portraits ever seen in cinema'. Of course, the director has frequently incorporated aspects of his own life and

personality into his work (and again his parents cameo as Isa's mother and father) and so one should resist the urge to read *Climates* as purely the cinema of autobiography. The first of the director's films to be shot using high-definition digital video, with Gökhan Tiryaki assuming cinematography duties, the film captures with enhanced clarity and precision the stunning Turkish locations. The physical details of the protagonists are also beautifully rendered; witness the opening scene of Isa and Bahar frolicking, first playfully and then with the aim of causing provocation, on a golden sandy beach. Such moments lend *Climates* a pronounced and profound sense of intimacy.

### The World of Secrets

The production notes that accompany Ceylan's films are as lean and economical as the works themselves, but the blurb for *Climates* did reveal Ceylan's belief that 'man was made to be happy for simple reasons and unhappy for even simpler ones – just as he is born for simple reasons and dies for even simpler ones...'. This is wholly applicable to *Three Monkeys* (Üç maymun, 2008), the director's fifth feature and most recent work at the time of writing. In certain ways an expansion of the central thread in *Climates*, namely the unspoken dynamics in a dysfunctional family, the film differs from Ceylan's previous works in that it more closely corresponds to genre tropes. Exhilaratingly ambitious in scope, the film, which adopts the proverbial 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' as its moral anchor, is a gripping and tightly wound psychological drama.



**Three Monkeys**

Servet (Ercan Kesal, who, alongside Ebru, also collaborated on the film's script), a wealthy politician, has caused a hit-and-run accident, and persuades his perennially cash-strapped driver, Eyüp (Yavuz Bingöl), to assume responsibility in return for a considerable financial reward. Convinced that he will endure only a short spell in jail, Eyüp accepts. In his absence, Eyüp's seductive wife Hacer (Hatice Aslan) becomes involved with Servet, and the couple's brooding teenaged son Ismail (Ahmet Rifat Şungar) must carry the weight of their secret when he visits his father in prison. Eyüp's release functions as a metaphorical unleashing of past indiscretions and various family deceits, desires and anxieties, and all too soon the increasingly fractured family find themselves entangled in an ever more complex web of subterfuge.



**Three Monkeys**

Weaving a carefully calibrated maelstrom of violence, moral decay and ruined lives, *Three Monkeys* is in many ways the director's darkest and most pessimistic work yet. Though still managing to find the time to accommodate the inspired flashes of ironic humour that frequently punctuate Ceylan's cinematic universe (including a humiliating climb down in a traffic jam when the offending vehicle is revealed to contain three brutish types), the overall feeling here is of a darkly malevolent society slowly suffocating through its own avarice and weakness. The dysfunction at the heart of the film is not confined to a single family struggling through their differences, but rather a wider and seemingly irreparable affliction.

Working again with cinematographer Gökhan Tiryaki, Ceylan continues to act as a pioneer in the use of high-definition images. Largely restricting himself to sombre tones, the director still imbues his urban milieu with an astonishing richness and compositional depth. As a peek into the tortured window of the human soul, *Three Monkeys* is, like *Cocoon*, *Small Town*, *Clouds of May*, *Distant* and *Climates*, a wonder to ponder and behold.

**JASON WOOD** is a writer and film programmer. His books include *100 American Independent Films* (2004), *The Faber Book of Mexican Cinema* (2005), *Nick Broomfield: Documenting Icons* (2005), *Talking Movies: Contemporary World Filmmakers in Interview* (2006) and *100 Road Movies* (2006).

## Nuri Bilge Ceylan filmography

[feature-film directing credits only]

1997

### KASABA (Small Town)

Script: Nuri Bilge Ceylan, based on a story by Emine Ceylan. Photography: Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Production Design: Ebru Ceylan. Editing: Ayhan Ergürsel, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Players: Mehmet Emin Toprak (Saffet), Havva Saglam (Hulya), Cihat Butun (Ali), Fatma Ceylan (Grandmother), Mehmet Emin Ceylan (Grandfather), Sercihan Alioglu (Father), Semra Yilmaz (Mother), Latif Altintas (Teacher), Muzaffer Ozdemir (Mad Ahmet). Produced by Nuri Bilge Ceylan. 82 mins

1999

### MAYIS SIKINTISI (Clouds of May)

Script: Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Photography: Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Editing: Ayhan Ergürsel, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Players: Mehmet Emin Ceylan (Emin), Muzaffer Ozdemir (Muzaffer), Fatma Ceylan (Fatma), Mehmet Emin Toprak (Saffet), Muhammed Zimbaoglu (Ali), Sadik Incesu (Sadik). Produced by Nuri Bilge Ceylan. 117 mins

2002

### UZAK (Distant)

Script: Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Photography: Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Production Design: Ebru Ceylan.



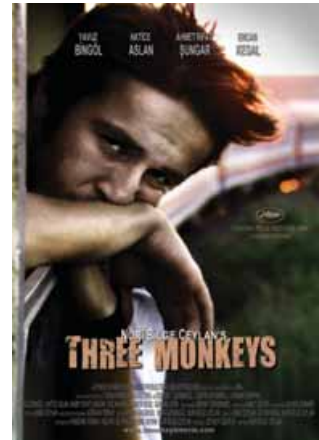
Editing: Ayhan Ergürsel, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Players: Muzaffer Ozdemir (Mahmut), Mehmet Emin Toprak (Yusuf), Zuhal Gencer Erkaya (Nazan), Nazan Kirilmis (Lover), Feridun Koc (Janitor), Fatma Ceylan (Mother), Ebru Ceylan (Young girl). Produced by Nuri Bilge Ceylan. 110 mins

2006

### IKLIMLER (Climates)

Script: Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Photography: Gökhan Tiryaki. Editing: Ayhan Ergürsel, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Players: Ebru Ceylan (Bahar), Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Isa), Nazan Kesal (Serap), Mehmet Eryilmaz (Mehmet), Arif Aşçı (Arif), Can Özbatur (Güven), Ufuk Bayraktar (Taxi driver), Fatma Ceylan (Isa's mother), M. Emin Ceylan (Isa's father), Semra Yilmaz (Semra), Ceren Olcay (TV series actress), Abdullah Demirkubuz

(TV series actor), Feridun Koç (TV series director), Zafer Saka (TV series crew member). Produced by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Cemal Noyan, Zeynep Özbatur, Fabienne Vonier. 101 mins



2008

### ÜÇ MAYMUN (Three Monkeys)

Script: Ebru Ceylan, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Ercan Kesal. Photography: Gökhan Tiryaki. Production Design: Ebru Ceylan. Editing: Ayhan Ergürsel, Bora Gökşingöl, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Players: Yavuz Bingöl (Eyüp), Hatice Aslan (Hacer), Ahmet Rifat Şungar (İsmail), Ercan Kesal (Servet), Cafer Köse (Bayram), Gürkan Aydın (The child). Produced by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Cemal Noyan, Zeynep Özbatur, Valerio De Paolis, Fabienne Vonier. 109 mins