alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

33rd International Istanbul Film Festival
Istanbul, Turkey, 5–20 April 2014

A Report by Özge Özdüzen Ateşman, Edge Hill University

Throughout the last few decades, film festivals have become widespread distribution channels, connecting films, film crews, critics and film audiences within a professional network. Boissevain, as quoted by Robinson and Picard, lists "the rise of secularism, the increase in the diasporic populations, together with the increasing democratisation" as the most important factors to enable the current mushrooming of festivals (20). Although a recent antidemocratic turn has taken place in Turkey, which is evident from the increasing state violence on its people and the bans of Twitter and YouTube, Istanbul, as a vibrant cultural city, is still home to many exciting creative and cultural events, such as the Istanbul Film Festival. Due to the intense political agenda of Turkey, with the increasing tension between secularism and Islam, and the expanding visibility of Kurdish identity and politics after years of struggle, cultural events like film festivals are turning into political events, as "film festivals are events where nationality and political relations are negotiated, economic sustainability or profitability is realized and new practices of cinephilia are triggered" (de Valck 16).

In addition to functioning as a school for cinephilia for almost three decades, since its inception the Istanbul International Film Festival has showcased films representing the social, cultural and political atmosphere of Turkey. Being the first and still the most prominent film festival in Istanbul, it was founded in 1982 by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV) and by the Turkish industrialist Nejat Eczacıbaşı. This year's edition consisted of 593 sessions, 25 sections for 16 days, with 357 feature films and shorts from 50 different countries, testifying to the international focus of the event. It is not easy to describe what "an international film festival" actually is, though there is a general understanding that film festivals exist as "alternative distribution networks providing audiences with opportunities to enjoy commercially unviable films that most communities, even the most cosmopolitan, otherwise would not have the opportunity to see" (Peranson 23). As well as operating as alternative distribution and exhibition networks, "film festivals are set up as a nexus of multiple events including competitions, master classes with celebrated filmmakers and exhibitions of thematic programs" (Mazdon 23). This year, indeed, the Istanbul Film Festival offered three master classes with practitioners such as Asghar Farhadi, seven panels, and many film screenings followed by q and a sessions with filmmakers, producers and film crew members.

As well as these events, Istanbul Film Festival has been home to social protests outside the former site of the historical Emek movie theatre because of its closing down four years ago and its final demolition last year, as part of the construction of a shopping centre.

As Öncü explains, "the physical transformation associated with globalization in Istanbul has taken place since the mid-1980s: gated communities, five-star hotels, the city packaged as a consumption artifact for tourists, new office towers, expulsion of small business from the central districts, beginnings of gentrification of the old neighborhoods, and world images on billboards and shop windows" (57). Film festivals, according to Robinson and Picard, "are linked to the wider sociological, economic and political context of change, as a site to adapt, reconstruct and re-enact meaningful narrations of the collective being in the global world" (20). Since the early 2000s, construction has been booming even more in Istanbul's peripheral neighbourhoods as well as in the city centre. This has had direct effects on the film festival, which now can only use the two remaining large movie theatres on Istiklal Street, namely the Atlas and the Beyoğlu. The demonstrations against the demolition of the Emek marked the second day of this year's festival. Once the most important symbol of the history of cinema and culture in Turkey, the Emek has become an emblem of the overall repression and brutal neoliberal and Islamic ideology of the current government. Even though it was demolished last year, the protests continue to attract attention to the brutality of the urban regeneration programmes and state violence in Turkey.

In addition to social events and protests, the programme included a variety of international films, in a bid to enhance the festival's multicultural nature. One of the most popular sections was the "Akbank Gala", whose tickets were the most expensive. This section consisted of gala screenings of highly popular American or British art-house films, such as *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Wes Anderson, 2014) and *Philomena* (Stephen Frears, 2013), which was also the opening film of the festival. Guests representing Yeşilçam, the old Turkish film industry, marked the opening ceremony, as this year is considered to be the 100th year of Turkish cinema. After the screening of *Philomena*, the festival hosted many remarkable Irish and English films, including period dramas like *The Book Thief* (Brian Percival, 2013), social realist films such as *Starred Up* (David Mackenzie, 2013) and witty humour in films like *Life's a Breeze* (Lance Daly, 2013) and *Frank* (Lenny Abrahamson, 2014).

The festival's most celebrated thematic section was a brand new section, "Nerdesin Aşkım?" ("Where Are You, My Love?"), named after the slogan of the LGBTQ communities in the Gezi Park movement. Although LGBTQ films have been screened at the festival for many years, this year marks the first designated LGBTQ section, comprising seven films. Sketching the stories of the everyday lives of gay, lesbian and transsexual characters, these films highlighted attempts at searching for and finding love. My personal favourite was *Something Must Break* (*Nånting måste gå sönder*, Ester Martin Bergsmark, 2014), a stylised story of two men's love in the face of conformity and similarity promoted by the capitalistic societies in which they live. Another film worth noting, Marco Berger's *Hawaii* (2013), displays the intimate tension of the relationship between two gays, who have not yet opened up to each other.

As it has increasingly become the case through the years, the festival hosted many documentaries both from Turkey and abroad. The most remarkable of these, stirring the greatest audience reactions, were related to the "Occupy Gezi Park" movement, the ongoing war in Syria, and the conflicts in Egypt. For instance, the audience of *Istanbul United* (*İstanbul United*, Farid Eslam and Olli Waldhauer, 2013) showed oppositional reactions to what they thought was a misrepresentation of the Gezi movement, and protested against its future screenings in various film festivals. Additionally, one of the most important

documentaries of the festival was *The Return to Homs* (*Al awda a ila Hims*, Talal Derki, 2013), which was also the toughest to watch, as through shots of Homs in ruin, blending with the personal subjectivity of the director and his friends, the film presents a powerful first-person experience of the damage of war in Syria. Its q and a session, in the presence of the director, was full of fruitful discussions in Turkish, English and Arabic by many activists from Turkey and Syria.

The most remarkable and popular events this year were the ones relating to the changing dimensions of Turkish national cinema. The festival hosted many events relating to the centenary of cinema in Turkey. The panel on political cinema, for instance, hosted Kurdish director Kazım Öz and Turkish director Emin Alper. Öz talked about what being a Kurdish filmmaker in Turkey has implied for him, and commented that Kurdish filmmaking is inherently embedded in a political situation, given both the diasporic nature of the Kurds and the culture of state repression and violence on Kurdish people that exists in many Middle Eastern States. As was the case in many panels and workshops, the first question from the audience related to the Gezi movement. The audience wondered if the movement had changed the ways in which filmmakers engage with politics and art. Öz replied that, before the Gezi movement, Kurdish people experienced similar movements throughout the 1990s; however, for Öz the sense of humour that characterised the Gezi uprising is something new and has the potential to transform the traditional characteristics of cinema and other arts in Turkey. Another important question was on the scope of the "national award" of the Istanbul Film Festival, as his Kurdish film competed for it. Öz was asked whether he defines his cinema as part of the national cinema in Turkey or not. Öz's answer was simple, highlighting that, as a Kurdish filmmaker, he makes Kurdish films in Kurdistan, but his films are also films from Turkey, as he makes films that are from Kurdistan in Turkey. He added that film festivals should redefine their categories of national cinemas and national awards, arguing that they need to find better ways to cope with cinemas like Kurdish cinema in their programmes.

As the awareness of the civil war in Kurdistan and state violence on the Kurdish people in Turkey is increasing, the film festival has been marked by an abundance of Kurdish films for two or three years now. The most remarkable of these were Öz's *Once Upon a Time* (*He Bû Tune Bû*, 2014) and Hüseyin Karabey's *Come to My Voice* (*Were Dengê min*, 2014). Depicting the harsh life experiences of Kurdish seasonal farm workers, *Once Upon a Time* won the special prize of the jury and the FIPRESCI national competition award. *Come to My Voice* also portrays the reality of Kurdish people in Turkey. Turning his camera to the journey of a Kurdish woman and her granddaughter hoping to save the former's son from his arbitrary detention by the Turkish state, Karabey's film won the "People's Choice" and the Cineuropa.org awards this year. After the screening of the film, we discussed with a Kurdish director, Nazif Coşkun, how the end of the civil war in Southeast Turkey impacts on Kurdish films today. Coşkun's short *The Home* (*Welat*, 2013) shows the hard-hitting reality of the depopulation of Kurdish villages by the Turkish state in the 1980s and 1990s. Showing the empty houses and parks in the aftermath of the depopulation, the film presents the empty spaces juxtaposed with the sounds of their former dwellers.

As well as the Kurdish films from Turkey, the festival showcased films from other parts of Kurdistan, such as *My Sweet Pepper Land* (Hiner Saleem, 2013), a film that offers an alternative understanding of Kurdish culture and history. Even though the crime-of-honour aspect of the cultural history of Kurdistan has been overemphasised in the film, at the

expense of other critical issues, the film represents a new direction, being one of the very first examples of the Western genre in new Kurdish cinema. As the "Political Cinema in Turkey" panel showed, cinema in Turkey and the Middle East has been stuck in social realism, and the use of new genres and exploration of different subjects might provide a way out of that.

Another exploration of genre came from Turkish cinema with *Let's Sin* (*İtirazım Var,* Onur Ünlü, 2014). This film experiments with the traditional expectations of crime and comedy. Not only does it make reference to the Gezi by showing flags and other symbols of the movement, but it also stars a political and "modern" imam, the leader of worship in the Sunni Islamic world. The imam in the film can be seen as an example of one of the most important figures of the Gezi movement, the anticapitalist Muslim. Onur Ünlü won the Best Director award for *Let's Sin*. This year's Golden Tulip for the national competition went to *I'm Not Him* (*Ben O Değilim,* Tayfun Pirselimoğlu, 2014), whose curiously powerful appeal lays in its acting performances and use of spaces like the outskirts of Istanbul and the interiors of shantytowns. However, both *I Am Not Him* and *Let's Sin,* as typical examples of New Turkish Cinema, seem "disinterested in the stories of women and subordinate women to men, denying them agency" (Suner 163).

This year's festival was marked by its blending of politics, art and cinephilia. Both events and films were enriched by the politically aware nature of their audiences. The q and a sessions after the screenings went into great depth and the panels were always full, demonstrating the persisting power of cinephilia and of film festivals. The increasing visibility and representation of LGBTQ and Kurdish identities and the influence of the Gezi movement seem to have been the nexus of this year's festival, and will probably continue being so, for "film festivals [have] powerful transformative capacities of the testimonies on display and activist functions as well" (Torchin 6).

Works Cited

Boissevain, Jeremy. *Revitalizing European Rituals*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.

The Book Thief. Dir. Brian Percival. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2013. Film.

Chan, Felicia. "The International Film Festival and the Making of a National Cinema". *Screen* 52.2 (2011): 253–60. Print.

Come to My Voice [*Were Dengê min*]. Dir. Hüseyin Karabey. Asi Film, 2014. Film.

Frank. Dir. Lenny Abrahamson. Runaway Fridge Productions, 2014. Film.

The Grand Budapest Hotel. Dir. Wes Anderson. Scott Rudin Productions, 2014. Film.

Hawaii. Dir. Marco Berger. La Noria Cine, 2013. Film.

I'm Not Him [*Ben O Değilim*]. Dir. Tayfun Pirselimoğlu. Zuzi Film, 2013. Film.

Istanbul United [*İstanbul United*]. Dir. Farid Eslam and Olli Waldhauer. Nippes Yard Production and Port au Prince Film & Kultur Produktion, 2013. Film.

Let's Sin [*İtirazım Var*]. Dir. Onur Ünlü. U10 Film, 2014. Film.

Life's a Breeze. Dir. Lance Daly. Fastnet Films, 2013. Film.

Mazdon, Lucy. "The Cannes Film Festival as Transnational Space". *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 25.2 (2006): 19–30. Print.

My Sweet Pepper Land. Dir. Hiner Saleem. Agat Films & Cie, 2013. Film.

Once Upon A Time [*He Bû Tune Bû*]. Dir. Kazım Öz. Yapim 13 Film Production & Al Jazeera, 2014. Film.

Öncü, Ayşe. "The Myth of 'Ideal Home' Travels Across Borders to Turkey". *Space, Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalizing Cities*. Eds. Ayşe Öncü and Petra Weyland. London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1997. 56–72. Print.

Peranson, Mark. "First You Get the Power, Then You Get the Money: Two Models of Film Festivals". *Dekalog 3: on Film Festivals*. Ed. Richard Porton. London: Wallflower, 2009. 23–37. Print.

Philomena. Dir. Stephen Frears. Weinstein Company, 2013. Film.

The Return to Homs [*Al awda a ila Hims*]. Dir. Talal Derki. Proaction Film, 2013. Film.

Robinson, Mike and David Picard. "Remaking Worlds: Festivals, Tourism and Change". *Festivals, Tourism and Social Change: Remaking Worlds*. Eds. David Picard and Mike Robinson. Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2006. 1–31. Print.

Something Must Break [*Nånting måste gå sönder*]. Dir. Ester Martin Bergsmark. Garagefilm International, 2014. Film.

Starred Up. Dir. David Mackenzie. Sigma Films, 2013. Film.

Suner, Asuman. *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity, Memory*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009. Print.

Torchin, Leshu. "Networked for Advocacy: Film Festivals and Activism". *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism*. Eds. Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin. St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012. 1–13. Print.

Valck, Marijke de. *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam U.P., 2007. Print.

The Home [*Welat*]. Dir. Nazif Coşkun. 2013. Film.

Suggested Citation

Özdüzen Ateşman, Özge. "33rd International Istanbul Film Festival". Festival report. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 7 (Summer 2014). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

Özge Özdüzen Ateşman received her BA and MA from the Philosophy Department at Bogazici University, Istanbul. While a teaching assistant in the Media Department at Istanbul Bilgi University, she was a member of the editorial board of the Turkish film magazine *Yeni Film* for many years. Since 2011, she is a member of SIYAD (Turkish Film Critics Association) and FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Critics). She is currently a teaching assistant and PhD student at Edge Hill University. Her research is on audience ethnography and the Istanbul Film Festival at a time of transition for the Turkish political agenda and social fabric.