



Uzak

Director: Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Country: Turkey

Date: 2002

A review by Jonathan Romney for *The Independent*:

In a month which has given us the restoration of Troy's ramparts and the razing of LA by multiple tornados, the truly awe-inspiring apparition on our screens is this: a huge, rusting hulk of a ship keeled on its side in a frozen Istanbul dock. This extravagantly strange apparition, looming into view in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uzak*, wasn't achieved, like the others, by armies of boffins slaving at digital workstations on a multi-million-dollar budget. No. The ship simply happened to be there, a sight so authentically surreal that apparently just about every director working in Istanbul that winter contrived to get it into their film.



Uzak (Turkish for "distant") is what you might call poetic realism: the sort of film that reminds us to look at what's there, whether it's as majestic as that ship, or as insignificant or even abject as an old set of wind chimes, the daily outpourings of cable TV, or a scrawny mouse trapped on sticky paper. More than most film-makers, Ceylan uses what's to hand in his life - *Uzak* is partly shot in his own Istanbul flat, and co-stars his cousin - although he uses it so subtly that we can never be sure how close any of it is to his personal reality. *Uzak* is an absolute example of auteur cinema - Ceylan shot and co-edited it himself - and in theory at least, is a partial autobiography, a portrait of the artist as a disenchanted waster. One of the two main characters, Mahmut (Muzaffer Özdemir), is a commercial photographer, Ceylan's own former

profession. The other is Mahmut's country cousin Yusuf (played by Ceylan's cousin Mehmet Emin Toprak), who comes to stay with him while looking for work on a ship.

Mahmut is none too happy to play host, since he has his own sorrows to contend with. His ex-wife is about to move to Canada; he's having an affair with a woman who pays silent, unhappy visits to him at dead of night; and his ill mother is leaving phone messages which he doggedly ignores. He also has trouble with mice, and the sticky tape he lays in his kitchen to trap them looks very much a metaphor for the stuck condition of his own existence. But this self-absorbed, self-despising urbanite can't begin to understand his cousin's predicament. With work prospects looking slim, Yusuf hangs around snow-covered Istanbul in a thin leather jacket, wiling away his days and more or less stalking women he takes a fancy to.

Melancholy as it is, *Uzak* is a comedy, but its humour is of misunderstanding and missed connections - the strain of humour you find in Chekhov, of whom Ceylan is a devoted fan. In one subtly excruciating scene, Yusuf has a chance to talk to an attractive young neighbour (played by the director's wife Ebru Ceylan), but ends up loitering tongue-tied while she waits for a vacuum cleaner.

Television features prominently, either used by Mahmut to fill the silence and keep his guest at bay, or figuring as a secret connection between the two men: one inspired cut shows them both independently ogling the same models on a fashion channel. In a priceless episode of slow-burn comedy, Mahmut watches a severely monotonous scene from Tarkovsky's *Stalker*: Yusuf hovers, then makes his excuses and leaves. The second he's gone, Mahmut sticks on a porn video instead.

Uzak may strike some viewers as the art cinema of their nightmares - slow, contemplative, seemingly about nothing much, the type of film where characters spend a lot of their time staring blankly ahead. But sometimes this apparent dead time provides real dramatic event. Yusuf's aimless hovering around town is never boring: it just makes us acutely aware of his frustration.

This is a film of inspired visual beauty, despite the bleakness of its wintry cityscapes - a far cry from the familiar picture-postcard Istanbul. Although Ceylan has the sensibility of a pragmatic realist, his photographer's eye is attuned to the enigmatic: there's even a brief, wonderful dream sequence, in which a lamp keels over in slow-motion, echoing Ceylan's (and Mahmut's) beloved Tarkovsky.

A widespread prejudice has it that films only work when characters are "likeable", whatever that means; Uzak refutes it decisively. Neither Mahmut nor Yusuf is pleasant to be around; indeed, much of the time, they fairly give us the creeps. The relatively sympathetic Yusuf is a slobbish moper, while Mahmut - who fancies himself as an aesthete above the common run - has allowed himself to become a selfish, neurotic couch potato who walks into his flat sniffing out traces (cigarette smoke, damp socks) of his cousin's presence.

But both men are humanly fallible, and by installing us within the narrow, mundane parameters of their lives, Ceylan - without resorting to warm, broad strokes - creates a sympathetic intimacy with them. The two men's performances, low-key and economical, more than justify their joint Best Actor award in Cannes last year. Özdemir is dry to the point of fossilisation, his sour-herring face a long bilious streak of discontent; yet, by being so undemonstrative, he makes his character oddly likeable.



Toprak's presence is all the more eloquent as the actor physically wears the mark of hard times, having started out as a dashing, muscular youth in Ceylan's first two films; his face now looks tarnished and weather-beaten, as if he has gone through times as hard as Yusuf's. His look of disappointment, like a sullen adolescent's, as he hovers round the unattainable women of Istanbul, is both poignant and unsettling.

Anyone who instinctively recoils from this elliptical brand of art cinema will no doubt snort at Uzak's unapologetically open ending, with Yusuf slipping unexplained out of Mahmut's life. His disappearance is all the more affecting in that, shortly after the film's completion, Mehmet Emin Toprak was killed in a traffic accident. He is commemorated in an extraordinary film by a director who is one of the most vital new discoveries of European cinema. I've seen Uzak three times now, and it just gets richer and richer. For my money, it's a masterpiece, and if you need your faith restored in the possibility of thinking, feeling, grown-up cinema, Uzak is not to be missed.

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