

take them out of the bus and their all-important policeman's work. The Balkan macho knows that women are the really stronger ones, and that's why he desperately and often pathetically tries to show, not so much to the women but to his pals, that he is in charge.

Early on, a wife summons one of the policemen out of the bus to demand that he come with her to the hospital for artificial insemination. For a moment she succeeds in getting him out of his bubble. They lovingly argue over the sex of the future child. He'd like a girl, she a boy. The bus, however, soon pulls him back inside to the lewd comments of his colleagues.

The daughter of the old major brings him his medicine but resolutely refuses to step over the line that separates the protesters from the police cordon. After the unit brutally beats his daughter's boyfriend and brings him to hospital without an eye, the major suffers a stroke. The daughter he brought up single-handedly (he lovingly recounts how he carried her twenty-five kilometers to the hospital when she ruptured her appendix) refuses to see him ever again. In the concluding scene, however, she takes him home from the hospital in a wheelchair. We are led to believe she will take care of him, a role reversal anthropologist Andrei Simic calls "cryptomatriarchy," a situation in which the Balkan macho becomes a child to his spouse (or daughter in this case) as he grows older.

Framing the battle between police and protesters is the imminent arrival of observers from the EU. The major tells his unit that Serbs must demonstrate that they can manage their own affairs. Serbia is a kind of a patriarchal household at war with itself. The protestors are the local manifestation of European values—bearers of a gaze that undermines the authority of the household patriarch. The outside gaze recursively reinforces the local one in undermining the masculine bubble. And that gaze is female.

The use of a bus as a dramatic device evokes associations to Slobodan Sijan's *Who Is Singing Over There?* (1980). Other films coming out of Serbia also situate prototypical characters in a crucible of confined space, perhaps most successfully in Srdjan Dragojevic's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (1996) and Goran Paskaljevic's *Balkan Cabaret* (1998). *Cordon*, however, manages to avoid the self-exoticism so widespread among filmmakers from peripheral countries.

Recent Serbian films tend to insist on a lack of catharsis and moral transformation. The fact that nobody changes in this film and that there is no resolution is intended as a representation of this kind of Serbdom that is forever condemned to eternal and unsavory repetition. *Cordon* makes its temporality more of a question mark than a bold statement, food for thought rather than an anguished lament.—Marko Zivkovic (Edmonton)

Distant

Directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkey, 2002.
Distributed in the U.S. by New Yorker Films,
www.newyorkerfilms.com.

Climates

Directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkey/France, 2006. Distributed in the U.S. by Zeitgeist Films, www.zeitgeistfilms.com

In Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Distant* (*Uzak*, 2002), when photographer Mahmut (Muzaffer Özdemir) meets with his old friends, they ponder how they once were idealist romantics. Before deciding to make money as a commercial photographer, Mahmut dreamed of shooting films like Tarkovsky. This partially autobiographical dilemma between art and money resonates clearly with the division of the contemporary film market in Turkey between art and entertainment. During the golden age of the film industry in the Sixties and Seventies, a common problem for leftist filmmakers was finding a niche outside the dominant popular film market and a way to avoid censorship. Since then, a series of major transformations—a military coup in 1980, followed by an ongoing process of relative democratization, the dominance of American films and distribution companies since the late 1980's, the dissolution of film theaters, and the influx of new generations of filmmakers and spectators—changed both the figure of the filmmaker and the dominant themes of films. In contrast to the era in which a leftist filmmaker such as Yilmaz Güney had to fund his political films with his popular films, contemporary Turkey provides financial and esthetic opportunities for noncommercial or *auteur* cinema. Directors such as Zeki Demirkubuz, Yesim Ustaoglu, and Ceylan have had a chance to stay outside the mainstream of the popular film industry yet make films that sometimes attract a consid-

erable number of spectators. The commercial pressures related to costs are greatly reduced as these directors also commonly act as producers, directors, scriptwriters, and even sometimes cameramen or actors in their own films.

Ceylan's diversion from the avenue of fortune can be viewed in scenes such as the one at the end of *Climates* (*Iklimler*, 2006), which reveal the dynamics of the television industry during the shooting of a television series. Nonetheless, in *Distant*, despite his elite pleasures, Mahmut watches Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) with his relative Yusuf (Mehmet Emin Toprak). Later, when alone, he replaces the videotape to watch a porn film. In this oscillation between the moral and the profane, the central male characters of *Distant* and *Climates* are themselves like stalkers. The yearning for the lives of others, the possibility of being at the center of things, and the masculine desire for women are all interlaced with autobiographical tensions that waver between the filmic and the real.

Ceylan's Cannes Film Festival's Grand Prix winner film *Distant* is about a photographer's distance from himself expressed through his coldness to his young relative Yusuf who comes from a village in search of a job in Istanbul. His most recent film, *Climates*, is about the changes in the inner climates of the university professor Isa (Nuri Bilge Ceylan), whose love oscillates between Bahar (Ebru Ceylan) and Serap (Nazan Kesal). Both films feature educated, middle-class male characters like the director who must negotiate with the ordinary or with the Other.

The films share a minimalist economy of visual and narrative storytelling. Ceylan's films reflect the work of modernist masters of cinema with a vocabulary of abstraction that comes out of the ordinary by recording its fine details and by turning simple objects into metaphors. The killing of a mouse in *Distant* and the eating of a hazelnut after it gets dirty by falling to the floor in *Climates* are both metaphors for psychological states.



Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Distant*.



Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Climates*.

Such states also coincide with the physical characteristics of the places represented. In *Distant*, Yusuf's engagement with the outdoors contrasts with Mahmut's self-enclosed existence and indoor frustrations. Similarly, the kitschy musicality of the wind chime in *Distant* or the music box in *Climates* points to the irretrievable loss of ordinary pleasure on the part of the main character. Neither the photographer's nor the university professor's taste could include such objects which are, nonetheless, integral to their lives. Such simple incidents such as those involving the mouse or the hazelnut also may be read simply as playful vignettes.

Unlike the modernist masters, Ceylan's cinema involves elements of playfulness, nostalgia, and well-constructed ploys. By using the real names of characters, Ceylan deliberately blurs the line between the filmic and the real. In *Clouds of May* (*Mayıs Sıkıntısı*, 1999) the main characters use their real names and they are real-life relatives of Ceylan. Two actors have the same name in two different Ceylan films. Mehmet Emin Toprak is Saffet (Purity) in Ceylan's earlier films, and Nazan Kirilmic is Serap (Mirage) in both of his recent films. This manipulation of names becomes more playful in *Climates*: Mirage (Serap) cheats on Trust (Güven) with Jesus (Isa); Jesus and Mohammed (Mehmet) are officemates and friends, with Jesus wavering between Spring (Bahar) and Mirage (Serap). In this tension between the filmic and the real, the esthetic and the ordinary, there is an inescapable loss of the ordinary as signaled by the closure of Ceylan's films in which the characters melt into the void.

Ceylan's *Distant* and *Climates* deal with a sense of not belonging anywhere, as his characters travel from the city to village or small town, from the center to the periphery, or vice versa. Rather than a nomadic existence, this is more about insecurity. Ceylan films are about a nostalgic search for some belonging which has been left behind. Mahmut or Isa's intellectual and existential restlessness does not acknowledge a possibility, but an abyss. In *Distant* Yusuf is a reminder of Mahmut's past in the periphery of the nation. In *Climates*, Bahar and Isa's presence in Agri underlines the distance between the urban, modernized Western Turkey and the rural, traditional Eastern Turkey. Despite such travels between distances and between climates, the incessant demand for closure does not come with ease. Instead Ceylan's films disown these demands. His endings dissolve into nothingness. In



Turkish filmmaker Nuri Bilge Ceylan has been described by some critics as a Balkan Antonioni.

this abyss, the recovery of intellectual interest is lost in despair and, at times, in translation.

In *Climates*, the translation of the name of the city of Agri is given in the subtitles as "the East" while two other place names, Istanbul and Kas, are kept as is. *Climates* opens in the Mediterranean coastal town of Kas which has recently been flooded with German retirement communities and tourists. But the three main characters of the film reside in Istanbul, the Westernized cultural and economic capital of Turkey. Conversely, as one of the easternmost border provinces of

Turkey, Agri is close to Iran, Armenia, and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, an exclave of Azerbaijan. In this zone of tension, various cultures and ethnicities encounter each other. Similar to Orhan Pamuk's novel, *Snow* (*Kar*), in which the city of Kars is described through the eyes of a Westernized Turk as a frozen state under snow, Ceylan's Agri is a place of well-kept secrets. Apart from providing a visit to the Ottoman era Ishak Pasha Palace in Dogubeyazit and from resolving his love problems, the Westernized, secular professor Isa's visit to Agri is an encounter with the others of Turkey—the traditional, the exotic, and the ethnic East of the country. When Isa hands the pictures of their summer holiday in Kas to Bahar, both the literal contrast of climates and the metaphorical

contrast of the relationship between the two are obvious. But a third contact is missing. In the snowy winter of Agri, Mount Ararat (Agri) does not come into sight. Moreover, in this city, which is named "the East," the faces of Kurds, such as the hotel receptionist or the airline ticket salesman, are kept hidden when they talk in an "accented" Turkish. It is in this unnamed East where one must search for the subtext of *Climates*, which is hidden behind the faces of Turkey's Others. Unless these faces are revealed and the social lacework which extends beyond the picture is fully threaded with the sociopolitical realities of the unnamed East, Ceylan's films carry the risk of being overly occupied with their tension and the void.—Savas Arslan (Istanbul)