

MICHEL HAZANAVICIUS ON *THE ARTIST* & SILENT CINEMA

CINEASTE

America's
leading magazine
on the art
and politics of
the cinema
Vol. XXXVII No. 2
U.S. \$7.00
Canada \$8.00

Gance's Napoleon is back
Ralph Fiennes on Coriolanus
Michael Haneke goes academic
Johnny Depp on his characters



The Descendants

FILM REVIEWS

Once Upon a Time in Anatolia

Produced by Zeynep Ozbatur Atakan; directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan; screenplay by Ercan Kesal, Ebru Ceylan, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan; cinematography by Gokhan Tiryaki; production design by Dilek Yapkuoz Ayaztuna; editing by Bora Goksingol, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan; starring Muhammet Uzuner, Yilmaz Erdogan, Taner Birsal, Ahmet Mumtaz Taylan, Firat Tanis, Ercan Kesal, Erol Eraslan, Ugur Arslanoglu, Murat Kilic, and Safak Karali. Color, 157 min., Turkish dialog with English subtitles. A Cinema Guild release, www.cinemaguild.com.

What is the sensation of watching a film that, from its opening images, is the work of an artist in supreme control of his material, but which is also elastic and open to the elements of surprise, to the possibilities of hazard? It's hard to exactly define this, to apply words to a sensory as well as intellectual experience—a kind of total experience, perhaps what might be termed the audience member's own sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, demanding the viewer's complete involvement and immersion, producing a possibly transformative event in the viewer's mind (and even, and maybe especially, body) that occurs very few times a year for even the most voracious cinephile or enthusiastic moviegoer. It happened in 2011 only a few times.

Unquestionably, this was the case with Jafar Panahi's unprecedented work of auto-diary, self-examination, and protest, *This Is Not A Film*, made in his condo with a couple of video cameras and nothing else except Panahi's innate sense of the right expression and right choices, at just the right time. It happened earliest in the year, in the Berlinale, with Bela Tarr's already-classic *The Turin Horse*, in which Tarr regained his composure and sense after the misfired *The Man from London*, with a magnificently orchestrated work of pure Beckettian absurdity and sadness, set not so much at the end of the world (as has been frequently wrongly read into the film) but at the end of the lives and purposes for the worn-to-the-nubs family on screen. It happened for the most exciting young filmmaker to really break out in 2011, Ben Rivers, with probably the greatest film under an hour made in many years, *Slow Action*, a work cunningly combining documentary/anthropological film with an elaborate, Greenawayesque literary fiction about four strange island "civilizations" in a distant, flood-ridden future.

All of them are not just masterpieces, thoroughly devised, directed, and controlled in every aspect, but also are all able to capture moments of the unexpected, receptive to accidents, all of them driven by ideas, all animated by the notion that the practice of cinema is one of radical, continuous exploration and experimentation. Yet I would say that the greatest example of this kind of cinema that premiered in 2011, and is now rolling out commercially (in the United States, care of The Cinema Guild, one of the real treasures in the hardy community of art-house/DVD distributors), is Nuri Bilge Ceylan's sublime *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, which, like Tarr's case, marks a great filmmaker recovering from his last, misjudged film. In Ceylan's case, this was *Three Monkeys*, which was unaccountably lauded with a best director Palme, when it was actually the one feature Ceylan has made where his best directorial ideas and instincts got away from him. (Even more unfortunately, *Three Monkeys*, at least in the States, is one of Ceylan's most accessible films, unlike his far-superior early films, such as *The Small Town* and *Clouds of May*, which can still be seen only on DVD with English subtitles via the U.K. label, Artificial Eye.)

A way of getting at the sensations felt when watching the kind of total film I'm referring to is to describe some of what happens in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, in the sense that the film as an object makes material the otherwise vague and even airy notions of an "experience." But it's also best to first identify this: that the factor that results in *Three Monkeys* failing is precisely what results in *Anatolia*'s triumph. Filmmakers never start with nothing, and, in Ceylan's case, since at least as far back as *The Small Town*, that starting point is Anton Chekhov. Unlike almost any other working filmmaker, Ceylan has derived considerable inspiration and source material from this one writer, and there's a way of viewing all of his films, up to *Three Monkeys*, through the prism of Chekhovian aesthetics. Starting with *The Small Town*, whose opening shot is not too different in manner from the penultimate shot in *Anatolia* of children playing in an outdoor area, the echoes of Chekhov are all there: the remote village and its denizens, far from the big city (Istanbul, replacing Moscow); thoughtful men, such as the schoolteacher in *The Small Town*, stuck in dead-end posts, or the filmmaker's friend desiring to leave town in *Clouds of May*; the immediacies of death and sudden bouts of joy, replaced just as suddenly by sadness, that are replete in *The Small Town*, *Clouds of May*, *Distant* (where the scene shifts to

Istanbul), and *Climates*, a master-class film in arranging mood shifts; a deliberately understated sense of the absurd, which is what situates Ceylan's cinema quite apart from the more extreme absurdism of Tarr's, both of them uncommonly sharing many of the same concerns and delivering them in different registers and optical modes.

One of the ways in which Web-based film criticism is expanding the abilities of critics and cinephiles is allowing them to find the connective tissue linking films together and filmmakers with their sources. Critic Chuck Stephens, for example, brought to my attention (on his Facebook page) an ongoing Web discussion of Chekhov stories with some connection to the narrative of *Anatolia*: "On Official Duty," "The Examining Magistrate," and "Happiness." I won't go into these stories here, but just to note that all three provide and combine several aspects of characters and actions that flow through the film, none of them taken directly from Chekhov, but bent, filtered, re-created by Ceylan and his cowriters Ercan Kesal and Ebru Ceylan, his wife, cowriter of *Three Monkeys* and costar with Ceylan himself of *Climates*. To take one example, of "On Official Duty": a bureaucrat, on the job visiting a small village in the dead of winter, is soon distracted and pulled away by the concerns and characters he encounters, the story being about the very nature of drift, of mental and physical wandering, and of some sense of guilt for being a privileged Muscovite amidst deprived hicks.

Much of this happens in *Anatolia*, but in different combinations of incidents and characters, and from different causes. The film begins with a simply but densely staged series of shots, which shift from an Altmanesque peeping-Tom telephoto shot through a window of two guys drinking and laughing with an auto shop owner—with conversation we can't hear—to a more ominous wide exterior shot of the shop itself and the owner's dog tied to a pole, a storm approaching, a vague sense of imminent danger. This prologue gives way to the first of the film's four major sections, a long, extended investigation of a crime scene, with local cops taking killers Kenan (Firat Tanis) and Ramazan (Burhan Yildiz) on a search for the body they buried somewhere in the countryside. The connection between the first scene and the ensuing sections isn't apparent until well into the film, but this isn't a concern for Ceylan; drawing the lines, gradually comprehending the truth, situating where the truth lies, these are precisely the film's central matters, and they are ones



A police convoy, with two handcuffed murder suspects in tow, venture into the remote Turkish countryside in an effort to locate the grave of the victim in this scene from Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*.

directly experienced by the viewer in patiently watching and absorbing the material on screen. That Kenan admits that he and Ramazan buried their victim in the area, but can't quite recognize the spot once the police caravan arrives there, is the grounding for the film's ongoing absurdist comedy, which comprises the first and third sections.

Ceylan has wrongly been perceived as deadpan serious, a kind of dour inheritor of Antonioni by way of Angelopoulos and Tarkovsky's interests in large ideas and movements of history within a framework of highly elegant staging. To think of him this way is to miss much in his cinema, which retains Chekhov's miniature nature as well as his lightness and comedy. The lead cop on the case in *Anatolia* is a pissed-off piece of work named Naci (the superb Yılmaz Erdoğan), who almost immediately finds himself being snookered by Kenan on a wild-goose chase all over the hilly Anatolian landscape to see where the body is buried, an absurd Chekhovian bureaucrat if there ever were one. He also finds himself in hopeless but funny conversations about prostates and yogurt, and receives nothing but nagging noise from his wife on the other end of his cell phone. He's already beaten down, and he's now about to be beaten down further when his professionalism is placed into question because of his growing and then exploding frustration over Kenan.

To add to his burdens, which he wears like a tired mule, Naci has two other bureaucrats waiting him, like an audience, but also waiting their turn in the cycle of official duties that comprise a murder investigation: prosecutor Nusret (Taner Bırsel) and doctor-coroner Cemal (Muhammet Uzuner). These are educated men stuck

way out here, far from Ankara or Istanbul, aware of their place, and also displaced—classic Ceylan characters, the keys to his world view. Nusret is obsessed with the story of a woman who, like Babe Ruth calling his home run, exactly predicted the time of her death; as he relates this to Cemal while they wait for Naci's ridiculous crime search to make some progress, Cemal begins to suggest to him a skeptic's view, that nobody can call their own death and then will themselves to die at that appointed time. Cemal further implies, subtly and between the lines, that a man of Nusret's training and intelligence should know this. It opens up a running dialogue that begins at the film's periphery, and finally moves to a central point in the fourth section.

What starts as an anecdote evolves into something else entirely, as a kind of revelation for Nusret of his thoughts and action and their consequences, and this evolution applies to the rest of the film, which is fascinated with the ways that things change around human beings who are surprised and unprepared for the way things change, but is also equally fascinated with a doubling of this effect, how a film can change for the filmmaker and the viewer. What begins as a crime procedural drama shifts into a road movie that literally stops at a village party hosted by the village mayor, who puts up the investigators, bureaucrats, and killers for the night after a feast, only to shift back to the investigation, which shifts again into the final exchange between Nusret and Cemal, as well as the final leg of the investigation, once they return to their offices after their night-long marathon on the road. Each of the narrative sections is marked by a single character's job: the first being Naci's handling the criminals; followed by the mayor

(cowriter Kesal) hosting his guests; then Nusret recording the evidence once the body is found; and, finally, Cemal conducting the autopsy. But these aren't so neatly presented by Ceylan; instead, the changes between scenes, and their emphasis, the ways in which formerly central characters become backgrounded or eliminated altogether, and vice versa, all of these match Ceylan's receptivity to accidents and seemingly unrelated matters, and this attention to what appears to be irrelevant is as crucial as the matter of the investigation itself.

There is an extraordinary moment early in the film that reveals much of what concerns Ceylan and how he thinks as an artist. During one of the long waits to see what Naci comes up with as the killers roam about to find the corpse, Cemal (whom we've barely noticed until now, and who we really don't know at this point) wanders away from the party. The same kind of storm that was threatening in the prelude is quickly approaching, along with wind and lightning. We can't quite perceive what Cemal is doing, and he can't either. He's only aware, probably, that he wants to remove himself from the inane situation as much as possible, to create as much separation as he can manage from the bureaucratic ineptitude around him. He's a stranger in a strange land, a stranger to us, almost accidentally becoming the only figure on screen, becoming lost in the dark amidst craggy rocks. Suddenly, lighting flashes, illuminating the unsettling sight of what looks like an ancient sculpture of a man's face on the side of a sheer rock cliff. The face is regal yet reeks of death, the dark side of a Rushmore-type visage, medieval not democratic. Shaken, Cemal finds his way back to the party, and civilization.

The scene doesn't need to be in the film at all, and yet becomes, in the end, essential to it. Art is necessarily useless, and the very essence of art's radical nature lies in its lack of utility. The sound of a musical note that disturbs a composition's plaintive calm, as can be heard in Stravinsky, can be the precursor of something greater, and so it is with Cemal and the stone face. The film ends with Cemal, contemplating the curious and upsetting resolution of his dialogue with Nusret, pondering what he has just found during his autopsy of the buried murder victim (that he was likely buried alive), silently measuring the limits of his morality against the necessity of literally burying the evidence of this ghoulish act, and watching—again, like a cinema audience—the victim's wife and child walk back home past a playground.

The stone face doesn't reappear here, but it hovers in his and the viewer's memory as an indicator, not a sign exactly (he's a skeptic, as is Ceylan, who displays no interest in God or spirituality in any of his work), but a screen reflecting back projections, cinema thoughts made material.—**Robert Koehler**

Corpo Celeste

Produced by Carlo Cresto-Dina, Jacques Bidou, Marianne Dumoulin, and Tiziana Soudani; directed by Alice Rohrwacher; screenplay by Alice Rohrwacher; cinematography by Hélène Louvart; art direction by Luca Servino; edited by Marco Spoletini; starring Yle Vianello, Salvatore Cantaloupo, Pasqualina Scuncia, Anita Caprioli, Maria Luisa de Crescenzo, and Renato Carpentieri. Color, 98 min., Italian dialogue with English subtitles. A Film Movement release, www.filmmovement.com.

Corpo Celeste, the “heavenly body,” alludes to the earth, to orbs suspended in space, to the sacred bodies of prophets and saints, and to the human body, which determines the phases of our lives, and is perhaps the greatest wonder of all. Thirteen-year-old Marta Ventura (Yle Vianello), Alice Rohrwacher's protagonist, is at first fixed on the latter. Gazing into a mirror, she squeezes her budding breasts together to mimic the cleavage of a voluptuous TV newscaster, and later steals her older sister's bras to add inches to what is hardly there. In the course of the film, Marta spends a great deal of time in the bathroom, impulsively lops off much of her blonde hair, and gets her first period.

While the Italian filmmaker seems not to have elided any coming-of-age clichés in *Corpo Celeste*, she has nevertheless made an impressive first feature. Yle Vianello displays a remarkable emotional range in her portrayal of Marta, evoking a complicated character in relatively few lines of dialogue. The movie is skillfully directed, and although the

plot remains predictable, it benefits from an unusual setting, a credible cast, and Rohrwacher's talent for characterization. Along with her adolescent preoccupations, Marta is a protagonist with such presence of mind that we plainly perceive the woman she will one day become. Not an effusive girl or a rebellious one, her resolute nature finally bubbles to the surface in the course of her confirmation classes, when she must decide what is deserving of her faith.

The film's title is an homage to Italian author Anna Maria Ortese, whose literary essays in *Corpo Celeste* (Adelphi, 1997) are a rumination on the role of nature in the modern world and in the imagination. Ortese spent part of her childhood in Southern Italy, where her working-class parents traced their roots. The region appears often in her fiction and nonfiction as a real place and, sometimes, as an invented one. Marta's adolescent dilemma in *Corpo Celeste*, of accepting conventional wisdom or “her own society” (in Emily Dickinson's words), springs from Ortese's writing; that choice is not simply a hallmark of maturity, but the natural outcome of a conscious or examined existence, especially, as Ortese points out, in an increasingly corporatized world. Appropriately, Rohrwacher's movie takes place during Lent, the Roman Catholic commemoration of Jesus's exile in the desert, a time of self-reflection and renewal.

Corpo Celeste opens at a spring festival in Calabria where Marta, her mother Rita (Anita Caprioli), and her older sister Rosa (Maria Luisa de Crescenzo) have recently relocated from Switzerland. For Rita, now a single mom, the return to her hometown is bittersweet, an acknowledgment of her failure to make a new start in the North where so many Southern Italians immigrate for work. Amidst the bizarre Lenten spectacle, which is outdoors, in a muddy field, and features pageant puppets and a school band, Marta gets a first glimpse of her new life. There, among the parishioners, Marta's aunt spies Santa (Pasqualina Scuncia), the confirmation teacher, and calls her over to meet her nieces.

Santa takes Marta's face in her hands in a transparently insincere show of affection, and then remarks on her youthful appearance,



Marta (Yle Vianello) gazes at the reflection of her changing teenage body in *Corpo Celeste*.

a stinging insult for a thirteen-year-old girl. Marta reacts accordingly, and recoils from Santa's touch. Emblematic of Rohrwacher's direction, in which many aspects of character and plot are dispensed with crisply and cinematically, this brief exchange exposes Santa's maliciousness and Marta's perspicacity. Next, we see Father Mario (Salvatore Cantaloupo) whose cell phone rings during the silent pause he has requested from his flock as they all await the bishop's arrival. Ambitious, impatient, and disdainful of his modest parish, the insistent, modern tocsin perfectly articulates the pastor's impiety.

This atmospheric first sequence is followed by a family dinner, which maps Marta's relationships with Rosa and Rita, and signals the family's working-class status, mostly through their modest home, far from the center of town. During the meal, Marta is embarrassed by a particularly harsh rebuff from Rosa and, as she does several times in the film, escapes to the roof. There she observes, from different vantage points, village life, especially along the waterfront where a group of boys troll for discarded objects, which they rescue or rearrange in fanciful sets. The progress of their labors becomes increasingly compelling for Marta as she grapples with maturity, and with finding a comfortable place for herself in a strange, new setting. These reflective moments, and the affectionate interludes when Marta and her mother conspire to escape Rosa's priggishness, are in contrast to the boisterous and sometimes hilarious antics of the confirmation exercises.

As the hypocrisy of the adult world and of the Church unfold, Marta struggles to reconcile what Santa insists is the incomparable and sacred body of Christ with her own body, and the throbbing signs of life around her, the most poignant of which is a box of newborn kittens she discovers at the church. They are killed by a handyman in a sequence of disturbing violence, which we witness from Marta's point of view. Everyone in this movie is subject to blunt treatment, especially the children who are taught silly religious songs and derivative biblical stories that desensitize them to the mysticism and deeper significance of their religion and, by extension, to the wonder of all life. Seemingly digressive sequences of Father Mario and Santa, where their varying forms of past victimization become apparent, are further illustrations of the coarseness of a working-class existence in Southern Italy, and its capacity to dull the senses to the splendor of *La Terra*, this *corpo celeste*.

Rohrwacher worked with veteran cinematographer Hélène Louvart (*Pina*, 2011) to keep the camera in close-up and extreme close-up, sustaining the intimacy she establishes at the start of the movie. Louvart, best-known for Agnès Varda's *The Beaches of Agnès*, alternates between documentary and narrative film, and her adept hand-held style works well in *Corpo Celeste*, where