

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Distant**2002 Nuri Bilge Ceylan

### OVERVIEW

*Distant* (Uzak) is the last film in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's rural trilogy. However, Ceylan carries on the theme of rural life even in his later films such as *The Wild Pear Tree*, *Winter Sleep*, and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*. Almost every film in his oeuvre is somewhat related to rural life either through narrative, location or characters. Therefore, it would be better to consider his first three feature films as a trilogy both in terms of thematic context and their dramatic elements.

Although his previous films *The Small Town* and *Clouds of May* have been screened in international festivals, *Distant* is the first film that made Ceylan into a household name in global cinema circles. In addition to winning awards in Cannes Film Festival and international competitions with *Distant*, Nuri Bilge Ceylan also won the best film and the best director in prominent film festivals in Turkey such as İstanbul, Antalya, and Ankara.

### CINEMATIC NARRATION

In her book *Hayalet Ev (The Haunted House)*, Asuman Suner says that "Ceylan's cinema gets his point across with images rather than narrative" (2006: 120) and draws attention to the imagery of houses in both *Distant* and his other films: "There is always something that evokes 'the home', something that relates to 'the home' in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films" (2006:165). *Distant* begins with the image of a young man getting to a road in order to leave his home and travel to İstanbul. It goes on with the young man waiting in front of a house to enter it, a house that makes him feel outside even when he is in it, Mahmut's home. In the end, he leaves the spare key behind and leaves that house. The house is a powerful metaphor for the inability of Yusuf to escape rural life (his home).

Ceylan is able to capture a snow covered İstanbul as well as the house with a powerful cinematography. Connections between the characters and locations come into focus with long takes and wide shots. With no frills, the close ups reveal the moods of characters. The first shot of the film shows Yusuf as he is leaving his rural home, while the last shot shows Mahmut, unable to escape his inner rural home even though he has been living in İstanbul for a long time.

### CHARACTERS

Mahmut            In his fifties. Photographer.  
Yusuf             In his twenties. Unemployed.

### SYNOPSIS

Yusuf has lost his job because the factory he worked in has closed down. Thinking that he would make a lot of money while travelling around the world if he had a job in merchant ships, he comes to see Mahmut who has moved to İstanbul years ago. Mahmut reluctantly accepts Yusuf as a guest. Mahmut does not lift a finger to make Yusuf feel welcome or help him find a job. On the contrary, he constantly asks him when he is leaving. As Yusuf's stay gets longer, he gets more uncomfortable. When he gets out of town for a photo shoot, Mahmut brings Yusuf along as an assistant. Mahmut's mother has fallen ill. He stays with his mother at the hospital for a few days. When he gets back home, Mahmut gets angry when he sees Yusuf smoking in the living room, all his mess scattered around, and he insults Yusuf. That same night, Mahmut cannot find the clock he uses as a prop in his photo shoots and he suspects that Yusuf has taken it. He implies his suspicions to Yusuf. Even though he finds the clock later, he does not let Yusuf know. Although he has put up with Mahmut's attitude before, even the suggestion of being a thief rankles Yusuf. When Mahmut goes to the airport to see his ex-wife for the last time, leaving the country with her new husband, Yusuf leaves behind the spare key and the house. When he gets back home, Mahmut finds Yusuf's cigarette pack. He takes it and goes out, sits on a bank by the sea, and smokes one while watching the ships sail on.

## THE PLOT

*Yusuf leaves his village.* Passing through a snow covered plain, Yusuf gets on a road. He waits for a while and gets on a passenger van.

*Mahmut's ordinary life.* Mahmut has sex with a woman. When the woman leaves after a while, the janitor of the apartment building waiting outside follows the woman with his eyes. Mahmut cleans his hands with a paper towel, and just as he is about to check what is in the fridge, the phone rings. When he is about to pick up the phone in the living room, the answering machine comes on. The caller is his mother. He makes a move to answer back, decides against it. He carelessly puts some food on the table and eats. At a makeshift studio in one corner of his house, he shoots photos of some papers tacked on wooden plates. He drinks tea by the shore. In a small office, a man checks the small prints of his photographs.

*Yusuf's wait.* Yusuf arrives at the apartment building of Mahmut. They are relatives of each other from Yusuf's village. He rings the bell. Just then, the janitor gets out of the building but does not allow Yusuf to get inside. Yusuf rings a couple more times but no one answers. While he waits outside, a young woman appears in front of another building in the street. She is also waiting for someone. When Yusuf sees the woman, he leans on a car with sunglasses on and his leather jacket's collar popped. He lights a cigarette without taking his eyes off her. The woman takes him in with furtive glances. A short while later, the young woman walks by Yusuf with an older woman and smiles at him. Just then, the alarm of the car that Yusuf has been leaning on goes off. A man leans out of a window from an apartment across the street and shuts it down. Yusuf moves away from the car.

*Mahmut's apartment.* Yusuf has gotten in the building and he is asleep with his head on the janitor's desk. Mahmut arrives. Without taking a look at him, he passes by Yusuf and starts climbing the stairs. At the last moment, he realizes who he is and wakes Yusuf up. Together they go up to Mahmut's apartment. While they smoke in the kitchen, Yusuf tells Mahmut that he was unable to find a job back in the town, that a lot of workers have been laid off from the factory he has been working in; he has come to İstanbul to find job on a ship. Mahmut asks Yusuf when will the job on the ship be available. He gives Yusuf a blanket and shows him where he will sleep. Yusuf gets ready to sleep. While passing by the shoe rack, Mahmut smells *Yusuf's shoes*. He sprays the shoes with an anti-odor deodorant and puts them away inside the cupboard.

*Yusuf looks for a job.* Morning. It is snowing. Yusuf is out. He goes to the harbor on foot. He asks the customs gatekeeper about finding a job. When he gets back home, he puts his wet socks on the radiator to dry them, and his shoes under them. Mahmut is watching television.

*Friend talk.* Together, they go to one of Mahmut's old friends' home. A group of seven or eight people talk and drink around a table. One of the people criticize Mahmut for giving up on making art.

*Vacuum cleaner.* When they get back home, they see the janitor and the woman Yusuf saw before, talking. The janitor is describing to the woman how to work the vacuum cleaner. He stops Mahmut and tells him that a package came for him. While Mahmut climbs the stairs, Yusuf waits for the janitor to bring the package. While he waits, his eyes never leave the woman; he watches her every move.

*From Stalker to porn.* Mahmut and Yusuf are watching Tarkovsky's *Stalker* in the living room. Yusuf is dozing off. After a while he goes to his room to sleep. Mahmut stops watching *Stalker* and puts on a porn tape. During this, Yusuf calls home in hushed tones so that Mahmut does not hear him. After his talk, he goes back to the living room to get a magazine. When Mahmut hears the door open, he changes the channel. Yusuf picks up a magazine but the television catches his eye and he starts watching. Mahmut gets uncomfortable.

*The seamen coffeehouse.* In the morning, Yusuf goes towards the harbor and finds a coffeehouse where ship workers frequent. He sits at someone's table. They start talking after a while. The man says that there is no money in working on ships.

*The rat adhesive.* Mahmut goes to a bar to drink. When Yusuf comes back home in the evening, they talk in Mahmut's study filled with books. Yusuf complains about not being able to find a job. At night, Yusuf asks permission to make a call. Mahmut approaches the room's door and listens to what Yusuf says on the phone. When Yusuf finishes his call and opens the door, he escapes into the kitchen but he steps on a Mouse trap. He tries to take the adhesive material off his foot.

*The agency.* Yusuf goes to the ship agency office to find a job. The men's attitude clearly shows that Yusuf is going to have a hard time in finding a job on ships.

*The abortion.* Mahmut meets with his ex-wife. The woman is moving to a foreign country with her new husband and she wants their old house to be sold. From their talk, we learn that she had been pregnant while they were having a divorce, that they decided on abortion because Mahmut did not want to have a kid, and that she was unable to have another child because of this abortion. Mahmut is troubled by this news. On the way back home, he stops and smokes a cigarette by the sea. He parks his car across an apartment. For a while he watches an apartment that has lights on. He goes to a bar, eats and drinks. Just as he is about to leave, a couple enters the bar. He exchanges glances with the woman.

*A snowy morning.* Mahmut falls asleep in his bed while watching a Tarkovsky film. When he wakes up in the morning, it is snowing. Both of them watch the snow fall. While Mahmut reads something in his study, Yusuf goes out to the balcony to smoke. Mahmut gets up and closes the balcony door.

*The photography trip.* In Mahmut's car, they drive out of Istanbul into other places to take photos of mosques. Yusuf assists Mahmut and follows his directions on how to properly carry the materials, how to use the lighting tools.

*The mother.* When they get back home, Mahmut gives some money to Yusuf for helping him. Yusuf is pleased. Mahmut's mother has had an operation. His sister has called Mahmut and left a message on the answering machine, scolding him for neglecting their mother. Mahmut goes to the hospital and accompanies his mother during her recuperation. When she is discharged, he takes his mother to her home. Mahmut's sister is also at their mother's house with her little daughter.

*The chase.* Looking out the window, Yusuf sees the young woman again and she is walking in a hurry. This time she is out of her housedress and in fetching clothes. Yusuf quickly goes out and follows after her. They arrive at a park. Yusuf hides behind a tree and spies on her. The young woman seems to be waiting for someone. For a moment there, Yusuf thinks that the woman is waiting for her. Just as he is about to reveal himself to her, another man approaches the woman and they hug. The woman sees Yusuf and recognizes him. In a hurry, Yusuf retreats back to his hiding place behind the tree. While they walk away, Yusuf looks after them in a dejected mood.

*Mahmut returns.* In her mother's house, Mahmut watches a fashion channel which shows models on a runway. Back at home, Yusuf smokes in the living room and watches the same channel. The bed is unmade and there are empty cans of beer on the floor. Mahmut calls on the phone. He says that he will get back home in half an hour and that he will have a meeting there, and he asks Yusuf to get out of the house and not be back till 10 p.m. In a hurry, Yusuf starts to clean up the house.

*Beyoğlu.* Yusuf goes to Beyoğlu. He walks around, observes people. He sees a beautiful young woman and starts following her. The woman enters an arcade and looks at some magazines. But when she enters the cinema inside the arcade, Yusuf gives up following her. During all this, Mahmut is back home, angrily cleaning up the mess Yusuf left behind. It is night. Yusuf gets on a bus. He sits next to a young woman. He is manspreading and tries to touch the woman's legs with his own. The woman gets disturbed and stands up. Mahmut is lying on his bed. In the bathroom, a woman is sitting on the toilet and crying. She is the woman Mahmut met in the bar, the one who came in with a man. While Mahmut is still lying on the bed, the woman leaves. Mahmut is sitting in the dark, his head down. The doorbell rings.

*The pocket watch.* Mahmut opens the door, its Yusuf. Mahmut scolds Yusuf for making a mess of the house. He asks him about finding a job. Yusuf mumbles something and asks Mahmut to inquire about a job in the company he works with. Mahmut gets really angry for this request and at the sound Yusuf keeps on making with the battery-operated military gun toy that he bought for his nephew. While he tells Yusuf that he has no qualifications, that he naively thinks that he would find a job just by coming to İstanbul, he mouths off at people who migrates to big cities from their villages with the hope of making money. Then opening and closing drawers and cupboards, he starts searching for a pocket watch he uses in his photoshoots. Just then his eyes fall on Yusuf's bag. He asks Yusuf if he saw the pocket watch. Yusuf says he did not. In a manner that blames Yusuf, he asks him again if he saw the watch. Even though he is not satisfied with Yusuf's answers, he goes on looking. He finds the pocket watch inside a box but he puts the box back in its place without letting Yusuf know that he found it. Yusuf has understood that Mahmut is suspicious of him. He gets worried. Then the phone rings. Its Nazan, Mahmut's ex-wife. She is calling to say goodbye. Mahmut tries to say something but he never quite manages to. Because her husband has arrived, Nazan cuts the call short. Mahmut is thoughtful, he gets

emotional. Yusuf swears that he never saw the watch. Mahmut dismisses Yusuf. When he enters his room, Yusuf sees that his bag has been searched and he gets upset. He goes out to the balcony and smokes.

*The rat.* Yusuf wakes up to sounds coming from the kitchen. Mahmut has also woken up. A mouse is caught in the mouse trap and screaming. Yusuf puts the mouse and the trap inside a trash bag and leaves it outside next to other trash in the street. When he sees some cats digging around for food, he slams the trash bag on a wall and kills the rat.

*The spare key.* Mahmut wakes up in the early morning from a nightmare. First, he goes to the shore and then the airport. Nazan and her husband is about to get on their flights. Hiding from her, he watches Nazan from afar with a look full of longing. When he gets back home, he sees that the spare key he gave to Yusuf is hanging on the coat rack. Yusuf has left the house. Behind Yusuf's bed, Mahmut finds a cigarette pack that Yusuf forgot. He goes out again and sits on a bank by the seaside, smoking one of Yusuf's cigarettes.

## THEMES

*Belonging.* The concept of belonging describes the condition of being connected and belonging to a community or space. According to Asumen Soner (2006: 116), belonging in *Distant* contains a duality of emotions, both "wanting to escape home" and "longing for home". Home is the rural country that Yusuf and Mahmut left behind when they came to İstanbul. Although Yusuf wants to escape his home and describes his home as a place that he would never escape if he returns there, the rural country does not stop following him even in İstanbul. Suner describes these conditions as "the endlessness of the rural": "İstanbul, where he arrived with the dream of starting a new life, does not offer Yusuf anything other than rubbing his nose in his uselessness, his primitiveness, and his deprivation once more. The character looks at everything that İstanbul promises, the bright streets, women, happy and rich people, and now he knows that he will never be a part of this world. What he encounters in İstanbul is nothing new or different, it is his familiar rural origins yet again" (Suner, 2006: 117). This how Yusuf realizes the endlessness of the rural. With the arrival of Yusuf, even Mahmut, who had come to İstanbul years ago and succeeded in making a life for himself, has to face a part of himself that he would never be free from, his rural origins: "For all their apparent differences, this is the common feeling that brings Yusuf and Mahmut together: the endlessness of the rural. Mahmut is troubled by Yusuf's extended sojourn not because something unusual has come into his life, just the opposite, he is troubled because he is confronted with something that he is intimately familiar with. Yusuf reminds Mahmut of his own rurality which he cannot escape from and has always been a part of himself." (Suner, 2006: 118)

The rat scurrying in the kitchen gets caught by Mahmut's trap. However, Mahmut is reluctant to throw the rat out. He plans to make the janitor get rid of it in the morning. Yusuf is the one who throws the rat into the garbage. But when he sees cats rummaging through garbage bags, he does not have the heart to leave the rat behind so that it falls prey to cats so he kills the rat by slamming the bag into a wall. "The rurality that Yusuf has to bear the burden of as guilt, as inadequacy and as a weakness has become a source of power here (...) To handle their dirty business, the city, and the urbanite (Mahmut) needs "the rural"" (Suner, 2006: 154).

*The exterior.* The film depicts interiority and exteriority with the language of cinema by locating characters in enclosed and open locations, and by using spaces that are separated from each other with pronounced boundaries such as the living room and the balcony, the apartment and the stairwell, home and street. Yusuf is the character who is outside, who has been left out. He has come to İstanbul from a rural place but he is unable to get "in". It is apparent that outside represents the rural, and the inside represents the center, İstanbul. Yusuf has informed Mahmut that he would be coming to İstanbul yet Mahmut comes home late that day. Yusuf cannot enter into the apartment building; at first, the janitor refuses to let him in. Later, he awaits in the lobby all day long. In another scene, Yusuf goes out to the balcony to smoke while Mahmut is reading a magazine on his desk. Mahmut gets up and closes the balcony door. Yusuf is left out again. Even though the balcony is a part of the apartment, it is still outside.

*Distant.* Beginning with the name of the film, this theme reveals itself in most scenes, but especially with Mahmut's remoteness from people, his dreams, the feeling of love and sharing, and communication. There is no dialogue in earlier scenes. The characters are mute. Indifferent to the voice message his mother left in the answering machine, "Mahmut's life also seems to be distant from language" (Akbulut, 2005: 127). Throughout the film, we rarely hear Mahmut talk. Not just in his job, Mahmut also does not speak with the woman he has sex with, his ex-wife, his relative Yusuf, or his friends. Just like he tries to shut his home off to the outside, to those who come from the outside, and just like he is unwilling to let

anyone enter his life, he keeps his words in. On the other hand, Yusuf is distant to everything in İstanbul. During his stay there, he realizes that he is kept apart from working, ships, women, happiness, or being appreciated. He can only look from afar at the women he wants to get close with and the ships he wants to work in. Through these distances, the film deprives both characters from the chance of escaping into the center.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Mahmut** A photographer in his fifties. Mahmut is a man who has left his village, who has come to İstanbul years ago and has built a life on his own. He gets married to and divorced from Nazan. He lives alone and shoots publicity photos for corporations. In his youth, he had dreamt about being a director who makes art house films but he has started working as a photographer to make money. Mahmut's character reflects both his rural origins and his urbanized attitudes. He has trouble putting into words his emotions that would render him weak such as love, compassion, and guilt. He is a cold, vulgar man who does not want to accept responsibility for anything, who has severed his ties to traditional values yet has remained traditional just as much. "Just like Yusuf, Mahmut is also someone who is crushed under feelings of discontentment born out of his failure in realizing his aspirations". (Suner, 226: 119) "...that is why he lives with a feeling of guilt, a bitterness toward himself".

*Remote* . Mahmut has a personality that is stand-offish and he does not reveal his positive emotions, he does not want to take on any responsibility and he does not want attachments. Starting from the moment that Yusuf steps in his home, Mahmut does not make any conversations with the young that is remotely human, warm, or casual. All his questions he asks and all the things he says are in order to learn when Yusuf is leaving, and to either criticize him or to make him do something for his own ends. This is how he will stop Yusuf and other people from interfering with his routine, meddling in his habits, and thus stop them causing trouble for him.

*Controlling.* When he learns that his ex-wife Nazan cannot become pregnant anymore, that doctors say that the problem is related to the abortion they had when they were married, Mahmut gets emotional, feels sorry. He is almost on the verge of tears yet he does not utter a word that would reveal how he is feeling. When Nazan calls to say goodbye, he tries to say something but still does not express his emotions, he cannot. When he realizes that Yusuf has left home and when he finds the half-empty cigarette pack, an expression appears on his face that makes us think that he is both sad and happy. We see that when the woman he had sex with is crying in the bathroom and after she leaves, Mahmut is in a pensive and even self-reflective mood. It is apparent that he has upset the woman and he is not happy about it.

*Indifferent.* Mahmut is also someone who shows the characteristics of toxic masculinity, and who can act in vulgar ways. He watches porn, disappoints the woman she has sex with, ferrets around in Yusuf's bag without his consent, does not care for his feelings, and berates him.

**Yusuf.** Living with his family in the village, twenty something Yusuf is one of the many workers who has been laid off from their jobs in a factory. It has become harder to find a job because of the financial crisis. So, he comes to İstanbul with the hope of finding a job in long distance merchant ships. He neglects himself and the place he lives in, he has no qualifications for a job, he cannot hold a casual and direct conversation with the opposite sex, and all these problems stem from him living in a rural geography with limited and traditional relationships.

*Sexual needs* . Yusuf attempts to get close to three women. He encounters the woman who lives in one of the apartment buildings on the same street as Mahmut but he cannot take the final step. He can only stare at her while he waits in the entrance of the building for the janitor to bring the package for Mahmut. He follows after the young woman he sees in Beyoğlu but he is also unable to speak with her. Finally, on the bus, he tries to touch the young woman next to him with his legs. He has that desire to get intimate with these women but he does not know anything other than this attitude, maybe the only way these things are done in rural places. Cultural and class differences become even more obvious in these moments.

*Emotional.* Yusuf does not have the education or vocational capability that would provide him with self-confidence and a direction in life. He does not read; he does not have a wide and objective perspective on issues. This is why he interprets the world with his emotions and reacts to it through them. When he understands that Mahmut suspects him for stealing the lost watch, he is upset and he feels humiliated; he repeatedly tells him that he never saw the watch. The next morning, while Mahmut is out, he leaves the spare key behind and leaves.



Mahmut. After Yusuf leaves.



Mahmut spends his time in the same places.



Yusuf and the endlessness of the rural.



Mahmut, with his ex-wife Nalan.