Once upon a Time in Anatolia

Turkey/Bosnia and Herzegovina 2011

Director: Nuri Bilge Ceylan
Certificate 15 157m 32s

Having already spent hours on the cold, dark mountain as part of a team carrying out what seems to be an endless, often farcical search for the burial spot of a murdered man conducted by the murderer himself, the melancholic city-trained detective Cemal (Muhammet Uzuner) is startled by the sudden revelation of a rock sculpture of an unknown face, illuminated by a flash of lightning. In the context of the leisurely, naturalistic flow of the scenes preceding, it's a creepy moment, suggesting supernatural horror, but not as gently unsettling as what's said by police driver Arab Ali soon afterwards: "There's good people and bad. You can never tell... That's what it's like around here, doctor. You're kind of forced to take matters into your own hands."

Director Nuri Bilge Ceylan makes the plain meaning of Arab Ali's words mysterious by dismembering them, taking the camera away from the talking driver to behind his darkened back and then cutting to an unmatched shot of the silent, crying Arab Ali from another angle entirely. It doesn't seem to add up. At least, not at first. It feels as if Ceylan is pulling away from the audience - especially those used to the orthodoxy (if elliptical) minimalism of his earlier movies (the country diary The Small Town and Clouds of Mag; the Istanbul-set Distants and Climates; the more genre-friendly Three Monkeys.). What territory is Ceylan moving into now? In his earliest pair of films critics had him down as occupying Bresson land or following in the footsteps of Kiarostami; by the time of Climates it was Cassavetes who was the influence; now he seems to be annexing themes associated with Kieslowski, and even, given his insistence on hidden and highly questionable (and almost exclusively male) motives, the uncomfortably probing social critiques of Michael Haneke. Whatever the influences - great filmmakers, as Ceylan has been known to say, can't be subsumed by mere reference to their peers or predecessors - this is certainly his most ambitious and experimental (and longest, most expensive and most talky) film to date.

Soon after the scenes quoted above, the doctor, Cemal, is moved to quote a Romantic poet: "Still the years will pass and not a trace will remain of me. Darkness and cold will engulf my weary soul."

SYNOPSIS

Central Anatolia, early winter, at night. Yasar, Kenan and Kenar's slow-witted younger brother Kamaran are sharing drinks and a meal.

On an evening some time later, at dusk, a train of three packed cars - containing Doctor Cemal, Prosecutor Nusret, local police commissioner Naci, driver Arab Ali, Kenan (who has confessed to Yasar's murder and burial), Ramazan and various army gravediggers, grave diggers and helpers - pulls up on a lonely mountain road to carry out the first in a series of searches for Yasar's burial place. The official party later spends the early hours as guests of the mayor of a local village, where Kenan - moved to tears by the ghostly appearance of the mayor's pretty daughter - lets out that he is the father of Yasar's son. Kenar then takes the party to the place where the victim is found in a shallow grave. Ramzan cries, mainly unheard, that he is in fact Yasar's murderer.

Later, outside the town's courthouse, Kenar spies among an angry crowd Yasar's son and widow; the boy hits Kenan with a rock. Cemal concludes a running conversation with Prosecutor Nusret about the self-predicted and mysterious death of the wife of Nusret's 'friend'; it becomes clear that Nusret has in fact been talking about his own wife, who may have committed suicide. Cemal performs an autopsy on Yasar. He takes evidence to suggest that Yasar was buried alive, so that presumed perpetrator Kenan will face lesser charges.