

Traveling Realisms, Shared Modernities, Eternal Moods: The Uses of Anton Chekhov in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Winter Sleep*

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Abstract Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Turkish drama *Kış Uykusu/Winter Sleep* (2014) owes an enormous debt to nineteenth-century Russian realism. This article explains why Ceylan looks to Russia through an analysis of the film's form and the historical context that binds Russia and Turkey. By placing Turkish and Russian realism on the same plane, this article complicates the asymmetrical binary of East/West that is frequently upheld by analyses of 'Eastern' rewritings of 'Western' literary classics. Instead it offers a more equitable model of international exchange, a nonhierarchical relationship of not East/West but East and East.

Keywords: *Modernity, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkish cinema, Middle Eastern cinema, Anton Chekhov.*

Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Palme-d'Or-winning Turkish drama *Kış Uykusu/Winter Sleep* (2014) draws upon a realism from a radically different time and place: nineteenth-century Russia. Lifting entire parts of the script (co-written with his wife Ebru) from the short stories of Anton Chekhov, while also borrowing plot elements and themes from Chekhov's drama, Ceylan proudly wears his debt to nineteenth-century Russian realism, even going as far as to say in an interview, 'Russian literature is...maybe the biggest influence in my films' (Romney). For Ceylan, there exist certain affinities between the cultures of nineteenth-century Russia and modern Turkey that lie not only in these nations' shared peripherality to Europe and former imperial grandeur, but also in their respective national characters; after all, he once told an interviewer, 'If I didn't see reflections of Turkish people in Russian literature, I wouldn't use it' (Romney). In this he is not alone: contemporary Turkish filmmakers such as Zeki Demirkubuz and Semih Kaplanoğlu have demonstrated a recurring interest in Russian literature and film as well.¹ But Ceylan's Russophilia is distinguished by its debt to one author in particular. While he may see parallels between the Russian experience of the nineteenth century and the Turkish experience of the twentieth and twenty-first century—periods when both nations attempted to modernize themselves into futures that were predicated on

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the effacement of their respective pasts—there is also a singular quality to work of Chekhov, as opposed to, say, that of Tolstoy or Turgenev, that speaks to his cinematic project.

In an interview with Turkey's premier film magazine, *Altyazı*, Ceylan even claimed that

Gerçi Çehov ne yazarsak yazalım yeterli hissedeceğimiz bir yazar değil bizim için, o hemen hemen bütün filmlerime katkılarda bulunmuş, hatta bunun ötesinde bana nasıl yaşamam gerektiğini öğretmiştir (Ceylan, “Nuri Bilge Ceylan’la *Kış Uykusu* Üzerine”).

No matter how much we read and write about Chekhov, we cannot get enough of him; he has contributed to almost all of my films, and even beyond that, he has taught me how to live.²

Winter Sleep, Ceylan's seventh feature film, confirms that Chekhov's influence on him has not waned at all.³ In the distinguished company of Voltaire, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky, Chekhov even appears in the final credits of the film. This attribution is more deserved than cheeky: Ceylan kicks off *Winter Sleep* with the main plot point of Chekhov's drama *The Cherry Orchard* (1903) in order to provide the initial narrative thrust to what is otherwise a talky film devoid of real plot. Chekhov's importance to Ceylan becomes more apparent as one discovers that this film adapts, almost line-by-line, several key scenes from his short stories ‘Excellent People’ (1886) and ‘The Wife’ (1892).

These stories were available to Ceylan because of the rich history of translation that exists between Russian and Turkish. Following the establishment of the Translation Bureau in 1940, nineteenth-century Russian literature began to flood into Turkey. Over 100 translations of Chekhov's works, produced by more than 20 different translators, have appeared in Turkish since then (Öncü 418–20); Mehmet Özgül's eight-volume translation of Chekhov's short stories, published in 1960, is largely responsible for his popularity in Turkey today (Aykut 23). Despite the Turkish literary public's familiarity with Chekhov, it is unclear to what extent Ceylan's audience is aware of the film's Russian spirit: most reviews of *Winter Sleep*, in English and Turkish, mention Chekhov only *en passant*. The Turkish novelist and critic Kaya Genç was one exception, describing in his review the extended parallels between the two Chekhov stories and the film's plotline (Genç). His review appeared online in *The Believer*, however, and this publication's select audience of English-language literati suggests that the film's nineteenth-century Russian aesthetic may only be discernible to global cultural elites—the kind likely to have discovered Ceylan on the international film circuit.

Whether the audience is aware of them or not, the two short stories that Ceylan takes from Chekhov's oeuvre both feature incorrigible and self-interested male characters, whose worst character traits coalesce in the form of the cynic and critic at the centre of *Winter Sleep*: Aydın. A former thespian, Aydın—a pun on the Turkish word for ‘intellectual’—is a secular, Western-educated man who finds himself marooned among locals in Turkey's gorgeous but spare mountain region of Cappadocia. He often talks about writing a massive history of Turkish theatre as a retirement project, but for most of the film, he cannot quite summon the courage to begin writing; in the interim, however, he remains the overseer of a resort that is carved into one of Cappadocia's mountain ranges and a landlord to tenants he has inherited from his father's day. Most of the

conversations in *Winter Sleep* take place in this resort, Hotel Othello, where Aydın lives with his dyspeptic sister Necla and his much younger, practically estranged wife, Nihal. (Not helping matters is the fact that these conversations tend, in Chekhovian fashion, to blur the roles between spouse and sibling.) Paralyzed by wealth and lassitude, this trio does not do much of what might be called work, and so they find themselves engaging in long disquisitions on morality and philanthropy in a few set locations: the hotel lobby, Nihal's room, and Aydın's dark, cave-like study. Reminiscent of the protagonist of Ceylan's *İklimler/Climates* (2006), Aydın progressively alienates these women, as well as everyone else, for that matter, during these fireside chats or in his column for the local newspaper. He is sententious and insufferable, though he is not always wrong.

Chekhov's oeuvre furnishes a number of precursors to Aydın's character, namely, Vladimir Semyonitch of 'Excellent People' and Pavel Andreitch of 'The Wife'. In 'Excellent People', the relationship between the theatre critic Vladimir and his sister Vera increasingly frays as the two discuss the latter's ideas about 'non-resistance to evil', that is, her theory that one's own inaction before evil will stir the conscience of the evil-doer and prompt him to recant. This notion, popular with the Russian intelligentsia in the 1890s, is one of the many forays into philosophy first penned in Chekhov and subsequently overheard at Hotel Othello; needless to say, like Vladimir, Aydın finds this idea, languorously lofted up for consideration by his sister Necla, risible. Even the set design of *Winter Sleep* mirrors that of the short story: just as Vera sits behind Vladimir on the sofa in 'Excellent People', so too does Necla carp and cavil from her immovable perch on the couch. (One cannot ignore the implicit gesture here to another classic of nineteenth-century Russian realism: Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* [1859], whose titular character cannot bring himself to leave his bed for the first third of the novel). By the end of 'Excellent People', Vladimir is dead and, worse, not missed at all—a fact that does not augur well for Aydın: 'No one remembered Vladimir Semyonitch. He was utterly forgotten' (Chekhov, "Excellent People" 191). While Ceylan mines 'Excellent People' primarily for its characterization and psychological depth, he deploys 'The Wife' to advance the minimal plot of *Winter Sleep*. This story opens with a classic Chekhovian situation: a doomed marriage between a weary middle-aged man and his much younger wife, whose optimism is stifled by her husband's cynicism. Pavel, the inspiration behind Aydın, begins the narrative by reading aloud a letter addressed to him asking for financial help for Russia's peasants. Pavel reads the letter in front of his wife and friend in order to demonstrate his magnanimity, the fact that he is a person to whom people in the region can turn for help. In reality, the story is a showcase for the caustic, rapier wit of his wife. Ceylan inserts this dialogue into *Winter Sleep*, and it becomes one of the most powerful conversations of the film:

Ancak yeri geldiğinde bu erdemlerinle insanı boğan, küçük düşüren, aşağılan bir hava taşıyorsun. Bu dürüst düşünme tarzınla bütün dünyadan nefret ediyor gibisin. İnsanlardan nefret ediyorsun çünkü inanmışlık sana göre az gelişmişlik, kara cahillik belirtisi. Öte yandan herhangi bir inanç, bir ideal taşıyorlar diye inanmayanlardan da nefret ediyorsun. Yaşlıları, ger kalmışlıkları, tutuculukları, özgür düşünemedikleri için, gençleri ise özgür düşünceleri yüzünden. Geleneklerinden kopuk oldukları yüzünden için beğenmiyorsun. Halkın ülkenin çıkarlarının en önde olması gerektiğini söyler durursun. Ama her karşına çıkandan, hırsızmış, soyguncuymuş gibi kuşkulandığın için halktan da nefret ediyorsun. Nefret etmediğin insan yok neredeyse.

You're actually a well-educated, honest, fair, and conscientious man...But sometimes you use these virtues to suffocate people, to crush and humiliate them. Your high principles make you hate the whole world. You hate believers, because for you, believing is a sign of underdevelopment and ignorance. But you also hate nonbelievers for their lack of faith and ideals. You dislike the old for being conservative bigots and for not thinking freely. And you dislike the young for thinking freely and abandoning the traditions. You defend the virtues of community, but you suspect everyone of being a thief or a bandit, so you hate the people too. You hate practically everybody (*Winter Sleep* 2:10").

A series of these conversations ensures that this union will never be happy. Ceylan's interest in this failed marriage—and the attempt to survive a lifeless one—also draws from a text that is referenced in 'The Wife': Tolstoy's *Family Happiness* (1859). This novella chronicles the unravelling of the marriage of a middle-aged man to a bride about half his age; their falling out takes place, symbolically and similarly, over the course of a winter. Nonetheless, the ending of *Winter Sleep*, borrowed from 'The Wife', suggests that despite their chilly relationships with their partners, Aydın and Pavel are not ready to give up: both the film and the story conclude with silent monologues that reveal the true extent of their attachment to their wives.

I have now established certain correspondences between Ceylan's film and Chekhov's drama and short stories at the level of character, theme, and plot, and dialogue; these correspondences include the direct translation of conversations from Chekhov's text as well as a looser adaptation of plot points from the Russian text into the Turkish film. Before venturing to explain why Ceylan imports these types and themes into modern Turkey, I wish to emphasize that transnational comparisons, precisely of the sort that this article undertakes, are never completely innocuous; far from it, the act of placing disparate texts into a larger constellation often does violence to their local contexts and requires the critic to confront a series of ethical questions. This is especially important to recall when at least one of the objects of comparison hails from a so-called 'non-Western' country, such as Turkey. On this point, Nurdan Gürbilek has argued that Turkish literary criticism, all-too-aware of Turkey's belated experience of modernity, frequently (and unhelpfully) tends to identify a 'lack' in almost all of Turkish cultural production. 'This cultural context forced Turkish literary criticism toward being an anxious effort of comparison programmed to discuss from the very start the deprivation, insufficiency, and shortage of its object: Turkish literature', she writes ("Dandies and Originals" 599). This has created a double consciousness that casts a pall over almost all Turkish cultural production, whose texts are always already compared to a (generally 'Western') formal precursor. The problem, while magnified in the context of a 'non-Western' artistic culture such as Turkey, forms part of a larger issue inherent to the methods of comparative literature or comparative media. For it is the very act of comparison can consolidate the power that Western critics hold. As Rey Chow writes,

[i]n the 21st century, we need to ask what it really means for any practice of writing to be considered to transcend national boundaries. Why is it such a good thing to transcend national boundaries? Is not transcending, which signifies a certain privilege of mobility, always part of a power structure, with those who can apparently transcend the boundaries (the ones who talk about *the novel*, for instance) setting the criteria for evaluation? (296–97).

These questions of literary sociology animate, consciously or not, every act of comparison across cultures, given that ‘seldom is it pointed out in discussions of comparative literature that languages and cultures rarely enter the world stage and encounter one another on an equal footing’ (Chow 296). This argument will not surprise any reader of Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*, which crowns nineteenth-century Paris as the capital of aesthetic modernity, a concept she likens to a pugilistic competition between national literatures that relies on a binary of (non-Western) periphery and (Western, Parisian) centre (12). In this article, I address these questions of inequality in world literary space by comparing arts from two cultures that both hail from artistic peripheries. Of course, Russian literature, especially that of the nineteenth century, is no small player in world literature today. This is irrefutable. However, while Anton Chekhov is obviously no minor writer, during his own lifetime, Russian literature did not wield the cultural and aesthetic capital subsequently conferred onto it by writers such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and, certainly, Chekhov himself. Nineteenth-century Russian writers and artists, like their Turkish contemporaries, considered themselves fundamentally behind their European counterparts. Molly Brunson captures their despair in her recent study *Russian Realisms*, writing, ‘As early as 1834, the upstart young critic [Vissarion Belinsky] opens “Literary Reveries,” a lengthy review of Russian literary history, with the following provocation: “We have no literature!”’ (15). This is where Casanova’s thesis, however controversial, is redeemed: only following the circulation and approbation of these Russian writers in European capitals—namely Paris—did Russian literature acquire the status it enjoys today. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the tradition of Russian belles-lettres in which Chekhov was writing mirrored the situation of modern Turkish cultural production today, which is being lifted up into world circulation by a few stars, such as Orhan Pamuk, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, and, within the realm of film, Ceylan himself.⁴ Belatedly recognized by European cultural capitals, and sharing a complex relationship with ‘Western’ modernity, nineteenth-century Russian writing and twentieth- and twenty-first-century Turkish film have more in common than one might think.

In light of these similarities, this article complicates the asymmetrical binary of East/West that is frequently upheld by analyses of ‘Eastern’ rewritings of ‘Western’ literary classics. Indeed, as Meltem Ahıska writes, ‘From its initial conception in the process of defining the Turkish national identity in the late nineteenth century to this day, “the West” has been contrasted to “the East” in a continuous negotiation between the two constructs. “The West” has either been celebrated as a “model” to be followed or exorcised as a threat to “indigenous” national values’ (353). In contrast, this article asks what happens when an artistic tradition that constantly finds itself ‘lacking’, as Gürbilek puts it, stops comparing itself with ‘Western’ originators of form and looks to another tradition that has endured a similarly vexed experience of social and aesthetic modernization. In the process, this article offers a more equitable model of international exchange, a nonhierarchical relationship of not East/West but East and East.

In announcing a pivot towards the East in Ceylan’s cinema, I acknowledge the risk of simply replacing one essentialism (the West) with another (the East). The ‘East’ of course comprises an array of regions within itself whose literary and geopolitical particulars merit individualized attention. I nonetheless proceed with this analysis in light of the

fact that Ceylan himself has made it clear that irrespective of this region's diversity, he views himself as a member of a constellation of artists from the non-Western world. In effect, Ceylan has endorsed a version of the East and East essentialism I propose here, criticizing the popular metaphor of Turkey as a bridge between the East and West in the process. 'Imperialism has succeeded in making the underdeveloped countries feel slightly ashamed of their culture', Ceylan has said in an interview. 'Those who assimilate the point of view of the other see their own customs and traditions as extremities created by ignorance' (Ceylan quoted in White 66). The danger posed by accepting all-too-easily 'the other point of view' in this line—the Western one, that is—is such that Ceylan has consciously aligned himself with non-Western or Eastern artists from the past and present, and this is why nineteenth-century Russian literature becomes for him such a productive font of influence. This group of 'Eastern' artists, geographically diffuse and temporally dispersed, finds a great deal of common ground as it confronts the same question: What does it mean to make art from the margins of modernity?

In this article, I first provide historical context for my claim that Russia and Turkey have experienced similarly vexed encounters with modernity. After providing this historical foundation, I then formally track the transposition of Chekhovian drama and short stories into *Winter Sleep*. This second section also examines how the film discloses its interest in nineteenth-century Russian literature through the plastic arts; specifically, I show how *Winter Sleep's* *mise en scène* transmits the nineteenth-century Russian aesthetic into contemporary Turkey through a series of strategically placed paintings by the Russian illustrator of Dostoevsky's contemporary editions. Having established these historical and formal resonances between nineteenth-century Russia and contemporary Turkey, I conclude by suggesting that the various arts embedded within *Winter Sleep* capture the geographic and generic evolution of realism, a mode whose windy path that has travelled from European drama to the Russian short story to Turkish cinema.

BELATED MODERNITY

In order to disentangle the web of allusions to Russian literature in *Winter Sleep*, and consider, more historically, what unites these two cultures, I will begin with an analysis of Ceylan's interest in Chekhov's *fin-de-siècle* drama, *The Cherry Orchard*. Ceylan was familiar with the play, given that it furnishes the first (and perhaps only) gear of *Winter Sleep's* action. In *The Cherry Orchard* a formerly aristocratic family, on the cusp of eviction for dodging their mortgage payments, considers razing their prized cherry orchard—a landmark of such prestige that it merits inclusion in the Russian encyclopaedia—and subletting the land on which it sits in order to save their estate.⁵ The tension over whether to keep or sell the orchard, which has been in the family for ages, allows Chekhov to weigh in on the raging modernization debates taking place in Russia in the nineteenth century. Though published decades earlier, Peter Chaadaev's famous 'First Philosophical Letter' nonetheless manages to capture the sentiment in Russia while Chekhov was writing: 'Outcasts in the world, we have given it nothing and taken nothing from it... not a single useful thought has sprung from our sterile soil; not a single useful great truth has risen among us... I wonder if there is something repellent in our blood to progress' (Chaadaev quoted in Peterson 551). The symbolism in the play is impossible to miss; as one character says, 'This whole country is our orchard. It's a big country and a beautiful

one; it has lots of wonderful places in it' (413). As nineteenth-century Russia attempts to modernize itself, the orchard represents a fading, simpler Russia—one that perhaps only existed in the imagination—prior to the wave of social changes that took place in the nineteenth century, namely, the emancipation of the serfs in 1861.

These social changes, and the spectre of modernity they foreshadow, disclose themselves at the capillary level of daily life. In *The Cherry Orchard*, the temporal acceleration of life has already arrived: in the stage directions, characters are constantly looking at their watches. Chekhov even makes the following joke at the expense of some of the older folks on the estate, underlining the fact that time still moves forward even if they fail to register it:

LOPÁKHIN: Time sure passes....

GÁYEV: Say again?

LOPÁKHIN: I said, time sure passes (397).

As waves of modernity land in different parts of Russia, everyone on the estate in *The Cherry Orchard* still seems bent on living in the past. A character even apostrophizes a bookshelf because it stands for the last vestige of tradition they have: 'Dear old bookcase! Wonderful old bookcase! I rejoice in your existence. For a hundred years now you have borne the shining ideals of goodness and justice, a hundred years not dimmed your silent summons to useful labor. To generations of our family [*Almost in tears*] you have offered courage, a belief in a better future, you have instructed us in ideals of goodness and social awareness...' (400). In lines like these, the play gives us a picture of how Russians in the nineteenth century attempted, with varying degrees of success, to enter into the complex negotiation between honouring their past while taking the plunge into the new behaviours and norms of their time. While there is a character in *The Cherry Orchard* who seems to understand the call of his times—the eternal graduate student—his protestations unhappily fall on deaf ears. 'You can't go back to the past', Trofimov enjoins the family, not without a degree of sadness. 'Everything here came to an end a long time ago' (418). Even if the family would rather lose its estate than listen to him, he offers the audience one of the most lucid speeches in modern drama on the subject of modernity. For Trofimov, one needs to become conscious of the various temporalities that imperceptibly structure daily life and negotiate with them—not ignore or flee from what lurks uncomfortably in our past. In order to inhabit a mature, modern society, one needs to aspire to a more sophisticated relationship to time, one in which past, present, and future are necessarily co-implicated:

The thing is, we don't have any real sense of our own history; all we do is sit around and talk, talk, talk, then we feel depressed, so we go out and get drunk. If there's one thing that's clear to me, it's this: if we want to have any real life in the present, we have to do something to make up for our past, we have to get over it, and the only way to do that is to make sacrifices, get down to work, and work harder than we've ever worked before (414).

Though Trofimov, in particular, is treated with a degree of irony in the play, the characters ignore the perspicacity—and prescience—of this passage at their own peril. For Chekhov, in order to have a present—and, in turn, build a future worth inhabiting—his characters must contend with the past, at the level of both the personal

and national. If they do not acknowledge the past that they have suppressed, or if they fail to fully come to terms with it, living in the present becomes untenable. To restate most clearly the paradox that underpins this line of thought: history is a *sine qua non* for modernity. This, as Trofimov emphasizes, will take work.

It is impossible to overstate how much this passage presages contemporary Turkey's fraught relationship to modernity, an issue that holds a major clue as to why the themes of Russian realism appear so familiar to modern Turkish artists such as Ceylan. To completely grasp this relationship between the two cultures, one first must revisit a key moment in Turkish history. In the 1920s, the Turkish Republic's first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ('the father of the Turks'), modernized the country by fiat. Although I do not wish to conflate 'modern' with 'Western', Atatürk's conception of modernization did closely hew to what one would call Westernization, for it sought to emulate the best practices of successful Western nations. The language reform, in which the country abandoned the Perso-Arabic script for the Latin, was perhaps the most influential of these reforms, for it meant that future generations would have to learn a completely new alphabet if they wanted to read anything—history, literature, and newspapers—that was written before 1928.⁶ The country also adopted the Gregorian calendar, a Western dress code for government workers, and a vein of secularism based on the French concept of *laïcité*. Theorists of historical or artistic change often rightly seek to emphasize the dialectic that exists between continuity and rupture, for rarely can historical or literary movements be so neatly described as following a process of one or the other; in the case of modern Turkey, however, it does appear certain that Atatürk intended his reforms to obliterate the country's Ottoman past as a way to thrust itself into European modernity.

'No other country can ever have dissociated itself from its environment and its history to the extent that the Turkish Republic has done', writes Orhan Pamuk, the Nobel Laureate whose novels, more so than Ceylan's films, are often the window into modern Turkish life for the rest of the world (Pamuk, "On the Periphery"). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Pamuk has repeatedly stated his own admiration for the Russian realists of the nineteenth century; his novels frequently allude to and partially adapt plots and characters from the works of Turgenev and Dostoevsky.⁷ And the reason he turned to Russian realism perhaps mirrors that of Ceylan. 'When Dostoyevsky published his impressions of Europe in a Russian newspaper a hundred and thirty years ago', Pamuk writes, 'he asked, "Of Russians who read magazines and newspapers, who does not know twice as much about Europe as Russia?"' and then he added, half in anger, half in jest, "Actually, we know Europe ten times better, but I said twice as much so as not to offend." This troubled interest in Europe is, for many intellectuals, living on its periphery, a tradition that goes back centuries...' (Pamuk, *Other Colors* 190–91). Like Ceylan, Pamuk sees his own predicament as a Turkish citizen grappling with the history of his country's modernization reflected in these Russian writers, who had to contend with their own country's turbulent relationship to its past and future a century before him.⁸

In many ways, modern Turkey is still going through the kind of social upheavals and dislocations that Russia underwent during its own modernization efforts during the eighteenth century, at the hands of Peter the Great, and into the nineteenth. This is a modernization predicated on the erasure of the country's past and aspiration to

a European future. As Trofimov stressed in *The Cherry Orchard*, however, becoming 'modern' is impossible without reconciling oneself with one's past. In *The New Cultural Climate in Turkey*, Nurdan Gürbilek describes what happens when this reconciliation fails to take place, illustrating how the erasure of the past has come to haunt contemporary Turkey, which, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has turned away from Atatürk's secular vision for the country. 'Turkey's recent past is important not only because it shows how the repressed may return, but also because it allows us to see that the relationship between what was repressed and what has returned is more complex than we suppose', she writes (86). And in this Gürbilek warns that the repressed may return in a form that is warped, distorted, violent, and susceptible to political manipulation.

Turkey's self-consciousness about its past becomes more understandable, however, in light of what Marshall Berman identifies as 'the modernism of underdevelopment' in his study of modernity, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*⁹:

This modernism first arose in Russia, most dramatically in St. Petersburg, in the nineteenth century; in our own era, with the spread of modernization—but generally, as in old Russia, a truncated and warped modernization—it has spread throughout the Third World. The modernism of underdevelopment is forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity, to nourish itself on an intimacy and a struggle with mirages and ghosts. In order to be true to the life from which it springs, it is forced to be shrill, uncouth, and inchoate. It turns in on itself and tortures itself for its inability to singlehandedly make history—or else throws itself into extravagant attempts to take on itself the whole burden of history. It whips itself into frenzies of self-loathing, and preserves itself only through vast reserves of self-irony. But the bizarre reality from which this modernism grows, and the unbearable pressures under which it moves and lives—social and political pressures as well as spiritual ones—infuse it with a desperate incandescence that Western modernism, so much more at home in its world, can rarely hope to match (232).

This last line ends on a surprising note of hope for Ceylan; distance from modernity, temporal or geographic, appears to create a sense of aesthetic zeal or innovation in the artistic tradition of the country 'lagging behind'. Paul de Man echoes this sentiment in his own essay on literary modernities in *Blindness and Insight*; commenting on the vexed nature of the keyword, de Man observes, 'One is soon forced to resort to paradoxical formulations, such as defining the modernity of a literary period as the manner in which it discovers the impossibility of being modern' (144). Ceylan has made this discovery, and in the process has forged unlikely transnational and transhistorical connections with another country that is also perpetually on the cusp of modernity.

WINTER SLEEP'S RUSSIAN REALISM

Ceylan's interest in nineteenth-century Russia does not end with his identification with the country's similarly tumultuous passage into modernity; likewise, this article's attempt to convene a space for the equitable comparison of two 'Eastern' artistic traditions does not end with a comparison of their historical resonances. *Winter Sleep*, after all, primarily discloses its Russian soul through its form, recasting in a modern Turkish idiom the same questions that once preoccupied nineteenth-century Russian realist authors. In an interview with *Altıyazı*, Ceylan explains his goals for *Winter Sleep*'s form:

Aşlında baştan beri bu filmin edebî bir tadının olmasını istiyordum. Edebî eserlerden, felsefi metinlerden ve tiyatrodan aldığım hazza bir şekilde bu filme taşımak istiyordum (Ceylan, “Nuri Bilge Ceylan’la *Kış Uykusu* Üzerine”).

In fact, all along I wanted this film to have a literary flavor. Somehow, I wanted to transfer the pleasures I have received from literary works, philosophical texts, and theater into the film.

Ceylan achieves this intermedial feat by importing into the film several extended literary dialogues, a slower kind of photographic cinema, and allusions to the history of drama. At the level of form, it is through these three media that Chekhov’s realism travels into modern-day Turkey and creates the film’s nineteenth-century Russian realist aesthetic.

The literary dialogue arguably plays the biggest role in introducing Russian realism into Ceylan’s Turkey. Structurally, this three-and-a-half-hour film is best understood as nine conversations that take place in a few select settings, namely, the hotel and Aydın’s dark study. What follows is an outline of how the film unfolds when viewed this way; I include references to the original literary source when relevant, as well as a record of their (unusual) length and the minutes in which they occur in the film:

- 1) Confrontation over eviction from *The Cherry Orchard* (10 min) [12”–22”]
- 2) Dialogue from Chekhov’s ‘Excellent People’ (11 min) [28”–39”]
- 3) Idea of non-resistance to evil from ‘Excellent People’ (8 min) [47”–55”]
- 4) Forgiving an ex, from *The Cherry Orchard* (8 min) [1:05”01:13”]
- 5) Aydın-Necla argument from ‘Excellent People’ (19 min) [1:19”–1:38”]
- 6) Aydın-Nihal argument from ‘The Wife’ (30 min) [1:49”–2:19”]
- 7) Gathering of men; Shakespeare recitation (8 min) [2:28”–2:36”]
- 8) Film’s climax: philanthropy exposed as guilt assuagement (12 min) [2:43”–2:54”]
- 9) Chekhovian balcony scene as letter is read (3 min) [3:09”–3:12”]

Over half of the film (109 of 196 minutes) is thus taken up with these crucial scenes of dialogue. And as noted above, only two of these nine conversations do not explicitly involve the drama and stories of Chekhov: the Shakespeare recitation and the film’s climax. Even the film’s climax—in which Nihal’s philanthropic interest is dealt a devastating blow at the hands of the very people she is trying to help—hails from the canon of nineteenth-century Russian literature, however. It is an echo of the scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Captain Snegiryov rejects a sum of 200 rubles, which are offered as a means by which Alyosha can assuage his guilt for his brother’s actions. (This scene’s Dostoevskian subtext is further activated when Ismail throws Nihal’s generous cash offering into the fire, recalling how Nastasya Filippovna reacts to a 100,000-ruble offer from a suitor in *The Idiot*.) These conversations are the simplest example of how Russian realism travels into this film: they are almost literal translations of the original Russian realist fiction.

The film’s conversational set pieces that seem to bear few traces of Russian realism also reveal their surprising origins upon a closer look. Consider *Winter Sleep*’s final conversation. Here Aydın stands beneath Nihal’s balcony, gazing up at her as she looks down at him, while the audience hears the text of a letter he has written her. Although this scene may recall the famous ‘balcony scene’ from *Romeo and Juliet*, it is in fact a direct quotation of the final scene of Josef Heifitz’s Soviet film *The Lady with a Little Dog* (1960), an adaptation of the Chekhov story of the same name. In *Winter Sleep*’s version

of this scene, Ceylan deploys essentially the same camerawork strategies as Heifitz, literalizing the hierarchy of Nihal over Aydın through her position above him on the balcony. While the local Turkish context is of course never lost in these scenes, it is nonetheless striking how, at a purely formal level, a Russian realist antecedent inflects a scene that supposedly narrates the most specific and personal of exchanges.

Despite the sheer length of these nine conversations—Ceylan's adaptation of the climax of Chekhov's 'The Wife', as noted above, goes on for some thirty minutes—in each case the camera simply lingers on the faces, dimly lit by the fire, challenging the viewer's attention span instead of bombarding them with the images and movement. These conversations are often reproduced verbatim from Chekhov's short stories; they are not designed to be short, amusing, or easy to follow. They are literary dialogues that compel a film-going audience to think in real-time about what concepts like 'non-resistance to evil' might mean, or how altruism might only benefit the person doing the giving. In these conversations, 'the key aesthetic strategies expressing Aydın's conflicted selfhood mirror those of the earlier films', writes James Harvey-Davitt (264). 'The close-ups are more intense and Bergmanesque than ever; Aydın's gaze heightens our awareness of his attempts to oppress Nihal' (264). While some critics have observed that 'the use of shorter shot lengths, conventional shot/reverse-shot editing, and the increased use of dialogue in *Winter Sleep* are the methods used in conventional narrative cinema to draw the viewer into the characters and story', this film demonstrates a commitment to slowness that is consistent with Ceylan's previous work (O'Donoghue 58). Above all, this film valorizes language—quite literally, since the vast majority of viewers of *Winter Sleep* will have to rely on subtitles to understand the film—over the moving image that provides its form. Ceylan's repeated return to Chekhov thus creates a film less in service to the image than it is to the spoken word.

In addition to the literary conversation, the plastic arts in *Winter Sleep* play a subtler role in circulating Russian realism into Ceylan's Turkey. Consider conversation six, the thirty-minute argument from Chekhov's 'The Wife'. At the denouement of the conversation, Aydın looks at a painting on the wall. Adopting his gaze, the camera lingers on the painting for about two seconds [2:19"]. The light is dim, but the painting's provenance is clear: Its creator is the Russian artist Ilya Glazunov, and it is called 'At the Edge of the Ice-Hole'. This intertext is significant, for Glazunov, one of Ceylan's favourite artists, is the contemporary illustrator of many of Dostoevsky's writings. In fact, 'At The Edge of the Ice Hole' is an illustration that accompanies Dostoevsky's incomplete novella, *Netochka Nezvanova*. In this painting are two figures, a man and a woman, struggling in the snow. Their resemblance to Aydın and Nihal was not lost on Ceylan, who altered this painting for the film's official poster such that the faces of Aydın and Nihal take the place of those in the original painting. Elsewhere in Nihal's room, there is another painting by Glazunov: 'Rain', which features an Aydın-esque character as well, and which illustrates Dostoevsky's short story of unrequited love, 'White Nights'. (One can get a good look at it when Aydın tries to linger in the room with Nihal as well [2:17"].). Outside of this scene, there is yet another Glazunov painting that frequently appears onscreen: a portrait of the titular *Netochka Nezvanova* that sits behind Aydın's desk. Here Ceylan suggests a biting equation between the portrait and its owner: *Netochka Nezvanova* translates to *Nameless Nobody* [1:19"].

There is a power to precisely these kinds of moments in *Winter Sleep* that posit a connection between two radically different temporalities in a single instant. As Nihal looks at the Glazunov painting, she activates a comparison between her Turkish present and its Russian precursor that simultaneously opens both time-spaces. These allusions to Russian culture are, to be sure, not obvious: as Nihal looks at the painting the audience does so too, likely without any knowledge of the culture from which it hails, and, crucially, without any hierarchy or prejudice about its provenance. That both time-spaces hail from ‘non-Western’ countries is important for my argument, for it links both artworks from a point of view at once aesthetic and political. But in this discussion of form, I call attention to these intertexts simply because the paintings in Nihal’s room emerge in the film with startling—almost imperceptible—consonance. They fit in with the design of the room so seamlessly that it is very possible not to notice them, and yet if one does notice them, one’s understanding of the film is enriched two-fold. The same is true of the portrait that sits behind Aydın. There is something about these images of life in nineteenth-century Russia that so deeply resonates with Nihal and Aydın; their particular structure of feeling has compelled the two to frame these images throughout various rooms of their home. That these paintings were originally illustrations of nineteenth-century Russian realist literature further demonstrates the link between this time and place and Ceylan’s vision of contemporary Turkish society; in fact, it is right there on the wall for everyone to see.

To be sure, Ceylan does not only create precursors for himself in nineteenth-century Russian realist literature. Given that Aydın lives in a resort called Hotel Othello, and once acted in contemporary version of *Antony and Cleopatra*, I will briefly discuss the role that Shakespeare’s dramas play in this film. The film’s most explicit mention of Shakespeare arrives in dialogue seven, when Aydın’s sparring partner recites a few lines from *Richard III* in a battle of wits: ‘Conscience is but a word that cowards use...’ Mostly, however, Ceylan looks to Shakespeare for the same reasons that he looks to Russian realism. Consider two of the Shakespeare plays that *Winter Sleep* mentions through props or names: *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Each of these texts stages a fraught encounter between East and West, either between the moor and the Venetian in *Othello*, or between the cities of Alexandria and Rome in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The latter play suggests that modernity or worldliness is concentrated not in the Egyptian periphery but in the Roman metropolis, while in *Othello* the tragic fate of the (perhaps Turkish) moor is bound up in a doomed attempt to assimilate into European culture after his marriage. While Shakespeare is of course considered a Western author—perhaps *the* face of Western canon—it is clear that in this film Ceylan deploys him to highlight themes traditionally associated with literature or cinema of the ‘East’, for these two dramas are, in part, meditations on how modernity is often unfairly determined by geography and race. Ceylan’s use of Shakespeare to import the same thematic concerns that the Russian realists address is also complemented by a real-life twist. In 2012, the actor who plays Aydın in *Winter Sleep*—Haluk Bilginer, who is a member of the Istanbul theatre scene and co-founded its largest company, Oyun Atölyesi—played Antony in a Turkish version of *Antony and Cleopatra* that was performed at the Globe Theater in London. Through the play’s language and its historic location, Bilginer enacted a successful cross-cultural encounter that his character in *Winter Sleep*, also an actor who starred in the same play, could only dream of.

EAST AND EAST

For Chekhov, realism stood for the indexation of daily life in all its unglamorous, interstitial tasks: 'Things on stage should be as complicated and yet as simple as in life. People dine, just dine, while their happiness is made and their lives are smashed', he once said (Lewis 186). His attempt to modernize drama rested in large part on these types of quotidian reality effects: 'Just let me have my coffee, then we'll all be going', says Liubóv Andréyevna in *The Cherry Orchard* (398). Ceylan's evident commitment to realism similarly discloses itself through the film's paeon to the ordinary; this may explain the sheer number of scenes in *Winter Sleep* in which people are drinking tea and making small talk. Ceylan's realism of the everyday goes a step further than Chekhov's, however, as it takes advantage of cinema's unique ability to direct the viewer's attention to the objects and landscapes that comprise the *mise en scène*.

Pelin Erdal Aytekin makes this very point about the optical quality to the film, comparing '[t]he cinematic language created by Nuri Bilge Ceylan...to photographic narration and realist cinema' (247). It should therefore not come as much of a surprise that Ceylan himself is also a photographer whose cinematic landscapes possess a quasi-scientific interest in detail—a quality reminiscent of one of the avatars of nineteenth-century Russian art, Ilya Repin. The landscapes of *Winter Sleep* do indeed borrow from this artistic tradition; its milieu is less timeless than atemporal. The viewer understands that the film is set in the twentieth or twenty-first century, but the camera only moves between Aydın's cavernous study, Nihal's room, and, occasionally, the brush and mountains of Cappadocia. Guests come to the Hotel Othello to commune with nature and escape the vicissitudes of life; this is where Aydın himself has retreated in order to live his life in peace, a life in the margins. 'Ceylan shares with Tarkovsky an attempt to invest in the natural world a spirituality absent in secular times', adds Harvey-Davitt (253). In his interview with *Film Quarterly*, Ceylan suggests that his previous films screen a life shielded from modernity, relating the following regarding the making of *Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da/Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011): 'The original story which the film is based on is set in the 1980s...But when we went to the area, we saw that nothing had changed in the province since then. You feel sometimes that life is frozen' (White 70). This clearly applies to the geography of *Winter Sleep* as well, whose Anatolian landscape is an inscription of tradition frequently juxtaposed against the modernity of Istanbul.¹⁰ It follows, then, that one of the film's minor conflicts regards Aydın's simultaneous desire to remain in Anatolia and take the train to start afresh in Istanbul.

The realism that characterizes Ceylan's film and Chekhov's writing has historically migrated through many forms and nations. 'I need allude only to what seems the most faithful, almost literal realism of much Hellenistic or late Roman sculpture or to much of Dutch painting, or, in literature, to scenes in the *Satyricon* of Petronius, to medieval *fabliaux*, to the bulky corpus of the picaresque novel, to the circumstantial minuteness of Daniel Defoe, or the bourgeois drama of the eighteenth century', writes René Wellek in his demonstration of how realism's travels are central to the development of all of the arts (223). In light of its agglomerative approach to the various arts, *Winter Sleep* arguably narrates the generic and geographical evolution of realism, beginning with European drama, moving onto Russian short stories and painting, and culminating with the Turkish film itself. Every one of Ceylan's allusions to Shakespeare's plays,

Chekhov's stories, or Glazunov's art contributes to the film's capacious realist mosaic, one that travels between radically different centuries and countries without hierarchy.

In explaining why a contemporary Turkish filmmaker looks to nineteenth-century Russian literature in *Winter Sleep*, I have fashioned a network of exchange that eschews the connotations of 'lack' that so often characterize criticism of Turkish art or literature. I have also sought to model a vein of comparison that circumvents comparative paradigms that implicitly denigrate 'non-Western' art as a derivative melding of foreign form and local materials (Moretti 65). This particular comparison of Russia and Turkey demonstrates that *Winter Sleep* is a contemporary cultural artefact whose transnational circulation of formal elements is brokered not by a European or American precursor but rather by two independently rich artistic traditions from the Eastern hemisphere. In reflecting on the modernization efforts of both countries, I show how the pain of being temporally belated or geographically distant from the capitals of modernity can lead to the creation of new and often more innovative alternative pathways to the modern.

NOTES

¹ Demirkubuz's *Bekleme Odası/Waiting Room* (2003) is about a filmmaker who is trying to adapt Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, while Kaplanoğlu's *Süt/Milk* (2008) is an homage to Tarkovsky's *The Mirror*. Others such as Reha Erdem share a less concrete but nonetheless palpable debt to Tarkovsky.

² Translations from Turkish literary texts are my own; translations from the film I take from its English-language subtitles.

³ Ceylan's earlier films, including *Kasaba/The Small Town* (1997) and *Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da/Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011), also include nearly verbatim translations of Chekhov in their conversational set pieces.

⁴ Perhaps buoyed by the success of Orhan Pamuk with Western audiences, American publishers have started translating into English the works of major twentieth-century Turkish writers, such as Tanpınar and Sabahattin Ali. Tanpınar's satire of Turkish modernization and bureaucracy, *The Time Regulation Institute*, became an unlikely success in America in 2014 after landing on Oprah Book's Club, while Ali's cult hit, *Madonna in a Fur Coat*, was published for the first time in English by Penguin Classics in 2016.

⁵ The notion of the encyclopaedia as a handmaiden of empire is well trodden. The fact that a character specifically mentions the encyclopaedia in the text of the play is telling, perhaps suggesting that if the validation of the cherry orchard provided by the encyclopaedia can be cast aside, the empire that the encyclopaedia in part legitimates can just as easily suffer the same fate.

⁶ In fairness to Atatürk's modernization project, it is well known that the Turkish language was never particularly suited to the Perso-Arabic script. This script does not include vowels, which are crucially important for distinguishing meaning in Turkish. For more context, see Geoffrey Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.

⁷ This is especially pronounced in Pamuk's early novel, *Silent House*, which intertextually activates Turgenev's novels *On the Eve* and *Fathers and Sons*.

⁸ For a brief discussion of Ceylan's interest in Russian literature for its analogous East/West tensions, see Murat Akser, "The Existential Boundaries of Nuri Bilge Ceylan." *New Cinema, New Media: Reinventing Turkish Cinema*. Ed. Deniz Bayraktar. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014; Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.

⁹ See Gregory Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996; Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

¹⁰ For more on how Turkish artists and writers have harnessed the symbolic power of Anatolia, see Jale Parla, "From Allegory to Parable: Inscriptions of Anatolia in the Turkish Novel." *New Perspectives on Turkey* 36 (2007): 11–26.

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