Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens

Vol. (2025)

ISSN 2183-7198 (electrónico/online)

Homepage: https://revistas.fcsh.unl.pt/index.php/rcl

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Como Citar | How to cite:

Derdiyok, Ömer. (2025). Terra nos Pulmões: Espectros das Imagens-da-Morte em Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (2011), de Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Revista De Comunicação E Linguagens, (63). https://doi.org/10.34619/dizt-xquf

DOI: https://doi.org/10.34619/dizt-xquf

Editor | Publisher:

ICNOVA - Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA

RCL — Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens *Journal of Communication and Languages* N.63 (2025) ISSN 2183-7198

Dirt in the Lungs: Specters of Death-Images in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011)

Terra nos Pulmões: Espectros das Imagens-da-Morte em Once Upon a Time in Anatolia *(2011), de Nuri Bilge Ceylan*

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Abstract

This article examines *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011) as a film that engages death not as a representational event but as a temporal condition articulated through cinematic form. Rather than organising its narrative around revelation, causality, or resolution, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's film unfolds through delay, repetition, and procedural routine, allowing death to persist across landscape, duration, and institutional practice. The article argues that death in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* operates as a formal pressure that shapes perception and narration without stabilising into spectacle or closure. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's theory of the time-image, Susana Viegas's concept of the death-image, and Jacques Derrida's hauntology, the article situates Ceylan's film within a cinematic tradition that renders finitude perceptible through temporal organisation rather than thematic representation. Death appears not as an endpoint but as a condition internal to time itself,and which makes itself felt through suspension, interruption, and erasure. The analysis develops through close readings of three motifs: the nocturnal search across the Anatolian steppe, the prolonged tracking of a fallen apple, and the autopsy sequence in which dirt is discovered in the victim's lungs and subsequently excluded from the official record. These moments do not function symbolically or allegorically. Instead, they expose how death persists as duration and trace, shaping movement, attention, and documentation. By reframing slowness and ambiguity as temporal mechanisms rather than stylistic effects, the article offers a new perspective on Ceylan's cinema and contributes to broader discussions in film-philosophy concerning the relationship between time, death, and cinematic form.

Keywords

time-image | death-image | Nuri Bilge Ceylan | hauntology | spectrality

Resumo

Este artigo analisa *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011) como um filme que aborda a morte não como um acontecimento representacional, mas como uma condição temporal articulada pela forma cinematográfica. Em vez de organizar a sua narrativa em torno da revelação, da causalidade ou da resolução, o filme de Nuri Bilge Ceylan desenvolve-se através do atraso, da repetição e da rotina procedimental, permitindo que a morte persista ao longo da paisagem, da duração e das práticas institucionais. O artigo sustenta que, em *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, a morte opera como uma pressão formal que molda a perceção e a narração sem se estabilizar em espetáculo ou fechamento.Com base na teoria da imagem-tempo de Gilles Deleuze, no conceito de imagem da morte de Susana Viegas e na hauntologia de Jacques Derrida, o artigo situa o filme de Ceylan numa tradição cinematográfica que torna a finitude perceptível por meio da organização temporal, e não da representação temática. A morte surge não como um ponto final, mas como uma condição interna ao próprio tempo, registada através da suspensão, da interrupção e do apagamento. A análise desenvolve-se a partir de leituras detalhadas de três motivos: a busca noturna pela estepe da Anatólia, o prolongado acompanhamento de uma maçã caída e a sequência da autópsia em que se descobre terra nos pulmões da vítima, posteriormente excluída do registo oficial. Esses momentos não funcionam de modo simbólico ou alegórico; antes, expõem como a morte persiste como duração e vestígio, moldando o movimento, a atenção e a documentação. Ao reformular a lentidão e a ambiguidade como mecanismos temporais, e não como efeitos estilísticos, o artigo oferece uma nova perspetiva sobre o cinema de Ceylan e contribui para debates mais amplos na filosofia do cinema sobre a relação entre tempo, morte e forma cinematográfica.

Palavras-chave

imagem-tempo | imagem-da-morte | Nuri Bilge Ceylan | hauntologia | espectralidade

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Introduction

Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011) revolves around a murder in the rural expanse of Turkey's Central Anatolia. A police team, a doctor, a prosecutor, and two suspects spend an entire night searching for a corpse buried somewhere in the steppe. Yet the film is far less concerned with solving the crime than with observing how bureaucratic procedures, institutional routines, and everyday interactions take shape in the presence of death. Rather than organising its narrative around revelation or resolution, the film focuses on the "moods, feelings, and ideas that arise as a result of such a crime" (Rattee 2017, 208). As the narrative progresses, its perplexing elements increasingly interfere with causal intelligibility, calling for what Dudai describes as "a shift in attunement," away from goal-oriented progression and toward a mode of attention no longer governed by narrative resolution (Dudai 2022, 38). Scenes unfold around delay rather than discovery: locations are misremembered, procedures are discussed

at length, the autopsy is conducted with weary routine, and reports are drafted as administrative necessity. What comes into view is not the dead body itself, but the behaviour of the living as they navigate the demands that death imposes. Because the act of murder is never shown, death appears only obliquely, through the nocturnal landscape, through an apple rolling downhill, through the soil discovered in the victim's lungs during the autopsy. Rather than depicting death as an event, the film is concerned with the traces it leaves behind in the world of the living. This article approaches these traces through Gilles Deleuze's emphasis on situations rather than action in the time-image, Susana Viegas's conception of death-images inseparable from temporality, and Jacques Derrida's hauntology, foregrounding death not as a representable occurrence but as a condition that persists through time, procedure, and perception.

Once Upon a Time in Anatolia has generated a substantial body of scholarship addressing narrative indeterminacy, spatial absence, and the difficulty of truth. Critics have examined the film's refusal of causal closure, reading the nocturnal search as a process in which meaning continually slips away rather than achieving resolution (Dudai 2022). Others have situated the film within the aesthetics of slow cinema, emphasising long takes, dedramatisation, and boredom as strategies that suspend narrative momentum and foreground duration (Çağlayan 2018; Rattee 2017). A further strand of criticism, most notably in the *ReFocus: The Films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan* volume edited by Gönül Dönmez-Colin, has approached the film from the angle of absence and indirection, analysing it through the lens of spectral temporality and layered presence (Ochonicky 2023), transnational aesthetic indistinctions (Diken 2023), and ineffability as per religious and existential tropes (Kickasola 2016). While these approaches have illuminated the film's narrative opacity, affective atmosphere, and formal restraint, they have not directly theorised how death itself operates as a temporal and perceptual condition within the film's cinematic organisation. This article intervenes at this juncture by theorising *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* through the concept of the death-image, understood as a mode in which death persists not as event or representation, but as duration, trace, and formal pressure.

Gilles Deleuze's distinction between the movement-image and the time-image offers a way of rethinking cinematic temporality that departs from narrative-centred and representational approaches. In classical cinema, time is subordinated to action: perception leads to decision, decision to movement, and movement organises the unfolding of events according to a sensory-motor schema (Deleuze 1986, 26). The time-image emerges when this schema no longer functions, when action ceases to organise experience and characters find themselves immersed in situations they cannot master or resolve. In this regime, Deleuze argues, "movement becomes aberrant in essence" and time appears directly, as duration, delay, and suspension (Deleuze 1989, 271). What is at stake in this shift is not simply a new narrative style, but a different ontology of the image: cinema no longer represents events unfolding in time but renders time itself perceptible as a force that exceeds action and causal explanation. Read through this

framework, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* can be understood not merely as narratively indeterminate or atmospherically slow, but as structured around situations in which time persists without resolution. Rather than asking what the search leads to, a Deleuzian reading foregrounds how duration, waiting, and procedural repetition reorganise perception itself, opening a conceptual space in which death can be approached not as narrative event but as temporal condition.

Building on this reconfiguration of cinematic temporality, Susana Viegas proposes the concept of the death-image as a way of thinking how cinema engages death without representing it directly. What is at stake in this intervention is a shift away from understanding death as event, theme, or narrative content, and toward grasping it as a temporal condition inscribed in the image itself. For Viegas, cinema "thinks about death" not by showing dying bodies or terminal moments, but by making perceptible what she calls future nonexistence: the awareness that every cinematic present is already passing, already destined to disappear (Viegas 2023, 225–235). In this sense, "the cinematic experience is in itself equal to the viewer's awareness of his or her mortality, as a memento mori" (Viegas 2023, 225). In her later work, developed most explicitly in "Death Images in Michael Haneke's Films," Viegas sharpens this concept by arguing that the death-image is articulated not primarily through representational content but through cinema's formal operations. Following a Deleuzian lineage, she suggests that a "death image" is not an image of death but a dying image, one in which temporal organisation, interruption, and deferral make finitude perceptible within the image itself (Viegas 2024, 5). Read through this lens, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* can be positioned not simply as a film that withholds the spectacle of death, but as one in which death persists as a temporal force distributed across waiting, repetition, and procedural time.

The theoretical frameworks mobilised here, Deleuze's time-image and Viegas's death-image, emerge from distinct but connected historical moments. Deleuze develops the time-image in response to the crisis of action and representation in postwar modern cinema, where narrative causality gives way to duration, waiting, and perceptual uncertainty. Viegas's intervention revisits this lineage from a contemporary standpoint, asking how cinema continues to "think about death" in an era saturated with images and accelerated temporal regimes. To return to films such as *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* is therefore not to retreat into a canon of modern art cinema, but to examine how durational, suspension-based forms persist as critical counter-practices within today's visual culture. In a moment when death is often rendered hyper-visible, spectacular, or instantaneous, these films insist on death as something that unfolds slowly, indirectly, and formally, through time, delay, and disappearance rather than representation. It is this persistence of the death-image as a formal problem, rather than a historical motif, that motivates the present analysis.

The film's temporal and affective structures are reinforced by its socio-political context. As Kaya Genç observes, Ceylan's cinema has consistently been affected by the climate brought about by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) without ever

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depicting politics directly (Genç 2025). Throughout the 2010s, the increasing centralisation of public administration in Turkey and the expansion of executive power have been discussed as part of the country's shift toward "competitive authoritarianism" (Keyman ve Gümüşçü 2014; Esen ve Gümüşçü 2016). At the same time, ethnographic and sociological studies have shown that the state's presence in everyday life was experienced in capillary, affective, and often unpredictable ways, such that routine bureaucratic procedures became sites where broader political tensions were felt and negotiated (Navaro-Yashin 2002; White 2014; Saraçoğlu & Demirtaş 2020). Read against this scholarship, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* situates administrative delay and procedural repetition within a lived experience of institutional power that is diffuse rather than overt.

Lastly, Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology is yet another means through which the film's temporal, institutional, and formal operations can be understood as interwoven with each other. For Derrida, haunting is not a metaphor but a structural condition of time itself: presence is always inhabited by what has passed and by what has yet to arrive. Time, famously described as "out of joint," unfolds not as linear succession but as a disarticulated field in which traces persist without stabilising into resolution (Derrida 1994, 30, 202). Within this framework, death cannot be understood as a completed event; it operates instead as an organising absence that structures the present through delay, repetition, and return. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* repeatedly stages this hauntological condition. The body remains absent for much of the film, yet governs the nocturnal movement; burial sites are misidentified; and the autopsy produces a decisive trace only for it to be excluded from the official record. These moments exemplify Derrida's notion of the trace not as a remainder of what once was, but as an active force through which the past insists without becoming fully present (Derrida 1994, 34). In this sense, the film does not represent death but allows it to operate as a spectral condition internal to time itself.

Taken together, Deleuze's account of the time-image, Viegas's theorisation of the death-image, and Derrida's hauntology provide a framework for understanding how *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* renders death as duration, trace, and formal pressure rather than as narrative event. The sections that follow develop this argument through close analyses of three recurring motifs: the nocturnal traversal of the Anatolian landscape, the fallen apple, and the autopsy scene. In them, earth, gravity, and breath become haunted sites of perception, and death persists neither as spectacle nor closure, but as a lingering temporal condition distributed across perception, procedure, and cinematic time.

Spectral Search in Anatolian Landscape: Echoes of Death

Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (2011) follows a police team searching for a buried corpse after a murder that is never shown. The film's only glimpse of the pre-crime moment appears in the opening sequence, where the suspect, his accomplice, and the

soon-to-be victim share a quiet meal in a roadside tire shop. The camera begins outside a dirty window, peering into the dim interior. The men appear blurred and indistinct, flickering under the blue glow of a television, their identities suspended by shallow focus. As the camera slowly tracks forward, their faces momentarily sharpen before dissolving again into indeterminacy. One of the men—the victim—then rises and approaches the window, gazing outward. At this point, the camera withdraws, returning to its earlier distance, leaving the soon-to-be dead man occupying the viewer's position behind glass: a figure caught between interior and exterior, presence and withdrawal. As James Rattee observes, "the manner in which the camera records, emphasising elements that do not directly advance the narrative, is pivotal to how the film will speak to us" (Rattee 2017, 211). Ceylan's use of long takes and dedramatised performance produces a stretch of dead time in which gestures slow, dialogue thins, and action disengages from narrative progression. Rather than functioning as exposition, the scene suspends causal development, making duration itself perceptible and establishing a rhythm of waiting that will structure the film as a whole. When the victim later steps outside to feed a dog and the opening credits begin over the sound of barking, the film marks a quiet passage from presence to absence.

From this spectral opening, the narrative shifts directly into the search—an extended, nocturnal traversal of the Anatolian steppe in which the corpse remains absent, yet its anticipated discovery structures the rhythms of movement and delay across the landscape. (Image 1) The suspect cannot recall where the body was buried, and so the search repeats exactly four times until they take a break at a near village and continue in the early morning—circling the same indistinct hills, arriving again and again at wrong locations, each stop marked by hesitation, fatigue, and a growing sense of futility. This cyclical structure is precisely what defines the time-image as Deleuze describes it: a cinema where "the anomalies of movement become the essential point instead of being accidental or contingent" (Deleuze 1989, 128). In this world, movement no longer organizes action toward resolution—it fragments it. The convoy's repetitive motions do not advance the narrative but instead create a space saturated with delay and disorientation. Deleuze writes that "landscapes are mental states, just as mental states are cartographies, both crystallized in each other" (Deleuze 1989, 206-207). This is echoed in his reading of Antonioni's *The Eclipse* (1962), where he observes a cinema of "limit-situations" that reaches the point of "dehumanized landscapes, of emptied spaces that might be seen as having absorbed characters and actions" (Deleuze 1989, 5). The Anatolian terrain—barren, opaque, indistinct—performs a similar absorption, not merely serving as backdrop but slowly consuming the identities, intentions, and affective rhythms of those within it. It acts not only as a setting, but also as a crystallized mental and emotional topology—a cinematic field in which the absence of the body haunts both the frame and the consciousness of those who search.

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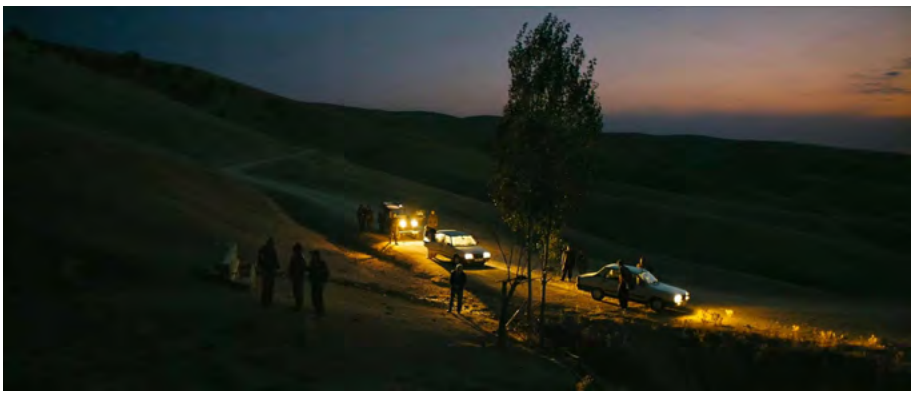

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Image 1
Search for the buried body in a desolate Anatolian landscape
© 2011 Zeyno Film / NBC Film / Arte France Cinéma /
Turkish Ministry of Culture

Mark Fisher's concept of absence as a generative condition helps to clarify the film's aesthetic of disorientation: here, absence is not a void but a structural force—it shapes and defines what is present, giving death a weight that exceeds its visibility (Fisher 2014, 23). The endless hills and unmarked roads are not mere backdrops for the investigation, but extensions of the corpse's disappearance and its gravitational pull. As the police convoy creeps through the night—reduced to faint beams of headlights swallowed by blackness—the Anatolian landscape evokes a site of cinematic disorientation. Death is not dramatized; it is diffused into every frame, saturating the darkness, the silence, and the repetition. What the characters fail to locate, the film renders palpable: a haunting structured not by what appears, but by what stubbornly refuses to appear.

This spatialisation of absence is unpacked with particular clarity in Adam Ochonicky's analysis of *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, for which absence is produced not through narrative omission but through the film's formal organisation of landscape. Contrasting Anatolia with Ceylan's earlier urban films, Ochonicky argues that absence emerges through scale, lighting, and shot duration, within a rural terrain whose spatial relations remain clear yet affectively uninhabitable (Ochonicky 2023, 92). The sustained use of extreme long shots, stationary framing, and nocturnal contrast lighting renders the Anatolian steppe as a space that precedes and outlasts narrative action, appearing largely indifferent to the characters who traverse it (Chatman 1985, 125, cited in Ochonicky 2023, 92). Human figures are reduced to fleeting silhouettes, intermittently visible in headlight beams and shadow, as if perpetually on the verge of erasure. As Ochonicky notes, this formal arrangement produces a landscape of absence that threatens to swallow the search itself (Ochonicky 2023, 93). Read alongside Fisher's account of absence

as a generative condition, the landscape functions not as a metaphor for loss but as a perceptual structure that exerts pressure on attention and agency, allowing death to be felt as a formal condition rather than a visible event.

In Viegas's terms, the Anatolian landscape functions as a death-image not because it represents death, but because it makes finitude perceptible through temporal organisation. Death appears here as a condition internal to the image, registered through duration, suspension, and the thinning of presence rather than through narrative event (Viegas 2023, 225–235; 2024). This operation becomes clearer when read alongside Ochonicky's account of Ceylan's recurring "landscapes of absence," in which empty frames and negative space establish absence as a mode of the present rather than a deficit to be filled. These images do not direct attention toward something missing beyond the frame; they visualise a world already shaped by disappearance, where overlapping temporalities press upon the now (Ochonicky 2023, 100). In *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, the nocturnal steppe exemplifies this condition. The terrain does not conceal the corpse as an object awaiting recovery; it sustains a perceptual field in which absence precedes presence and remains indifferent to action. Extended shots of hills, roads, and open ground exceed narrative function, producing a spectral present in which space appears suspended between what has passed and what never fully arrives. Rather than merely postponing resolution, time reorganises perception itself: movement loses direction, repetition displaces progress, and duration outweighs causality. The landscape does not signify mortality symbolically; it performs finitude formally, allowing absence and temporal drift to structure the image from within. Read through Viegas and Ochonicky jointly, the Anatolian steppe can be read as central to how the film thinks death cinematically, not by generating meaning, but by gradually eroding it, until absence emerges as the unstable ground of the present.

This act of searching without guarantee of discovery finds a parallel in *Taste of Cherry* (1997), a comparison that necessarily bridges distinct national cinemas and political contexts. The connection is not proposed on the level of cultural equivalence, but as a shared formal problem: how cinematic landscape can sustain an encounter with death without rendering it visible or narratively resolved. In *Taste of Cherry*, the protagonist, Mr. Badii, drives through the Iranian countryside in a similarly vast, sunlit landscape, looking for someone who will agree to bury him after he takes his own life. The search unfolds through repetition, detour, and inconclusive encounters, situating death not as an event to be reached but as a condition that structures perception and movement.

In both films, searching becomes inseparable from an engagement with death understood not as a terminal moment but as a persistent pressure shaping orientation and purpose. Rex Butler reflects on this dynamic in *Taste of Cherry* (1997), suggesting that "the afterlife in it is figured not as something out there but as something in here. It is not what reduces life to a copy of something else but what allows the very resemblance of life to itself" (Butler 2012, 73). In this sense, death can be read as a pervasive force that renders life "ecstatic," constantly mediated by what is deferred or absent (Butler 2012, 73). Alan S.

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Weber adds another layer of interpretation, noting how the silent hills surrounding Tehran evoke a "spiritually parched and end-of-life nuance," amplifying the ethereal ambiguity and existential weight of the landscapes (Weber 2013, 100). Similarly, the landscapes in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* mirror the spectral uncertainty of the characters' search for the buried corpse, blurring the boundaries between life, death, and memory, and transforming the act of searching into a confrontation with existence itself.

Derrida's notion of conjuration helps clarify this shared operation. Conjuration names an anxiety that "calls upon death … to summon the presence of what is not yet there" (Derrida 1994, 135). Here, the concept is used to describe how death exerts pressure on the present as an unresolved temporal force, shaping movement, repetition, and perception without becoming fully visible or narratively resolved. In *Taste of Cherry*, conjuration takes the form of anticipation, as the landscape bears the imminence of a death that may or may not occur. In *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, conjuration functions differently: the corpse already exists, yet remains inaccessible. Repeatedly traversed at night, landscape sustains death as absence, structuring time and movement with no destination. Rather than being represented as spectacle, landscape becomes the medium through which death is felt as temporal pressure.

Ceylan himself observes, "With Kiarostami's films I really felt as if I was seeing my own country. Iran and Turkey are quite similar in appearance, at least in terms of the people and countryside" (Suner 2010, 90). Crucially, this shared formal logic does not unfold in an abstract existential space, but within rural regions marked by political and administrative unevenness. In both Iran and Turkey, such regions function as zones where state power is present yet diffuse, encountered less through direct enforcement than through delay, negotiation, and procedural ambiguity. Kiarostami's cinema captures this condition obliquely, displacing political pressure into duration, repetition, and unresolved encounters shaped by censorship and moral regulation. Ceylan's Anatolia similarly appears as a space where institutional authority circulates without clarity: police, prosecutors, and doctors enact state power through routines that wither away as opposed to attaining a proper conclusion, and through procedures that defer responsibility as opposed to embracing it. In this sense, the rural landscape becomes a site where temporal suspension and administrative uncertainty converge, rendering closure, legal, or narrative, structurally unavailable.

The Fate of a Falling Apple: Possibilities of Death

At the fourth stop of the search, where movement has given way to repetition, the driver pulls down a branch from a luminous apple tree. Several apples fall, scattering on the ground. At this moment, the doctor approaches the suspect, and a charged glance passes between them—haunted, accusatory, and inexplicably fearful. But just as the tension rises, Ceylan cuts away and chooses to follow one of the fallen apples. The

apple begins its descent with a gentle roll. As the camera traces the apple's movement with near-hypnotic attention, it rolls slowly at first, then gains speed, bouncing lightly over the uneven ground before slipping into a stream. Yet the apple's drift is not entirely mute: as it glides through the stream, the ambient murmur of water and the detached bureaucratic chatter of the policemen linger along. As James Rattee notes, "the discrepancy between the conversation and the movement of the camera splits our attention from the apparent focal point of the narrative," dislocating the viewer's gaze and echoing the film's deeper logic of spectral indirection (Rattee 2017, 212). Carried along by the water, the apple bobs and spins, occasionally slowed by pebbles before finally coming to rest—lodged against a small rock. It seems as though it might move again, but it doesn't. The tracking shot ends. (Image 2)

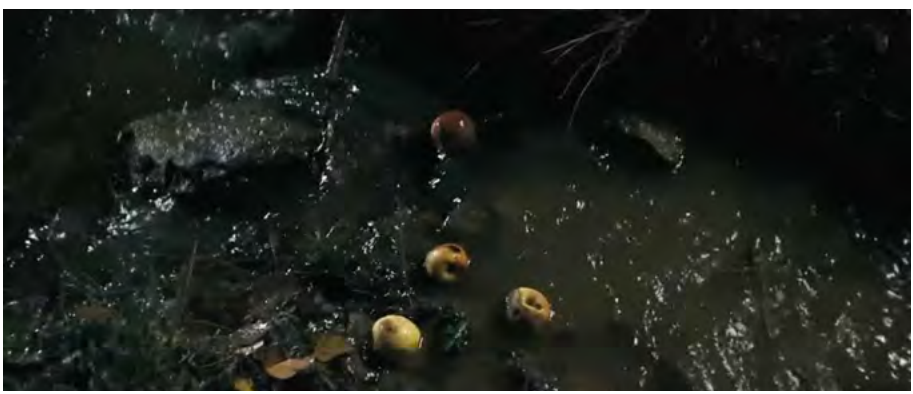

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Image 2
The rolling apple finally sets still | © 2011 Zeyno Film / NBC Film / Arte France Cinéma / Turkish Ministry of Culture

Read through Viegas, the falling apple sequence acts as a death-image not because it symbolises death, but because it renders finitude perceptible through temporal organisation. What the image stages is not an allegory of mortality but an encounter with duration moving toward arrest. As Viegas argues, cinema thinks death when it exposes the present as already slipping into nonexistence, when time is no longer subordinated to narrative progression but revealed as attrition and disappearance (Viegas 2023, 225–235; 2024). The apple's movement unfolds precisely within this register. Detached from causal necessity and narrative function, its drift suspends action and redirects attention away from human agency. The shot neither advances the investigation nor resolves tension; instead, it lingers on motion without purpose, allowing time to thicken and gradually lose momentum. Death is not represented as an event that happens to a body but

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enacted as a temporal condition internal to the image itself, captured in slowing, hesitation, and eventual stillness. Crucially, the apple's stop is not framed as an ending but as an interruption. The cut arrests the image at the moment when movement might resume, producing what Viegas describes as a dying image—one that withdraws rather than attaining accommplishment, leaving duration unresolved. The spectator is not invited to interpret the apple but to remain with the sensation of time failing to move forward. The apple does not "mean" death; it performs finitude by allowing time to exhaust itself onscreen. What remains after the cut is not narrative insight but a residue of suspended attention—an image that has ceased to move yet refuses closure.

Why do we track the falling apple? Werner Hamacher, drawing from Derrida's reflections on the spectral, writes: "In the spectral, something past, itself provoked by something to come, something outstanding and as of yet still in arrears, demands its rights here and now" (Hamacher 1999, 181). The apple's drift evokes more than a poetic image—it becomes a spectral demand, a slow insistence from the past, unsettled and unaccounted for. On the waters of the Anatolian steppe, the apple can be read as a ghostly vessel for those who have vanished into the silence of this land—where the driver sees the necessity of a gun, where death hovers in the doctor's melancholic surrender, and where the prosecutor's wife whistles back from beyond, haunting his evasive confession. In this reading, the past is not finished—it bears witness in memory and lingers in the landscape, seeking reckoning. The apple's motion does not represent closure but re-opens time, as if to ask, again and again, what has been left ungrieved, unspoken, and unresolved.

Then, why did it stop? In this framing, death is not a fixed point at the end of a line, but a condition revealed through a series of affects, delays, and unfinished gestures. The stream operates as a field of duration, and the apple's passage unfolds, in Deleuze's words, "as a series of powers," each moment suspended between stasis and potential renewal (Deleuze 1989, 275). This is why Ceylan's decision to end the shot precisely as the apple stops is so significant. In reality, the apple continued to drift—but Ceylan chose to cut, explaining: "Giving hope has become a cliché in cinema, and I don't like that attitude" (qtd. in Kickasola 2016, 13). This gesture—cutting precisely as the apple comes to rest—reveals Ceylan's commitment to a cinema that resists emotional closure. Rather than allowing the apple to continue drifting and suggest a natural arc toward renewal or release, the film arrests the movement at a point of ambiguity. In choosing to end the shot here, Ceylan does not deny meaning altogether, but instead suspends it, asking the viewer to remain within the discomfort of incompletion. The apple functions as a modest but potent figure for death in the film, not through spectacle or finality, but through stillness, hesitation, and the subtle withdrawal of narrative continuation.

"To know the human is to pluck an apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and to track its fall," writes Joseph Kickasola, invoking a biblical metaphor that resonates deeply with Ceylan's apple sequence (Kickasola 2016, 33). The act of tracking the apple's descent evokes, in this view, a way of tracing the arc of human existence

itself—marked not by dramatic culmination, but by slow drift, interruption, and eventual stillness. Kickasola emphasizes that Ceylan's cinema engages with the spiritual not through overt symbolism, but through what he calls "a complicated relationship with the aesthetics and power of the religious artifacts," resulting in "a formal articulation of timeless, yet urgent, existential issues" (Kickasola 2016, 33). In this way, the apple is both myth and matter, both sacred symbol and discarded fruit. Its fall enacts a quiet theology of mortality. As Ceylan himself puts it, "the fate of the apple is not so different from our fate. Everything created in the world has the same destiny—animals, trees, humans" (qtd. in Kickasola 2016, 13). In a world where divine judgment is absent and narrative closure is refused, the apple's fall can be read as a minor liturgy of existence—its motion echoing the human journey not toward revelation, but toward a shared, unceremonious destiny where death is neither climax nor punishment, but the gentle, inevitable folding of life into time.

After the fourth failed search, the investigation pauses in a nearby village, where the team takes shelter in the house of the local mukhtar. This shift from open landscape to interior space marks not a reflection on death, but a condensation of rural micro-politics. The mukhtar embodies what Elise Massicard describes as a "hybrid" figure: simultaneously a street-level state agent, a locally elected representative, and a broker operating between formal institutions and informal local interests (Massicard 2015, 273–274). Positioned at the furthest reach of the state's authority, he performs governance through proximity, familiarity, and opportunistic negotiation rather than rule enforcement. Ceylan stages this dynamic through exaggerated hospitality and strategic narration. The mukhtar offers food, insists on tea, flatters the officials, and repeatedly steers the conversation toward village needs, pressing the prosecutor to speak with the district governor about funding for a morgue and a body-washing room. While framed as a public necessity, his insistence carries the recognisable contours of patronage politics, where infrastructural requests double as opportunities for personal gain and local leverage. Death enters this exchange not as an existential concern but as administrative currency: a justification mobilised to secure resources within a system marked by corruption, favour-trading, and blurred accountability. The scene thus exposes how state power in rural Anatolia operates less through transparent governance than through personalised negotiation, where authority is enacted in living rooms rather than offices, and where public need becomes indistinguishable from private interest.

Within this male-dominated space of bureaucratic talk, negotiation, and exhaustion, the appearance of the mukhtar's daughter introduces a distinctly gendered interruption. Serving tea by the flickering light of a kerosene lamp, she enters not as a participant in the exchange of authority, but as a figure whose presence reorganises the scene's visual economy. As Gönül Dönmez-Colin observes, the daughter "mesmerises all men while serving tea," becoming a luminous yet fleeting presence—"the light that briefly illuminates the darkness, a mirage in the desert"—while remaining almost entirely silent. (Dönmez-Colin 2023, 177) Her visibility is intense, yet her narrative agency is minimal.

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She does not speak, make requests, or intervene; instead, she absorbs the men's gazes, leaving them speechless. In this sense, her silence functions as a structuring absence within the scene, exposing the gendered asymmetry that underpins both the social space of the mukhtar's house and the film's broader distribution of voice and authority.

Dönmez-Colin asks whether this silence should be read as a trope of disempowerment, echoing Marguerite Duras's association of feminine silence with exclusion from symbolic speech, or alternatively, following Kaplan, as a potential form of resistance—"a political resistance to male domination through the power of silence," operating outside a symbolic order structured by male concerns (Kaplan 1983, 9, cited in Dönmez-Colin 2016, 177). Ceylan refuses to resolve this ambiguity. The daughter's screen time remains tightly circumscribed, her role limited to advancing male narratives of fatigue, desire, and moral reflection. Yet her presence produces a fissure in the scene's masculine logic: she becomes, as Dönmez-Colin suggests, a mirror reflecting the men's interior states rather than an agent of her own. As Orit Dudai notes, the sequence unfolds within an oneiric register—storm, darkness, and unstable lighting blur the boundary between waking perception and half-dream (Dudai 2022, 40). In this register, the daughter does not function as symbol or narrative clue, but as a gendered disturbance through which desire, guilt, and anxiety briefly surface without finding language. The mukhtar's house thus can be read as a charged interior where political routine, masculine authority, and feminine visibility intersect, revealing how silence and marginalisation are built into both the film's social world and its cinematic form.

Dirt in the Lungs: Aftermath of Death

During the night at the mukhtar's house, the suspect confesses that he is the biological father of the victim's son. At first light, the police resume their search. At the very first location hitherto explored, the suspect recalls the spot, and they finally discover the buried body. The moment of finding is not marked by revelation or solemnity, but by a strange, subdued quietness. The dog that the deceased man had fed at the beginning of the film sits calmly atop the loosely covered grave. A lock of hair and part of an ear are visible above the surface. They begin to dig carefully, slowly uncovering the body. As the corpse emerges, they realize it is bound in a hogtie—an image that registers with a quiet shock. The brutal, dehumanizing way in which the body was buried unsettles the team. The prosecutor calls the courtroom clerk to report the discovery. What follows is a striking composition: the bound body of a man lying on the earth, surrounded by a small contingent of bureaucrats. The clerk sets up his laptop on a makeshift stand, transforming the scene into a depiction of procedural authority.

As Deleuze and Guattari argue in Anti-Oedipus, modern institutional power absorbs death not through ritual or mourning but through procedures of inscription and control, transforming it into an object to be recorded, processed, and consumed by

administrative language (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 194). In this regime, death is no longer returned to the earth as a communal event but rendered legible through documentation. This logic is enacted onscreen as the courtroom clerk types beside the bound corpse. Surrounded by laptops, forensic terminology, and half-hearted remarks, the body is converted into a bureaucratic artifact.

The prosecutor begins his formal report. This act of narration, assisted by the clerk's typing, is what the film's language relies on the most in the aftermath of the body's discovery. Later, in the autopsy room, the doctor will do the same. In both cases, the manner in which they report the death speaks volumes about who they are. The prosecutor, in an oddly inappropriate aside, jokes that the dead man resembles Clark Gable. We soon realize this is less about the corpse than about himself—he admits people once called him "Clark Nusret," revealing a weak vanity beneath his cold seriousness. The awkwardness continues when the team realizes they haven't brought a body bag. Improvising, they wrap the corpse in a blanket and attempt to place it in the trunk of the car. When it doesn't quite fit, the prosecutor even suggests tying the body again—a moment that distills the cold pragmatism creeping into the scene. Eventually, they manage to fit it in. The driver adds a few ripe melons he found at the burial site, placing them next to the body. Then, they begin the quiet drive to the town hospital.

As the investigation moves into the morgue, the camera briefly shifts to the victim's wife, Gülnaz, who arrives to identify the body. Wrapped in a red scarf, she sheds a single tear, her grief registered quietly and without narrative elaboration. Significantly, earlier in the film—after the suspect confesses that he is the biological father of the victim's son—the commissar remarks, "Wherever there is trouble, there is a woman behind it." The timing of this declaration is crucial: it is uttered only once female sexuality is revealed as the hidden motor of the crime. Responsibility is thus rhetorically displaced, away from male violence and toward an implied feminine cause.

As Gönül Dönmez-Colin observes, Gülnaz enters the film as an enigma marked by loss and suspicion: a woman who has lost not only her husband but also the social protection attached to male presence, simultaneously widow, partner of a man to be imprisoned, and mother of an orphaned son (Dönmez-Colin 2023, 177–178). Ceylan's camera reinforces this ambivalence through a brief but telling gesture. As Gülnaz walks down the morgue corridor, the frame lingers on her high heels, invoking what Dönmez-Colin identifies as a fetishistic visual code that aligns the grieving woman with the figure of the adulteress. Gülnaz is rendered visible and scrutinised, yet never granted speech or narrative agency. The doctor's silent glance toward her neither judges nor consoles; it merely acknowledges her presence. In this way, the morgue functions as a space where gendered asymmetry is intensified: while the dead man is reduced to an object of forensic procedure, the living woman is exposed as a body burdened with implication, visibility, and guilt.

The doctor then begins the autopsy alongside a technician whose casual demeanor contrasts sharply with the gravity of the procedure. As they work, the technician chats

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about new tools available at another hospital, remarking on how they "sit better in the hand"—a strangely intimate remark that merges bodily familiarity with institutional detachment. The doctor brushes off the conversation and signals the clerk to start taking notes. As the procedure unfolds, the doctor continues to dictate in a formal, clinical rhythm: "The brain and cerebellum were removed... The chest was opened... The heart was removed... The lungs were removed..." The language is precise, procedural, and affectively flat, reducing the body to a sequence of organs and actions and situating death firmly within bureaucratic process rather than human response.

While the doctor briefly steps away to look out the window, the technician inspects the lungs and notices something irregular: dirt lodged in the trachea, extending deep into the respiratory passages. He hesitates, then asks whether the man might have been buried alive. The significance of this moment lies not in symbolism but in material discrepancy. As Asuman Suner argues, ghosts in contemporary Turkish cinema do not operate as figures of speech or metaphor, but as residual traces—material or narrative remains that resist disappearance and unsettle official accounts (Suner 2005, 15). The soil in the lungs functions precisely in this way: not as an expressive sign, but as a stubborn remainder that exceeds the procedural language governing the autopsy.

Read through Susana Viegas's concept of the death-image, the dirt in the lungs functions not as evidence to be interpreted or truth to be revealed, but as a temporal disturbance that briefly renders finitude perceptible within the image itself. For Viegas, death-images do not depict death as an event, nor do they rely on representational signs; rather, they emerge when cinema makes visible the condition of future nonexistence by allowing interruption, suspension, and disappearance to structure perception (Viegas 2023, 225–235; 2024). The autopsy scene is one of those cases. The discovery of dirt interrupts the smooth procedural rhythm of the examination, introducing a momentary hesitation that opens a fragile temporal interval within bureaucratic time. Crucially, this interval does not lead toward narrative resolution. Instead, it exposes how easily finitude can be absorbed back into institutional duration. The dirt appears only briefly, without emphasis, explanation, or visual insistence, and is immediately subjected to the same recording logic that governs the rest of the body. In Viegas's terms, the death-image here is not the dirt itself, but the fleeting condition under which death becomes perceptible only to risk erasure at the very moment of its appearance. The image registers mortality not through spectacle or revelation, but through its susceptibility to omission. What the scene makes visible is not death as fact, but death as something temporally unstable—something that passes through the image without securing a place within it. In this sense, the autopsy does not confront death directly; it stages the conditions under which death can momentarily surface and then recede, leaving behind no guarantee of persistence. The dirt in the lungs thus exemplifies the death-image as Viegas defines it: a cinematic configuration in which finitude is felt not through meaning, but through the threat of disappearance embedded within time itself.

Crucially, the dirt does not "speak." On the contrary, it marks the point at which violence becomes vulnerable to erasure. Its presence exposes a gap between what the body contains and what institutional narration is prepared to register. In this sense, the dirt signifies enforced silence rather than articulation: evidence that exists materially but can be neutralised through omission. Derrida's notion of the "protest of corpses"—drawing on Victor Hugo—is useful here only insofar as it names the pressure exerted by remains that disturb closure without resolving into meaning. The dirt does not communicate; it interrupts. It reveals how truth, once subjected to bureaucratic procedure, can be absorbed, simplified, or made to disappear.

The technician's suspicion is correct—The suspect had indeed buried the victim while he was still alive. The victim, unable to breathe, had inhaled soil as he suffocated underground. But just as the doctor had earlier implied that the cause of the prosecutor's wife's death was never formally recorded, he now chooses to conceal this discovery. Turning back to the clerk, he calmly continues his report: "No abnormalities were encountered in the trachea, esophagus, or soft tissue of the neck." As Deleuze and Guattari argue, cruelty is not some primal, natural violence but "the movement of culture that is realized in bodies and inscribed on them" (Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Felix; 1983, 145). The autopsy becomes precisely such a moment of inscription—where the institutional ritual does not expose violence, but instead participates in its erasure. The dirt in the lungs, which could testify to a live burial, is systematically silenced and omitted from the official account.

The technician hesitates—torn between speaking up or staying silent—but ultimately continues the autopsy alongside the doctor. As the first incision is made, a drop of blood splashes onto the doctor's face. While the procedure continues, the doctor steps away to the window and looks at the murdered man's wife and their young son walking outside. It is at this precise moment that the doctor's silence begins to acquire a discernible context. Although Orhan Emre Çağlayan argues that "we are also not given any clue as to why the doctor does not fully report the apparent truth" (Çağlayan 2018, 79), the film stages a set of visual and temporal relations that render his decision intelligible without rendering it explicit. The doctor's gaze does not showcase an interior moral struggle; instead, it links the autopsy's procedural violence with the presence of the child, whose future becomes momentarily thinkable along the lines of the institutional consequences of truth-telling. Knowing that officially reporting the soil in the lungs would result in a harsher sentence for the suspect, the doctor remains silent—acting on the belief that a lighter punishment might allow the father to reunite with his son sooner. It becomes clear that the reason he chose to conceal the dirt found in the lungs is this child. The doctor, knowing that officially reporting the soil in the lungs would lead to a harsher sentence for the suspect, decides to remain silent—believing that a lighter punishment might allow the suspect to reunite with his son sooner. From the window, the doctor sees the kid momentarily slip away from his mother, and join a group of boys playing football. In a close-up, we see the doctor's face, the drop of blood

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from the autopsy still clinging to his skin. (Image 3) Though he has chosen to suppress the truth in an attempt to protect the child's future, he has nonetheless denied justice to victim—and the blood on his face is the symbol of his "crime." The doctor steps back from the frame, leaving behind only the slightly open window. As Adam Ochonicky observes, this empty frame, an image of absence, punctuates the film's emphasis on impermanence and the unreliability of what remains visible (Ochonicky 2023, 100). With the haptic sounds of the autopsy inside and the children playing outside blend together, end credits start to roll.

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Image 3
The murdered man's blood on the doctor's face
© 2011 Zeyno Film / NBC Film / Arte France Cinéma / Turkish Ministry of Culture

The doctor's decision to suppress the truth—to erase the spectral trace of soil in the lungs—is not merely a compassionate gesture. It is, more deeply, an act of selective mourning that Derrida calls "killing the dead": a choice that denies one ghost its voice so another might be spared. (Derrida 1994, 109). By choosing to protect the child and obscure the brutality of the victim's death, the doctor follows "the law of finitude, law of decision and responsibility for finite existences" (Derrida 1994, 109). Yet this choice, made in silence and recorded as absence, enacts a form of forgetting that carries its own specter. By forgetfulness (guilty or innocent, it little matters here), by foreclosure or murder Derrida writes, "this watch itself will engender new ghosts" (Derrida 1994, 109). The drop of blood on the doctor's face can be read as the mark of this suppressed truth—a visible stain left by what he has chosen not to acknowledge.

Conclusion

Once Upon a Time in Anatolia does not treat death as a problem to be solved or clarified. Instead, death appears as a condition that extends across time, landscape, and institutional routine, shaping how events unfold without ever stabilising into narrative resolution. Read through a hauntological framework, the film emerges as one in which death acts less as an occurrence than as a persistent pressure, structuring movement, delay, and perception long before the body is found and long after its examination concludes. This perspective offers a distinct contribution to existing scholarship on Ceylan, which has frequently framed the film in terms of slowness, ambiguity, or narrative indeterminacy. While such readings have productively illuminated Ceylan's resistance to causal progression, a hauntological approach clarifies how these features function as temporal mechanisms rather than stylistic preferences. Ambiguity in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* is not simply the absence of explanation. It is the means through which knowledge circulates unevenly, recalled incorrectly, deferred by procedure, or quietly absorbed into administrative language. What persists is not uncertainty as mood, but uncertainty as structure.

By bringing together Deleuze's time-image, Viegas's death-image, and Derrida's hauntology, this article has shown how death in the film is held as duration rather than as spectacle. The night search disperses absence across the landscape; the fallen apple embodies finitude through a suspended trajectory; and the dirt in the lungs introduces a material trace that enters institutional time only to be excluded from its final account. These moments do not ask to be interpreted symbolically. Instead, they organise attention around interruption, delay, and disappearance, allowing finitude to register through form rather than representation. Seen in this light, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* does not invite the spectator to resolve what remains unclear. It invites the spectator to remain with what fails to attain closure. Ceylan has remarked that depth in cinema depends on activating the viewer's imagination, insisting that "everyone has to try to create their own 'reality' for the film" (Ceylan 2012, 32). A hauntological reading sharpens this claim by showing that what the viewer constructs is not a coherent explanatory framework, but a relation to unresolved traces—procedures without closure, images without confirmation, and absences that continue to shape what is seen.

Rather than offering death as an endpoint, Ceylan's film allows it to persist as a temporal condition that neither resolves nor disappears. In doing so, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* situates death not at the limits of narrative, but within the ongoing flow of time itself, where traces remain active precisely because they cannot be fully accounted for.

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Declaration of conflicting interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

To cite this article
Derdiyok, Ömer. 2025. "Dirt in the Lungs: Specters of Death-Images in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (2011)." *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* (63): 94-113. https://doi.org/10.34619/dizt-xquf.

Received Recebido: 2025-05-31 **Accepted** Aceite: 2025-12-02

RCL — Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens *Journal of Communication and Languages* N.63 (2025) ISSN 2183-7198