‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’:

The Enfolding-Unfolding Aesthetics of a Film

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Watching Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s recent film ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’ (2011) was overwhelming as living in that geography can easily become so. It seems significant to ask what overwhelms us in the film; it might be the sense of “entrapment at an engulfing place where one supposedly belongs to” (Suner, 2006, 373) or the sense that “something new and different will spring up behind every hill, but always unerringly similar, tapering, vanishing or lingering monotonous roads” (as the official synopsis of the film puts in words). It also might be Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s sensuously rich long takes of the Anatolian landscapes that are directly addressing our senses where narrative resists unfolding. With the touch of Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Anatolia itself, with its people and landscapes as indexes of all the histories, stories and truths enfolded or hidden somewhere in this geography, unfolds itself in a way that it reveals its enigmatic character. More importantly, Ceylan does that by letting us perceive it with our senses. To grasp the richness of the experience of this film, I will draw upon the theory of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics as proposed by Laura U. Marks, and several ideas from Gilles Deleuze’s Cinema Books, and Mario Perniola’s concept of enigma. In the end, hopefully, such an analysis enables us to rethink about some concepts by bringing them into contact and explore the strategies and potentials of politics of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics.

In very simple terms, the theory of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics is based on the Deleuzian investigation of how certain images arise to or unfold to our perception by being selected from the universe of images in Bergson, and the virtual or the plane of immanence in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms. Based on several Deleuzian registers, including a Bergsonian concept of the image and a Leibnizian concept of the fold, the plane of immanence may refer to “a vast surface composed of an infinite number of folds” (Marks, 2010, 6). Sometimes one of these enfolded units unfolds into an image for our perception and becomes actualized. As an addition, Marks puts another layer between the infinite and the image and calls it ‘information’ to refer the forces and selections that intervene in the process of
unfolding of the images from the infinite. Therefore, the certain aspects of the infinite unfolds to us and become actualized as information or image whereas some aspects are left enfolded; “Images and information come into the world and roll back into the infinite in a ceaseless flow of unfolding and enfolding” (7).

For cinema studies, the theory helps us elaborate where all these images (in Bergsonian sense) come from and how they arise to our perception in films. It is a theory of “representation and narrative as unfolding” (Marks, 2009, 87). The images may unfold to our perception or knowledge in different manners; what Marks calls ‘manners of unfolding’. They sometimes unfold directly from the infinite, or sometimes from information, as an additional level that intervenes. Narrative conventions, genres, and funding or censorship conditions may intervene as information and act as a filter that regularizes and controls how certain images are selected from the infinite set of all potential images. Therefore, they are usually cliché images in Deleuzian sense of an image that “has been preselected, in an organized fashion, by a regime of information” (Marks, 2009, 90). So, the film makers act like a filter with their selections and manners of unfolding. However, as Deleuze explores in his Cinema Books, the film maker’s style plays a significant role in creating new contacts with the universe beyond what cliché images and unfolding are capable of.

Within the scope of this paper, several aspects of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics come to the foreground. First of all, it draws our attention to the manners of unfolding with its emphasis on the different layers (of folds) between the infinite and us, the elasticity of the unfolding and the resistance it may confront. Thus, it emphasizes the circularity - a ceaseless flow - of unfolding and enfolding processes which constantly enable us to come into contact with the universe in different ways. This is where the theory touches the Perniola’s notion of enigma. As Marks (2009, 97) nicely puts referring to
Perniola, enigma is that point of resistance or emergence on the plane of immanence which can never be unfolded once and for all since it is “capable of simultaneous expression on many different registers of meaning, all of which are equally valid, and it is thus able to open up an intermediate space that is not necessarily bound to be filled” (Perniola, 10). This points the surplus of world, reality or history over recollection and representation, and it seems revealing itself in enigmatic qualities.

In ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’, what overwhelms the audience is not only the things unfolding and the situation or the geography encompassing the characters or us (in Deleuzian sense) but also the enigmatic character of their unfolding. Throughout the film, it seems difficult for the audience to select which reality or truth to believe. As the narrative and the images refuse to unfold fully, the audience is left with contradictory realities that encourage them to search for the bâtin layers. In many ways, the film makes the audience feel that events or truths have not been fully unfolded yet or will never do. It is a world full of incompossibles, divergences and bifurcations in Deleuzian sense, just like the Anatolian setting itself. Like the people living in this geography, the audience and the characters of this film, are challenged by the events turning into enigmas at intersections of the sheets of past and the peaks of presents, as Deleuze discusses in Cinema 2 (which I will discuss later in the paper). In this regard, the Anatolian setting of ages past plays a fundamental role in this tension with its thick enfolded layers in physical, historical, cultural and political terms and the contradictory realities and histories it shelters. This will be my focus throughout this paper, as I analyze the film and the film maker’s style in terms of their enigmatic qualities.

The film is about a murder investigation; the small-town bureaucrats (the regional prosecutor, the police chief and his second-man-in-command, the town’s doctor, drivers and soldiers) and the suspects, who are said to have confessed, look for a corpse, which is buried in one of the fields outside the village, by driving around the countryside all night long. One of the suspects, Kenan, has killed the victim in a
fight after the victim has found out that Kenan is having an affair with his wife and is the actual father of his child (as it unfolds quite late in the film). Kenan cannot ‘remember’ the exact place where they have buried the corpse, as he claims that he was drunk that night. However, nobody knows (including the audience), whether he is lying or refusing to say where it is or he really cannot remember. As the night spent in the harsh steppes and rock cliffs of Anatolia with rain, wind and a full moon lasts longer, the characters (as the audience) witness the unfolding of these men’s personal histories, inner worlds, dilemmas, lies/secrets (such as the death of the prosecutor’s wife (?)) and hierarchical or competitive relations between these men.

Very similar to Ceylan’s avoidance of unfolding some aspects of the stories, the images also refuse to unfold fully. There are two stylistic qualities Ceylan employs that work for enfolding-unfolding aesthetics; the rhythm of the film (the simple durations) and the use of light (mostly yellow floating light on landscape or faces). The slow rhythm of the film (silences and long shots of landscapes), allows time and space for the audience to become in contact with different layers of unfolding/enfolding. As Deleuze (1989, 110) discusses in terms of some examples of depth of field, it feeds the effort of evocation and the exploration of the virtual zones of the past (which I will come back again).

Ceylan creates very strong frames/shots where some images unfold very slowly, as they are drawn out of the ‘dark dust’ into perception (Deleuze, 1993, 90-93) while some are folding back into the dark / the infinite. For instance, in one of the scene, the cars emerge from the dark (which are hardly to be recognized as cars at first) and become more perceptible as they get closer to our view.
There are several scenes where we are left with the darkness on the windy steppes of Anatolia with the car headlights or the moon as the few sources of light; literally nobody can know what can suddenly be ‘visible’. For instance, in one scene, the doctor sees the bas-reliefs on the rock cliffs as the lightning illuminates the cliff for a second; it might be a moment where the images unfold from the infinite. In these scenes, the audience can feel or imagine how many lives or stories are hidden somewhere in this geography, sometimes unfolds and enfolds back again, even their visibility lasts for a second. Interestingly, Perniola refers to the enigmatic character of lightning whose immediacy reveals surprises and unexpected events and so explodes any one-sided or consistent representation of reality or
On the other hand, in the scenes where the audience (like the characters in the film) watches the windy steppes of Anatolia in silence or with a voice-over of one of the characters, it feels as if the film resists unfolding, as it leaves the audience in suspense. As Deleuze discusses in Cinema 2 (1989), the empty spaces without characters or movement, such as landscapes in nature, may take on autonomy and “reach the absolute as the instances of pure contemplation, and immediately bring about the identity of the mental and the physical, the real and the imaginary, the subject and the object, the world and I” (16). They are direct time-images in Deleuzian terms, which ‘free time from causality’. The characters (and the audience) are the seers, they see rather than act. This is what is usually called ‘the cinema of the seer’; referring to the characters in situations which they (or we as the audience) no longer know how to react to or in spaces (“any-spaces-whatever”) which they no longer know how to move. As David Martin-Jones refers to Deleuze, the time-image is the one in which perception struggles to progress to action since “the sensory-motor link of the action-image has been loosened by the emergence of situations to which the character does not know how to respond physically, and they become instead a witness to time passing” (71). In the time image, no action is possible, as emotion and feelings opens us to the experience of time. (Marks, 2000, 27)
Even though Deleuze focuses on the spaces or situations after the Second World War within Western Cinema, there are some theorists who bring the Deleuzian ideas in contact with new images from intercultural and world cinemas, including Marks and Martin-Jones. As they both argue, Deleuze’s “any-space-whatever” can be extended into the disruptive spaces of post-colonialism and national histories where cultural memories destabilizing the national histories are repressed by official history. It is just the way we witness in ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’, where truths or events become very selectively, even fictionally, enfolded into information in official history.

However, it is not straightforward where to locate the Anatolian geography since it seems to embrace qualities of both ‘encompassing national or geographical whole’ and ‘any-space-whatever’ in its extended sense. As Deleuze describes (1986, 141), the ‘Encomposer’ refers to the milieu (such as any determine geographical, historical or social space-time) and its forces that act on the character and constitute the situation in which he is caught up. It usually has the formula: from the situation to the transformed situation via the intermediary of action. However, in the case of ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’, despite the situation or the geography encompassing the characters (and even the audience), there is not much action that can ‘resolve’ it. We witness characters as seers who don’t know how to respond to the situation as the reality with its enigmatic qualities refuse to “extend unproblematically into action” and, for the audience, the film refuses to explain or neutralize it (Marks, 2000, 47).

Based on these observations, it seems that the Anatolian setting acts as an ‘Emcomposer’ but at the same time it cultivates time-images that open up to the experience of time, most importantly, to the sheets of past and the peaks of present. Then, the question is: why and how it happens. According to Martin-Jones (2011), the pure optical situation, which is experienced by the character as a seer, opens up a way of “showing the sudden loss of a coherent whole (encompassing situation) that occurs during a
“time of national mutation” (74). It seems valid for the Anatolian setting as the political or cultural ‘mutations’ of this geography are considered. Anatolia has been a home for various civilizations for ages that enriched its soil in different manners. Now, it encompasses the major uplands of Turkey at the intersections of various long-established cultures deeply rooted in this shared history. However, this geography witnessed and its populations lived through ‘national mutations’ such as state violence, displacement, oppression and exploitation during several periods of nation-state building, modernization and urbanism. Today, Anatolia/Turkey is still struggling with the past and the current (and the possible future) ‘national mutations’ and the people feel in between various cultural values and traditions. In this regard, given Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s beautiful ‘use’ of Anatolian geography (with its own historical, physical, spiritual and enigmatic qualities), the film reaches the audience not only in a structural way but also, and more strikingly, in a sensuously very rich ways. Therefore, it opens up a plane within the ‘Encompasser’ (and outside of it at the same time) for our direct contact with the time through the sheets of past and the peaks of present.

Here, the critical thing is that the film also reveals the enigmatic qualities of events and truths with multiple points of registers (the officials, the murder, the victim, the wife and the child, and even other villagers) and it lets the audience become another point of register, too. The stories or images unfold to each one of them in different manners and so they come in contact with different layers of information and images, and the story itself is complicated by each one’s own stories and gathers all these stories together. This shows the dynamic processes involved in enigmas and how it escapes the control of every one. Therefore, the film explores and lets us explore what might slip from the enfolded or selectively unfolded realities of events or history by enabling us to sense the surplus that they cannot absorb or contain any more (and our bodies hardly do). Ceylan does that in very sensuous ways, by revealing it (or the glimpse of it) within a time image rather than expressing it in symbolic
representations to which we are used to give one-sided or ready-made reactions. It is ‘spilling over’ since the multiplicity and the immediacy of the reality, world and history cannot be contained anymore, “but only made or undone according to prehensive units and variable configurations or changing captures” (1993, 81), as Deleuze writes referring to Whitehead. In a sense, it becomes too many or too large to be grasped by the encompassing whole or universal history.

Deleuze’s ‘peaks of present’ and ‘sheets of past’ within a time-image are where this spilling over occurs; mostly drawn upon the Bergsonian understanding of time in which the relation between past and present is one of coexistence rather than succession. As Al-Saji argues (2006), it is a conception of time as a relation of past and present that escapes the closure of presence and opens us to the possibilities of interplay and transmission between different pasts, and planes or sheets of memory. The connection between present and past or actual and virtual, is complicated by the integration of what Bergson and Deleuze describe as the image of time (based on Bergson’s notion of duration). As Deleuze discusses regarding the crystal image, “time has to split at the same time as it sets itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past” (1989, 81).

Marks (2000, 40) states that “these two types of images create two disjunctive representations of the same moment”. As Al-Saji discusses (217), for Deleuze, this splitting is not complete: “The two jets continue to interpenetrate and to coexist”; the virtual becomes actualized and inserted into new presents, and the actual becomes virtualized as these presents continue to pass. In this process, virtualities vary in their degree of proximity from actual by which they are both emitted and absorbed; from ready-made recollection-images to “the past in general/in itself” in Bergson’s terms. Bergson understands the “virtual image” to be pure memories which are the planes in which the whole past is entangled and
coexists at different levels of expansion and contraction. Even though individual memories can be pulled out from a plane of the past by actualization (as recollection-images), the past as the interconnected and infinite virtuality remains enfolded; it cannot be represented as such. However, as Al-Saji emphasizes (216), the past does not need to be understood as “an abyss, a remote or lost presence, since the memory of the present is the virtuality that perpetually accompanies the present, making it an actual present by putting it in the contact with the past”. For Bergson and Deleuze, we move in time; between memories of different levels and intensities “in our acts of recollection, reminiscence and perceptual recognition” (Al-Saji, 204). In this regard, as Al-Saji emphasizes, memory can be understood as a virtual and an active reality that exceeds consciousness and presence.

Therefore, we can understand the past in general, the virtual or the infinite consisting of dynamic and transformative planes. This reveals a very significant aspect of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics: the processes of enfolding-unfolding are dynamic and transformative; transforming our relation with our world, memory and history. In this regard, several scenes in ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’ brings us in contact with the sheets of past and the peaks of present all together, for which the Anatolian setting is a very rich source.

From this point of view, as Deleuze argues, “the past appears as the coexistence of circles which are more or less dilated or contracted, each one of which contains everything at the same time and the present of which is the extreme limit” (99). In between, there are these planes, regions, strata and sheets each of which has its own ‘singularities’, tones and rhythms; “depending on the recollection image we are looking for, we have to jump into a particular circle”, even though the recollection image sometimes cannot be found where we look for it.

In this regard, ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’ opens us to the sheets of past for which Nuri Bilge Ceylan uses the Anatolian landscape as sensuous gateways (in Agnes Pethö’s terms). With
Ceylan’s sensuously rich, almost tactile, images, we come into contact with the sheets of past in different manners, as the characters do in the film. In the long takes of the landscape and the scenes where we are left with the floating yellowish light on the windy steppes and empty hills of Anatolia or with the close-up of the face or eye of the characters looking at the landscape, Nuri Bilge Ceylan complicates our resonance with different sheets of past. We feel the tension between what the landscapes open us to and its silence, calmness or ‘not showing or doing anything’. It resists unfolding or unfolds through contradictory realities such as the village headman’s beautiful angel-like daughter who unfolds as another reality or a possibility within this geography which is contradictory to the ones we have encountered so far in the film. This is where Anatolia’s enigmatic quality comes from; it absorbs or contains these divergent lives, contradictory realities or emergences unfolding from its enfolded thick strata. The audience can feel this confrontation in their body. It might be because of the fact that it stays silent and calm despite all the contradictions - suffering, injustice, lies, secrets, beauties and hope - it has witnessed; it refuses to express or act on, just like the characters (or the audience), and refuses to explain as the film-maker does. However, it might be due to fact they are incapable of doing so. Beyond our personal sheets of past, the film opens up the collective memory encoded in our senses by delaying a cultivation of recollection-images in order to keep the images rich for our experience with our senses. At the same time, it allows us to feel the richness of divergent lives or stories absorbed or hidden within this landscape and the tension of their possible future unfolding.

This is significant in terms of the politics of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics because the film makes us - our bodies -, feel the ‘spilling over’ of the multiple realities and histories of this geography and their enigmatic qualities. These are the divergent histories or realities that we need to confront and embrace together. In this regard, our bodies seem much more ready than our minds because our body seems feeling or knowing them more closely. This is why we feel familiar with the film’s setting and it
feels as if we are in resonance with the past, present and future of this geography. Like our bodies, Anatolia struggles to contain these complicated realities occupying our personal and collective memory. Since the film refuses to display or explain and insists on addressing our senses and complicating what seems to be a truth, it takes us another ‘point of register’ and ‘invites’ us to unfold.

Here, it is not only about unfolding of any specific event (a recollection-image), but it is also unfolding of time, unfolding of coexistence of realities and its intensity; “a transverse continuity or communication between several sheets and weaves a network of non-localizable relations between them” (Deleuze, 123). It is the film preventing the past turning into a recollection image which can be resolved and acted on. Instead, as Marks puts, emotion or feeling opens up to the experience of time or as Deleuze puts, it is remembering or temporalization, though not exactly a recollection-image but an invitation to recollect or to unfold. According to Deleuze (1989, 125), “If feelings are sheets of the past, thought, the brain, is the set of non-localizable relations between all these sheets, the continuity which rolls them up and unrolls them like so many lobes, preventing them from halting and becoming fixed … The screen itself is the cerebral membrane where immediate and direct confrontations take place between the past and the future, the inside and the outside, at a distance impossible to determine, independent of any fixed point” (125).

Similarly, the simultaneity of peaks of the present - the simultaneity of a present of past, a present of present and a present of future - refers to “the three implicated presents that are constantly revived, contradicted, obliterated, substituted, re-created, fork and return” (101). Each of these three different presents forms a world which is plausible and possible in itself; however, where all of them are ‘incompossible’. However, as Deleuze emphasizes, it is about one and the same event that is played out in these different worlds; “these are not subjective (imaginary) points of view in one and the same world, but one and the same event in different objective worlds, all implicated in the event, inexplicable
universe” (103). It is “undecidable alternatives between the circles of past, inextricable differences between peaks of present” (105).

‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’ unfolds the peaks of presents as the same event has multiple point of registers and is far away from any kind of closure. The event of murder unfolds differently to each character’s perception and knowledge. For instance, the little boy, whose father has been killed, throws a stone at the murderer. However, as it already has unfolded to other characters and the audience, the murderer is the real father of the boy. In this sense, it can be said that the boy’s father both has been killed and has not at the same time. Similarly, one of the villagers tells the doctor that someone has seen the victim alive in another village which is impossible for the doctor who has already seen the corpse (and so refuses it as non-sense). However, for a second, we have a glimpse of the peaks of presents; the coexistence of multiple confronting realities.

Based on these ideas, we can say that Deleuzian time-image reveals several enigmatic qualities, as they both refer to the dynamic and transformative processes of enfolding and unfolding and coexistence of divergent or contradictory realities. As Perniola discusses, when reality (or we can say ‘the image’) assumes a shape that is more complex, contradictory and many-sided, enigma reveals itself. It is an event or reality in which nobody knows what is really happening, “in which it seems impossible to calculate” (Perniola, 11) that escapes the control of anyone and becomes independent of any fixed point. It has multiple points of registers; as Perniola describes, “the divergence of the instrument’s arms... convergence of their strings, in such a way that the opposing forces do not succeed one another chronologically, but are held simultaneously present in the same object” (17). However, the experience of the opposites or contradictions does not lead to a dualistic world, since they are divergences and bifurcations within the same world, very similar to Deleuze’s understanding (in an
adaptation of Leibniz) of the universe built up by folds. “In a same chaotic world divergent series are endlessly tracing bifurcating paths” (1993, 81).

In this regard, the sheets of past and the peaks of present have enigmatic quality, as they are revealed in ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’. As the film maker refuses to resolve or to ‘explain’ the contradictory realities, the audience needs to unfold and ‘interpret’. So, the film opens up to deeper planes of the infinite. However, the essential point is that this cannot be separated from the enigmatic qualities of Anatolian geography and how Ceylan lets Anatolia unfold its past, present and future through its enigmatic character with sensuously very rich images and durations.

With ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’, Nuri Bilge Ceylan lets us explore the enigmatic qualities of the narrative or the images, by complicating zâhir aspects of them and avoiding to resolve/unfold them once for all. Thus, it delays any kind of closure of the realities or events and enables us to come into contact with different layers of reality or time. This is what can be called politics of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics since it makes us feel things about issues that we are so used to react with our cliché, and mostly biased, attitudes. Therefore, it ‘invites’ us to react differently, with our feelings and emotions that we share somehow. Their intensity also comes from the enigmatic unfolding of events and images in the film, as they do in Anatolia.

For Marks (2009, 98), a film is more intriguing when it unfolds ‘enigmatically’ rather than ‘truthfully’ and cultivates enigmas. Within ‘Once Upon a Time in Anatolia’ it reveals itself at the intersections of Deleuze’s ‘sheets of past’ and ‘peaks of present’. Therefore, Ceylan invites us to search more to grasp the richness, and the surplus of history, reality, or life itself. Since it is neither a resolution, nor a closure, it is opening to time and the world. This is why it is both overwhelming and freeing at the same time.
Works Cited


Once Upon a Time in Anatolia [Bir Zamanlar Anadolu’da]. Dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Film.
