

# The devil within us

Nuri Bilge Ceylan talks waking nightmares and the carrying of male guilt with **Nick James**

The careful progress of director Nuri Bilge Ceylan has seen the self-reliant former stills photographer build his feature-film work organically, using his family and friends. In his last film, the rigorously beautiful break-up film *Climates*, he tried acting himself, alongside his wife Ebru. Now, with *Three Monkeys*, the creatively restless Ceylan has moved on again, this time tackling a slow-burn, guilt-ridden melodrama.

Servet, a businessman with political ambitions, kills someone in a night-time hit-and-run. He persuades Eyüp, his driver, to take the rap in return for a large sum of cash. Eyüp's wife Hacer, troubled by her shiftless son Ismail, approaches Servet for an advance so she can buy Ismail a car for a school-run job. Soon Hacer and Servet are having an affair and the seeds are planted for another violent crime.

Mostly shot in an apartment next to a railway line and overlooking the Sea of Marmara, *Three Monkeys* has a brooding melancholy built of thunderstorms and purple skies. It is as exactly realised as we have come to expect from all Ceylan's films.

**Nick James:** In *'Three Monkeys'* the characters' psychology is all about transgression and guilt – it drives the narrative more than usual.

**Nuri Bilge Ceylan:** I wonder about evil. I'm afraid when it forces itself on me. So I try to create situations where the latent evil in ourselves surprises us. For instance, a son normally never hits his mother, but there may be certain situations in which he cannot stop himself.

**NJ:** Is there anything specifically Turkish about the situation the film describes?

**NBC:** No. It could happen anywhere. For instance, from a general point of view, when Eyüp learns that Hacer has cheated on him, his reaction – a look – may not seem typical of Turkey. Many a man in that situation would kill her. But if Eyüp hides what he knows, no one will hear about it. Such things do happen quietly, but we only read about them in newspapers if the husband kills in revenge. In this case the only man who knows is dead, but if Eyüp's friends knew, he wouldn't be able to forgive Hacer, because he would feel humiliated for the rest of his life. This psychology belongs more to human nature than any specific culture, but of course the style of behaviour is maybe more Turkish.

**NJ:** None of your films have hinged quite so much on suspense.

**NBC:** The characters here are navigating ambiguous and complex situations, so they try to gain time to think, creating suspense.



Dark dreams: high suspense, horror creaks and ghosts are new to Bilge's (above) repertoire. On set (below)

## BACKSTORY

**Nuri Bilge Ceylan**  
**Born:** 1959, Istanbul  
**Career:** The one-time stills photographer made his mark with *'Kasaba'* (1997), an impressionist portrait of a rural town. The self-reflexive *'Clouds of May'* (1999) followed, about an urban filmmaker returning to the family home. Ceylan's first masterpiece, *'Distant'* (*'Uzak'*, 2003) completed the trilogy, about a country man staying with his photographer cousin in Istanbul, with developing tensions. After the death of his favoured actor Emin Toprak, Ceylan himself acted in *'Climates'* (2006). *'Three Monkeys'* is his fifth feature.

And by not revealing, for instance, who killed Servet, further suspense is created.

**NJ:** It also seems a more expressionist work.

**NBC:** I don't know about that. I can't see with the eyes of the audience. For me it's a technical construction. But we had to be very careful to create a certain balance of tone because I didn't want to be misunderstood. There are so many things the audience has to pick up on as to what a character is feeling.

**NJ:** What was the first image to come to mind?

**NBC:** It was the son hitting his mother. That was something I saw coming out of jealousy, and it is one of the most painful things for a son to see in Turkish culture. Your mother is like a goddess. There would have to be a very strong reason to want to hit her. Next it was the father in prison.

**NJ:** A couple of scenes in *'Climates'* could have come from a horror film. And now in *'Three Monkeys'* you have a ghost child.

**NBC:** I'm often in that state between sleeping and waking, and there you can see horrible things. When I put [Eyüp and Hacer's] dead son into the film, I didn't want to show his face – I'm still not sure if I should have – but I thought his visits would help bind the family members. He stirs the guilty conscience in them, appearing whenever they lose hope or are suffering the most intolerable pain. He seems as if he is either consoling them or warning them.

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**NJ:** Why does the son not appear to Hacer?

**NBC:** I shot that, but in the edit I felt he should appear only to those who felt guilty about his death. Ismail was probably there when he drowned and maybe could have saved him. Women are good at awakening guilt in men. If Hacer were my mother, Ismail would be made to carry the blame all his life through minor reproaches.

**NJ:** How did you choose the location?

**NBC:** The house worried me because it was two metres long and makes the film feel very claustrophobic. We couldn't use different angles and we always had to shoot from the next room. And I didn't want to be near the sea because it made the house too pretty, but we had to be there because I needed the railway. I chose the house mainly for the way the terrace relates to the inside. It was the only house that gave me enough *mise en scène* possibilities.

**NJ:** Why so many creaking doors?

**NBC:** I used creaks instead of music. They create tension and suspense. I am very sensitive to creaks and collect all kinds; some are very painful. We used to live in an old wooden house in which everything creaked. If it's windy, it's like a symphony. To understand the feeling of the wind at the end of the film, when summer is ended and autumn is coming, I increased the creaks.

■ *'Three Monkeys'* is released on 13 February and is reviewed on page 77







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