



Unknown Unknowns

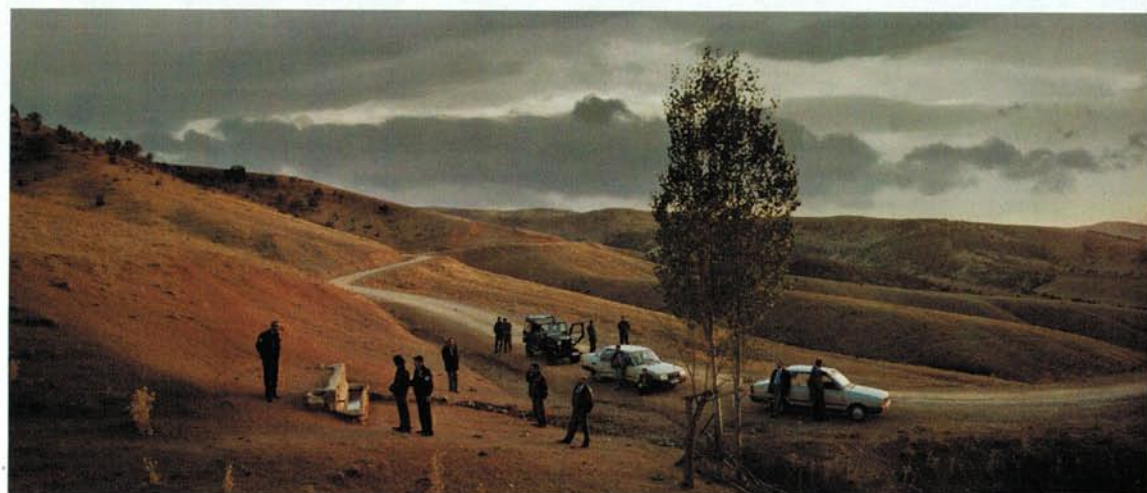
AMY TAUBIN ON NURI BILGE CEYLAN'S *ONCE UPON A TIME IN ANATOLIA*

WE ARE LOOKING THROUGH a rain-streaked window at three dark-haired men sitting around a table in an auto shop, eating, drinking, and talking. Although we see their faces clearly, there is no way to make out their conversation or to discern the relationships among them. After a few minutes—longer than prescribed for the opening scene of a murder mystery, which is what Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* turns out to be—one of the men steps out into the tire-strewn yard to feed his dog. It's night, there are no lights outside, and the camera keeps its distance. The scene is the perfect setup for a police procedural in which every "Aha!" moment for characters or audience will then be disputed or conflict with other facts as we thought we knew them. True, there is a corpse, and when it is found some ninety minutes later, one wonders whether it isn't that of the man who fed the dog. The suspects in the killing, who are said to have confessed, are the two men who were seen eating with him. Nothing else is certain. *Might, seems, perhaps, possibly, probably,* and, most of all, *supposedly* are the operative words. The film does not investigate a murder so much as epistemology itself.

For the next fifty-odd minutes, we find ourselves lost at night on the Anatolian Massif, a vast, harsh land-

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scape of uncultivated fields and steep rock cliffs. A caravan drives along a desolate dirt road, the three vehicles' headlights and occasional bursts of lightning the sole sources of illumination for more than a third of this two-and-a-half-hour movie, proving Ceylan and his cinematographer, Gökhan Tiryaki, masters of chiaroscuro and wide-screen composition. Crammed into the vehicles are a small-town police chief and his second-in-command, the regional prosecutor, the town's only doctor, assorted cops and soldiers, and the suspects. One of



Nuri Bilge Ceylan, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, 2011, still from a color film in 35 mm, 150 minutes.

the confessed killers, Kenan, a taciturn man with a thin face and beard that make him look like a Byzantine Christ, has promised to show the investigators where he and his slow-witted brother, Ramazan, have buried the corpse. The victim was supposedly killed in a fight after he learned that Kenan was having an affair with his wife and is the actual father of his child. Were this an episode of *Law & Order*, the district attorneys would be panicked about what even an incompetent defense lawyer could do to their case.

The above speculations about events, motives, and relationships are gleaned from casual remarks dropped amid intermittent bursts of small talk, from which we learn as much about the investigators as about the alleged criminals. The police chief has a sick child and an argumentative wife. The self-aggrandizing prosecutor is obsessed with the mysterious death of a woman whom he identifies as the "wife of a friend." His story has parallels with that of the crime since it may involve adultery and questions of paternity. The doctor becomes the prosecutor's confidant by virtue of their professional status in an impoverished backwater. In a film whose melancholy tone and subtle depiction of class privilege and frustration have much in common with Chekhov, the doctor could be a younger version of Astrov in *Uncle Vanya*. Almost imperceptibly, he becomes the focus of the narrative and perhaps a stand-in for the director.

"Wherever you find a can of worms, look for a woman," says the police chief. Barely present on the screen, women occupy a significant part of the men's thoughts and desires. After Kenan repeatedly fails to lead the caravan to the body (was he too drunk to

remember where he buried it or did he have nothing to do with the killing, or at least with the burial?), the prosecutor suggests his men get something to eat at a nearby village. Partway through the meal, but not before we've been given a lesson in the priorities of impoverished Muslim villages, the lights go out. And then an amazing thing happens. The youngest daughter of the village leader brings the men tea, her softly curving face with its perfectly proportioned features illuminated—as in a *La Tour*—by the oil lamp on her tray. Each man she serves looks up startled and then transfixed by her beauty. Unknowable emotions flicker across their faces. After this incongruent, almost miraculous moment of grace, the discovery of the corpse the next morning seems almost an afterthought. The caravan returns to the town from which it had presumably departed, and the doctor performs the autopsy, which adds yet another twist to the crime—or does it? But just before this ambiguous climax, there is a second, perhaps even more unsettling appearance by a woman said to be the widow of the man who was killed and the lover of the man who confessed to killing him.

Only those who perpetrated or witnessed the killing know the who and the why of it, and even they might be confused about the how. By eliding the murder scene, Ceylan refuses us that knowledge. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes last year, is the most complicated, beautiful, and haunting of the six features made since 1997 by the director who put the New Turkish Cinema on the international movie map. □

Once Upon a Time in Anatolia opens at Film Forum in New York on January 4. AMY TAUBIN IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF FILM COMMENT AND SIGHT & SOUND.