Tracking the Fallen Apple: Ineffability, Religious Tropes, and Existential Despair in Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s Once Upon a Time in Anatolia

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Abstract
Once Upon a Time in Anatolia: a religiously complex film and a complex filmmaker, from a complex nation. Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s Turkey is constantly balancing a secular constitution, Muslim majority (around 99%), and unavoidable early Christian history. This complexity—indeed, tension—shows forth in the film. In the end, the film can be seen as a type of ritual of skepticism, whereby one confronts darkness, horror, and hopelessness consistently, for a constructive purpose. This essay explores these complex religious dynamics through an analysis of Ceylan’s formal choices. From the mythic title (“Once Upon a Time”), to his theologically suggestive use of natural forces (wind, fire, lightning), to his complicated relationship with the aesthetics and power of the religious icon, we see a formal articulation of timeless issues beyond words. It at once evokes religious experience and existential nihilism, co-present as hammer and anvil, able to create or destroy the shield of faith.

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The constant balance between a secular constitution, Muslim majority, and an unavoidable Byzantine Christian history stands as one of Turkey’s most unique characteristics as a nation. This complexity—indeed, tension—forms an uneasy foundation for Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, a film that serves as a site of negotiation for contemporary belief and doubt. In the end, the film can be seen as a type of existential ritual, whereby Ceylan utilizes and sometimes inverts religious tropes to test their efficacy in the face of evil, horror, and hopelessness.

This approach places Ceylan within the “post-secular constellation,” which Bradatan and Ungureanu (2014) describe as a diverse group of European filmmakers, varying in their aims, beliefs, and aesthetics, but united in their opposition to dogmatic secularism. Though many are atheists and remain highly critical of religion, their films present the case that “religion cannot be simply dismissed from our lives as a useless remnant from the past” (6). They all “display a certain degree of frustration with the typically secular—agnostic or atheistic—approach.” While they often wrestle with belief, they acknowledge an indebtedness to religious tradition in their films in various ways (narrative, thematic, or aesthetic).

Indeed, Ceylan is more likely to dialogue with other filmmakers in his work than with theology or religion proper, but—as scholars like John Lyden (2003) and Robert Johnston (2000, 2014) have argued—the cinema has become a religious form for artists and audiences alike. *Anatolia* often fiercely recalls the most austere, pessimistic cartographers of existential alienation, such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Bela Tarr. Yet, despite his obvious skepticism of institutional religion, Ceylan’s work is also filled with gestures that can be seen as religious, broadly speaking. For example, in terms of
pictorial style, gradual pace, and metaphysical themes, we see a filmmaker in the “transcendental” tradition, evidently influenced by religiously-inflected filmmakers Andrei Tarkovsky, Robert Bresson, and Yasujiro Ozu.¹

Deploying and engaging with religious tropes is certainly not the same as assent to their foundational meanings, but it does imply a dialogue with those traditions, at the very least. “Filmmaking, for me, is to tell the indescribable things,” Ceylan says (Wigon, 2012: n.p.). In this regard, he may also be aligned with (sometimes) hopeful cinematic questioners from religious backgrounds, such as Krzysztof Kieślowski and Abbas Kiarostami; like them, his hopes are essential, but his doubts are often very grave. The darkness looms large, but has not yet fully extinguished the light.

In the end, this cinematic dialogue may be an expression of a particularly contemporary form of agnostic “faith,” born out of the exceedingly complex religious dynamics of contemporary Turkey (which, in its very constitution, shows the complexities of a uniquely globalized contemporary nation: at once, Muslim, secular, post-Christian, European, Asian, and Middle Eastern). Turkey is emblematic of the contemporary tension between the tribal, provincial, traditional past and the polyvalent, multi-cultural, globalized future. On the one hand, Anatolia is deeply Turkish, but that also means its scope is the evolution of contemporary, global culture.

This essay traces and analyzes these religious contours in Once Upon a Time in Anatolia. After a summary of the broader religious implications of the film’s structure, the religious dynamics of Ceylan’s formal choices will be explored, as manifest in two

¹ None of these filmmakers should be assumed to be of a particular religious commitment, but all showed the influence of religion on their work, at various levels. Transcendental style was a term coined by Paul Schrader (1972), particularly in relationship to Bresson, Ozu, and Carl Dreyer. Tarkovsky and Ozu, at least, are directly cited by Ceylan himself as major influences (Foundas [2014] and Wood [2007: 24])
representative arenas of theological import: the personification of the natural world, and the icon.

**Setting the Stage: Narrative**

In short, *Anatolia* is the four-chapter story of how a cohort of police investigators, a prosecutor, a medical examiner (Dr. Cemal) and two alleged killers spend a dark, windy night searching for the body of a victim, the location of which the alleged criminals cannot accurately recall. During the first (and longest) chapter, the party stops at multiple sites throughout the night, fruitlessly searching for evidence of a burial. This wandering, seemingly meaningless exercise forms the bulk of the film, with the dialogue naturally emerging from this soul-dredging event. Extended discussions of life, death, justice, sin, guilt, human need, and the meaning of life regularly arise between everyday, trivial, small talk and petty arguments. The second, and most significant chapter of the film is marked by a meal, brief rest, and unexpected late-night visions at a nearby mayor’s home. This is followed by chapter three, the discovery and exhumation of the corpse in the morning. The final chapter of the film tests all the theories put forward so far – theological and philosophical – through the return to town and the autopsy of the body, which reveals a truth about human nature more horrifying than even the hardest, most cynical investigators had imagined. Most crucially, the Doctor/mortician (who has become the central character of the film) chooses to willfully ignore this awful truth, and fabricate his report. This closes the drama into an existential circle, rather than following the path of dramatic transformation.
It’s worth noting that the symmetricality of the four-act structure is more suited for expression of temporal progression – the unrelenting march of time – rather than constructive human action or character transformation. The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov famously utilized this structure for “great specificity of detail: intricate arrival/departure patterns, pertinent ‘acts of God,’ the exact season, date, and age of the characters” (Kane, 1984: 52). Likewise, in Chekhov, “nature figures importantly… providing a beautiful background for the drab foreground and graphically showing the cyclical and degenerative pattern of life” (53). This all stands as a generally apt description of Ceylan’s film as well, and forms a type of dramatic (or, rather, anti-dramatic) ground, out of which levels of existential meaning and feeling can be examined. Just as Albert Camus (1991), famously adopted the Sisyphean myth as the story for universal existential struggle, the seemingly pointless circle of action here forms an arena, within which the battle for ultimate meaning is fought. Indeed, at the overarching level of analysis, we see a dialogue with (or, perhaps, interrogation of) religious narrative structure.

While the larger narrative begins as a journey or quest—a time-honored framework for mythic and religious stories—this structure is darkened by the horrifying goal of discovering a corpse. Here we have a subtle deconstruction of the quest: do we really wish for the quest to succeed? Likewise, the journey also proves more tortuous than it first appears. In this regard, a more proximal comparison, for Ceylan, is the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami’s film The Wind Will Carry Us. That film opens with a series of wide shots: hilly, dry landscape, marked by thin, winding roads carved into the parched soil,

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2 Ceylan has specifically noted his affinity for Chekhov (Suner, 2010: 90).
3 For example, consider the Old Testament story of the Israelites in the desert, also mentioned in the Qur’an. Consider also Homer’s Odyssey, and John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress.
with a single car navigating them like an ant in a vast sandbox. The voices of those in the car are remarkably close and present, in counterpoint with the distant view the lens presents, and this grants the viewer a strong sense of dislocation. It is clear, from their dialogue, that they are feeling lost and unmoored amid all this stark beauty, and as the movie progresses, it becomes clear all the imagery of long, winding paths in vast, uncharted territory are metaphors for life. Along this first road, they find their way partly because of a massive tree, unexpectedly and marvelously springing up amid the dry hills. One of the passengers quotes from a poem, at this point: “Near the tree is a wooded lane, greener than the dreams of God.”
These same metaphors find purchase in Ceylan, but take on a darker tone. As critics have noted, Kiarostami appears to be an influence on Ceylan’s audio-visual style (Wood, 2007: 25; Suner, 2010:90), and like the opening to *The Wind Will Carry Us*, we don’t initially see much of the drivers, but hear them as if we are in the car ourselves. His extended sequences of small cars against vast landscapes on winding roads, is also similar, but rather than beautiful vast landscapes, most of what we see of the cars are their struggling headlights, weakly stabbing into vast, overwhelming darkness:
Like Kiarostami’s film, we don’t know why they are driving or what they are looking for, at first. In Kiarostami’s film, the party in the car—a documentary film crew—is rushing to a village to find an old woman, hoping to find her while she is still alive. In Anatolia, it is a corpse they seek. At one point, a particular tree is noted as a possible marker of the shallow grave, in contrast with Kiarostami’s more hopeful imagery. Later on this journey, one of Ceylan’s characters asks if they are on the right road. The answer: “Inshallah, boss.
As the song goes, we’re riding on a sign marked for Hell.” The Hell imagery is reinforced by the presence of a dog, in the very first scene (before the murder), who barks in a premonitory, agitated state, and reappears later in the film, at the shallow grave of his master: he appears to be Cerberus, the mythical watchdog of Hades.4

As the tale is told over an evening and into a morning, there is also a natural hopeful telos in this journey from “darkness into light,” but in Ceylan’s case the “light” of truth confirms the worst of fears. This leads to a “circular” feeling on human nature, rather than a developmental one. The immediacy of light and darkness as experiential metaphors (or corporeal metaphors, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson [2003] have described them) have a long history of significance in religion, and Ceylan seems acutely aware of this, problematizing and interrogating the metaphors themselves. In the wandering darkness, with no body emerging, we at least had hope there was some mistake and the whole matter might be cleared up. The next day, in the clear, cold light of the mortuary, we are asked: do we really want to believe what the light has revealed, or do we long again for the dark?

And so we see, amid all the theologically-loaded dialogue of this film, Ceylan makes formal choices that function beyond mere complement or illustration of the dialogue. Rather, we might say the form dialogues with the dialogue, a constant dialectic between the verbal and non-verbal—idea and experience—not unlike the warp and woof of the religious experiential fabric, as described extensively by Rudolf Otto (1958: 2-3). To look at the religious contours here more closely, the most important of these cinematic gestures can be further organized into two constellations: the Personification of the World, and the Form and Function of the Icon.

4 It is worth noting that Tarkovsky also utilizes the dog as a mythic/religious figure in Stalker (1979).
Personification of the Natural World

In many religious traditions, large natural events (such as weather, or earthquakes) are presented as reflective of supernatural will and action. On the largest scale, a storm at sea could be seen as Divine judgment or wrath, while rain can be blessing, and the wind may be the arm or “breath” of God. While most modern believers see natural events in less directly supernatural terms, a kernel of divine volition remains in natural events.

As with the narrative structures, Ceylan both draws on these traditions and sometimes problematizes them. So, for instance, at the third stop in the search for the body, the Doctor (who is emerging as the central character), stands away from the group, relieving himself next to a rock formation. A flash of lightning illuminates the rocks, yielding a startling revelation (see next page).

This ghost-like face, crying out from the ground, completely rattles the otherwise unflappable and un-superstitious Doctor. These rocks might be aligned with the Biblical sentiment that the murdered Abel’s blood “cries out” from the ground (Genesis 4:10), as well as Jesus Christ’s suggestion that the rocks will “cry out,” if humans fail to give proper praise to God (Luke 19:40). The Doctor later refers to these formations as “sculptures,” but it is clear that his immediate reaction was not naturalistic, and this bothers him.

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5 For example: “The Bible’s images of nature show a strongly theocentric bias…. While the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition of nature was indifferent to how nature got here, accounting for the origin of nature is a virtual obsession with the writers of the Bible…. As Psalm 147 paints a picture of the ongoing activity everywhere in nature, everything is pictured as something that God does” (Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, 1998: 589).
At the next search location, the Doctor informs the Prosecutor, he was divorced two years previous and has no children (a story that we are given some reason to doubt later). The Prosecutor replies that he did the right thing by not having children, given the times they live in. And yet, while there is little obvious hope to be found here, there are slivers of light that poke through the darkness, revealing the possibility of a rupture in our dull,
fated existence. The Prosecutor critiques a modernist conception of truthful discovery and naturalist explanation of at least some of the things he’s seen: “with some of the cases” one has to “be less a prosecutor and more an astrologer” to find the cause of death, he states. He goes on to share a story, wherein a woman seems to have predicted her own death with uncanny exactitude. He hastens to add that this woman was a “smart, educated woman, and not the least bit superstitious…. And she was gorgeous too.” After a reflective pause, a rush of wind sweeps into the area, and a series of shots documents its effects: dancing, swaying trees, swirling leaves. The men look around, brace themselves against the elements, and observe the moon peeking out behind a cloud:
The timing of this “natural” interruption suggests a type of supernatural “answer” or contribution to the discussion the two men are having, though the “answer” is far from clear beyond its overwhelming presence. The polysemous nature of the natural “sign” is essential, as we will learn later that the Prosecutor’s investment in, and interpretation of, this story is far from unbiased, and not without moral culpability. What appears here to be supernatural affirmation may, in fact, be a sign of divine displeasure, judgment, or heartbreak.

Shortly after this, Arab Ali pulls on the branch of a tree, and a cascade of apples fall. In what appears to be a metaphorical reference to the Edenic story (told in the Old Testament and alluded to in the Qur’an), an apple rolls down a hill, enters a stream, and snarls in a swampy area of detritus and other rotting fruit. While the camera follows the rolling apple in a sequence of lingering shots, Naci (the chief of police) and the Prosecutor argue over the treatment of the main suspect on the soundtrack. They groan about the
loathsome bureaucracy with which they must contend, and the difficulty of the procedures they must follow in pursuing justice.

This functions as a straightforward metaphor for original sin, death, and the fallen state of the world, and this is not inappropriate to the story. However, this is also an example of Ceylan manipulating things to create a negative personification the world. When asked about it, Ceylan made this curious admission:

Ceylan: I wanted to show that the fate of the apple is not so different from our fate. Everything created in the world has the same destiny—animals, trees, humans all have the same kind of destiny. In some way, the apple represents human life, as it goes to rest with the other, rotting apples. Actually, in the rest of that shot, the apple moves back into the stream, but we didn’t use that.

[Interviewer]: Why stop the shot there?

Ceylan: Because to shoot the apple [as it keeps] moving creates more hope; it’s not realistic. Giving hope has become a cliché in cinema, and I don’t like that attitude.

(Wigon, 2012: n.p.)

The irony here—that what actually happened in the pro-filmic event is “unrealistic”—says volumes about Ceylan’s existential commitments, and how anyone (religious or not) may “religiously” manipulate and personify nature to express a larger

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6 In this regard, Ceylan bears some similarity to the Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski, who also alternated between hope and despair in his imagery of existential order. Overall, Ceylan’s relationship with fate is darker than that of his fellow agnostic, Kieślowski, who might have allowed the apple to make it back to the stream, just as he let the drowning honeybee survive the juice, and the mangled plant rise in Decalogue II (see Kickasola, 2004: 174-84)
idea to which he/she is committed. For Ceylan, the cinema serves as an arena of existential resistance, a gymnasium for the soul, however Sisyphean this exercise may prove to be. It is *out of hopelessness*, facing the darkness, that we should “construct a reality against it” Ceylan argues (Wigon, 2012: n.p.). However, this negative cinematic and conversational ritual can result in a unified quasi-religious community, dedicated to the same therapeutic questioning:

[The people in this figurative community] ask similar questions about life, and it doesn’t change in New York or anywhere else. You meet these people in Iran, in Singapore, everywhere. And these kind of people make another kind of nation. Through films, you find your soulmates, who live in the same nation with you. (Foundas, 2014: n.p.)

It seems, then, that Ceylan deploys and subverts religious tropes as a means of critiquing easy religious answers, and building himself a new agnostic community (a “church” of sorts), committed to meaningful struggle, but never to certainty.
The Icon and Other Religious Portraiture

Though the direct address of the cinematic camera has been described as a “modernist,” politically subversive, Brechtian and reflexive “distancing” effect (antithetical to standard immersive, mimetic storytelling), Tom Brown (2013) shows this is not always the case. He argues that direct address often invites the spectator to be included in the fictional drama in a particularly charged manner. He details numerous ways in which direct address may “intensify our relationship to the fiction” (x). One of the primary things the direct address can do, particularly at the end of a film (e.g. Fellini’s Nights of Cabiria or Paul Thomas Anderson’s Magnolia) is signify a particularly marked and significant realization that the character has had about him or herself. The direct address offers us, the audience who has watched this character develop (or fail to develop), the invitation to a particular “co-existence” in intimacy with him/her as well as critical distance (169).

It is in this aesthetic and relational stream that Ceylan can also be seen to be dialoguing with the history of the religious icon, which also offers a “co-existence” of the “otherness” of the divine, intimacy, and character realization (within the perceiver, however, not the character). In a metaphysical context such as the dialogue of Anatolia, that tribute to the icon—and religious portraiture in general—rings even louder.

Consider the images on the following two pages:

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7 In Anatolia, it’s worth noting this happens as well, but the Doctor stifles this realization and favors untruth in the autopsy of the body.
8 Byzantine culture is, of course, renowned for the icon, so it is reasonable to assume that it has bled from Turkey’s cultural imaginary into Ceylan’s consciousness.
9Metaphysical context refers to a narrative that consistently broaches discussion of metaphysical issues. For more discussion, see Kickasola (2004: 57-58).
The first images are of the primary suspect, Kenan, sitting in the back of the police car amid his accusers, in chapter one and chapter two of the film, respectively. Throughout this first part of the film, he is in handcuffs, helpless, and is routinely abused by Chief Officer Naci. It is difficult to avoid his visual association with Christ on the Via Dolorosa, as his bound condition, longer hair, battered face, and general demeanor align him strongly with the Man of Sorrows. Throughout chapter one, our sympathies are naturally inclined toward him, partly for this reason, and we experience relief when a kinder policeman washes his face for him, or when the Doctor tries to procure him a cigarette (a kindness Naci opposes, but then extends himself later in the film).

There is also another parallel with Christ: he may be offering himself for the sins of his dim-witted brother. At the discovery of the body, the next morning, the brother starts crying and confessing to having killed Yasar. Kenan angrily tells him to be quiet. It has also been revealed, by this point in the film, that Kenan is the secret father of Yasar’s young son. In this light, he may also be trying to atone for that sin, in some way. So, while not quite Christ-like, this narrative element falls within a penitential and redemptive motif. This is particularly true when Yasar’s son (his own), strikes him in the face with a rock, later in the film. He bears the wound with tears, and no reprisal.

It is exceptionally important, however, to understand that as much as this man suffers, and as penitent as he appears in the middle of the film, the last part of the film reveals that this crime was not merely a drunken accident, but murderous torture, and we don’t definitively know his role in it, except that he had some role to play. We never learn the motive or the full details of the crime. It remains an evil mystery that is never solved, but nevertheless progresses: by degrees of evil revealed.
The next image, and several examples like it, make appearances in the “search” part of the film (chapter one). Numerous conversations are shown from directly behind, or a primarily “closed” angle that precludes a view of the face. This imagery functions in direct antithesis to the icon – a sort of anti-icon – in which all the charity, receptiveness, and availability to the “other” that Emmanuel Levinas attributes to the human face is utterly shut down (Waldenfels, 2002; Levinas, 1969). Examples of these “closed portraits” are found throughout the first half of the film. At the same time, however, this “anti-icon” is not without interior depth or revelation.

During the aforementioned conversation between the Doctor and the Prosecutor (before the headlights reveal the wind), there is a long dialogue between the Doctor and Ali, right after the nighttime revelation (by lightning, no less) of the “sculpture” (around 20 min. into the film). Throughout much of this conversation, the camera frames the backs of their heads, looking at the natural scene before them, waving amid the wind and illuminated by headlights. A slippage occurs here, between what they are actually saying and what they are thinking, but given that we cannot see their lips we are uncertain as to the origin of the words we hear.

In this case, the “closed” posture suggested by the anti-iconic framing becomes a different kind of “opening” into the characters themselves, revealing, but also confusing and frightening. They talk/think of fear, of death, and the eventual demise of all living things, and it is revealed that Arab Ali owns a gun because he is both angry and fearful. They “say” things in these sequences they don’t dare say out loud. Indeed, the talk here is a far cry from the banal conversation about yoghurt and smoking and every day indignity that has characterized the evening so far. It is clear that death haunts everything. Then,
suddenly, it’s revealed that at least part of what the Doctor has been thinking has been said out loud, as Ali jokes about the Doctor "burying them all before they are even dead" (a darker joke than Arab realizes, in the moment).

It’s worth mentioning that Ceylan’s style often evokes the chiaroscuro lighting technique made famous in visual art, of which Georges de La Tour was a noted practitioner. Among La Tour’s most noted works are a series of “Penitent Magdalene” paintings, wherein Mary Magdalene sits by candlelight with her face turned away from the “camera,” with a skull present somewhere in the scene (see next page).  

This is a particularly interesting image given the “closed” or “anti-iconic” pose here, and adds a resonance of repentance amid mortality. It is hard to see many of Ceylan’s characters as fully “repentant” in the religious sense of the term, but it is certainly fair to say they lament the state of things, including some of their own actions, and their closed posture reinforces that.

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10 This painting, entitled The Penitent Magdalen is dated ca. 1640, and currently housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. (Source: http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/436839)
The last few images, however, demonstrate the other side of Ceylan’s dialogue with the religious icon: affirmation and vision. This scene is most unusual in this film, and comes at the most spiritually charged moment in the story. At their last stop of the evening, in the middle of the night, when they simply must eat and rest until daybreak, the search party and suspects all end up at the home of a local mayor. Their host proves to be one of the few characters exuding graciousness in the film, and it is around his table that all the men (guilty and innocent) share a meal together. It is a remarkable time, suggestive of a religious feast or sacrament (be it communion, Passover, or Eid ul-Fitr, “the Feast of
Breaking Fast,” which lasts for three days after Ramadan in Islam), and all the talk of lamb, honey, bread, and pickles carries enormous multisensory appeal. Likewise, the host waxes long about how it is “an honor and delight” to have guests. As in Ingmar Bergman’s film Wild Strawberries, a shared meal functions as a means of grace, and this proves particularly true in the moments to come.

The meal is suddenly interrupted with a power outage, and all the tired guests are left in the dark. As they doze around the room, the mayor’s daughter, Cemile, whom we have barely glimpsed before now, emerges with a lamp and some tea for the guests. She looks radiant, not unlike a religious icon, or another La Tour painting, featuring the child Christ holding a candle for his father. She serves the doctor, and the prisoners (including the dim-witted brother who strangely inappropriately asked for cola), and Kenan weeps at the sight of her. As an angel of grace, she glides almost noiselessly through the room, and her light enables Kenan to see “Yasar,” the murdered man, across the room, where she has served him tea.

“Aren’t you dead?” Kenan asks. Yasar does not respond, but pulls some prayer beads from his pocket and begins to work with them. He then starts to choke, as if being strangled. The chief of police (Naci), Kenan’s greatest antagonist throughout the film, interrupts the vision with the announcement of further interrogation. The clock on the wall shows it’s twenty past four in the morning. Reality has returned, but the light of the young girl has revealed, for the first time, genuine emotion (and conscience?) from the accused man.

At the essence of the religious icon lies a trans-historical dimension of presence. In some Christian theologies, it serves as a material marker of the metaphysical presence of God, saints, and the “great cloud of witnesses” in the spiritual realms,¹² and plays an intermediary role between the perceiver and God through this presence. It is also thought

to aesthetically and communicatively function through “inverted perspective”; that is, a deliberately flat image, intended to exchange Renaissance “depth” of perspective for a reverse “depth,” theoretically stretching forward, out of the picture, into the heart of the perceiver. At the heart of this image, then, is a new spiritual dimension that opens up for the viewer by directly engaging him or her in a charged exchange of mutual presence and engagement.

Ceylan works here within this tradition, complete with the truth-telling and depth-inducing feeling the icon yields. At the same time, even at this moment of grace, he inverts one of the icon’s central purposes. Yasar is not a dear departed saint, emblematic of the great cloud of witnesses (apostles, prophets, and martyrs), encouraging the believer to persevere. He is Abel, his blood crying from the ground, a condemning witness, and the darkest of truths revealed.

The final chapter, and final icon, of the film takes place in the liminal time between the discovery of the body and the autopsy, after the horrendously draining all-night search. It is a moment of fatigued reflection for the Doctor, where it is revealed that his existential questions and anxieties appear to be related to family and loved ones. We learn this through a series of contemporary icons, in the form of photographs including the wife he lost (to divorce, or was it death?), his younger, happier self with friends (whom he seems to have lost), and a boy who may be the child he denied he ever had.

Kickasola: Tracking the Fallen Apple
After surveying these, he walks to the window and observes the unrelenting wind, charging the dead leaves into animation, and driving a black cat under a dumpster for refuge. A black bag, also animated by the wind, gently glides by. Invisible forces are at work, both wondrous and ominous. He then wanders from the window, pauses, and quite unexpectedly stares directly at us.
Like the religious icon, it faces the viewer with unusual directness. Unlike the religious icon (and very much like the anti-icon), it is a depth of despair that is plumbed rather than the inverse perspective of spiritual depth and bonding relation the religious icon generates. This icon is, ironically, about absence: of self, and of others that help to constitute the self.

This final “icon” is only subsequently revealed to be the doctor’s gaze into a mirror. The fact that this establishing bit of diegetic information is initially withheld is significant, in that it puts us in the posture of receiving it as a direct address to us. But this is not a sort of Godardian avant-garde political gesture that so thrilled the 1970s Screen theorists. Rather, it draws on a much older idea: the mysterious paradoxical distant-presence of the icon. It is not the anti-icon, or the religious icon, but the contemporary, post-secular icon, for the rituals of existential loss and despair.

Marie José-Mondzain (2005) makes a compelling argument that much of contemporary thought has been foundationalized on, and flows from, the iconoclastic
debates of Byzantium. The concepts that emerged in the iconoclastic period—through the doctrinal writings of theologians like St. John of Damascus, and, more directly, from more broadly philosophical writers like Nikephoros—have enabled the West to understand a fundamental ontological difference between reality (spiritual or physical) and our perception/conception/knowledge of it. The “image” is the term for “invisible” reality (God himself, in the context of the iconoclastic debate). The “icon” is the term for the visible manifestation of that image, related, yet ontologically distinct from it. The *economy* is the relational dynamic between the two—their “living linkage”—and the “transfiguration of history” in its wake (3).

Mondzain argues that Nikephoros’s greatest contribution during this time was not to rob the iconoclasts of power through brilliant and inventive argument, though he surely did that. It was, rather, to reconceptualize how *any kind of human knowledge* is iconic, emanating from but ontologically distinct from the “image” of the real. In more mystic, theological, and less hyperbolic tones, one hears whispers of postmodern theory in the 8th century. It is also, Mondzain argues, the foundation for an argument against a distinction between secular and sacred art (69-117). It seems that this present-day Turkish film director is, in this respect, close to his Byzantinian forefather Nikephoros.

We would be remiss to leave our discussion of icons, without a brief mention of relics. In his study on charisma and enchantment in art and literature, C. Stephen Jaeger (2012: 99) speaks of the two categories of icon and relic as bridging life and afterlife in religious conception. One does so by presence (icon) and one by absence (relic). We have noted how Ceylan inverts the iconic trope by giving us the back of the head. Here again, we see inversion of the relic tradition on Ceylan’s part.
The initial discovery of the body in the field, revealed it in the most undignified, sub-human (indeed, hog-tied) manner. Yet, in religious tradition the relic persists beyond the grave as a material marker. In Ceylan’s film, the body never re-appears beyond it, even in the morgue; it always remains beyond our view. If a relic is to signify synecdochically, as a dead part for the live whole in certain religious traditions, Ceylan adamantly refuses us this view, denying us its power.

However, what is visually hidden from us, is sonically revealed in painful detail. The sounds of the exhumation are very loud, present, and evocative on numerous sensory levels, as cinematic sounds are naturally designed to be. The body we do not see is mirrored in our own bodily response, which recoils with each cut, crunch, and ghastly squish of the autopsy. Because sound is naturally associated with life and movement, there is a dark, negative type of resurrection that comes in this final scene. Indeed, the corpse “speaks” its awful news: there is dirt in his lungs, and so we learn the man was buried alive. At each stage, the crime has appeared more and more cruel, but now it is unspeakably so.

Conclusion: The Dirt in the Lungs

…Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

--Genesis 2:7 (ESV)

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14 For more on the multisensory nature of cinematic sound, see Kickasola (2013).
Among His Signs is this,
That He created you
From dust...


And to Adam he said… “cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life…. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” --Genesis 3:17, 19 (ESV)

The final chapter of the film is, indeed, harrowing, mainly because of what is heard (the detailed sounds of the autopsy) and what is described. The man—be he “Yasar” or our Father Adam—has his corpus clinically ripped apart, bit by bit, to reveal an awful truth, both moral and symbolic: the crime was not simply murder, but also heinous torture. Yasar has literally returned to the dust, and the breath of God, which once animated Adam, has been cruelly and sadistically replaced by suffocating dirt.

In a moment of astounding self-deception, yet – on another level – crystal clear truth, the doctor declares “no abnormalities” in this man’s condition. As Ceylan has told us, the normal path for the sin-bruised apple (and for all of us who would pluck it), is to roll down the hill and rot at the bottom. It is not so unusual, it seems, for human beings to brutalize each other at unimaginable levels. This is no more apparent and unavoidable than the moment, right after the Doctor insists they deny the dirt in the lungs, that blood squirts from the corpse and spatters his face. “Doctor, why don’t you step back a bit,” Sakir, the
mortuary assistant, says, “or you might get stuff on you.” That material stuff, of course, is the truth of Yasar’s humanity, a reality that the Doctor can only pretend to ignore.

And yet, the film does not end here. Rather, the Doctor goes to the window, avoiding the corpse being gutted on the table next to him, and observes the newly widowed wife of Yasar, and her young son, walking away from the hospital. Despite their grief, the gray weather, and the long winding road ahead of them, the boy finds kindness in his heart, as, it seems, children miraculously can. A ball from a nearby playground soccer game comes up onto their path. The boy runs back, and returns it, then hastens to join his mother. It’s a very small act of grace, but in the Doctor’s world, it is a momentous change from the moral climate he has endured in the last twelve hours. He turns from the window, and we linger on the shot, inside and outside, the world of life and the world of death, bisected by the liminal window pane:

The screen then goes black, but the soundtrack persists. In our darkness, for some time (as if buried alive), we listen to the dichotomous mix of children jubilantly playing,
and a brutally murdered man being sundered apart. Nothing less than both these realities, co-present, will suffice for Ceylan’s post-secular aesthetic.

This final audio mix is critical to Ceylan’s existential project:

Ceylan: … Socrates said that the aim of philosophy is to know oneself…. For me, the cinema is the same thing. I try to know myself better, to relieve my pain about life. In your travels, you see different kinds of people, different kinds of lives, and that makes you think. You ask harsh questions of yourself. I try to understand what it means to be human. (Foundas: n.p.)

To know the human is to pluck an apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and to track its fall. From the mythic title (“Once Upon a Time”), to his theologically suggestive use of natural forces (wind, fire, lightning), to his complicated relationship with the aesthetics and power of the religious artifacts, we see a formal articulation of timeless, yet urgent, existential issues. What emerges is not religious faith, in the conventional sense, but something like an agnostic faith in the religious search, a call to repeat the rituals again, as a Sisyphean struggle against meaninglessness. It at once employs genuine religious hope and existential nihilism, co-present as hammer and anvil, able to create or destroy the shield of faith.
Bibliography


