

## Cinema and the City

*Sarah Jilani* talks cinema, its plight, and its explosion onto the streets of Istanbul every April, in continuation of a valued tradition

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The bell of the historic tram rings as it tries to urge hundreds of pedestrians out of the way; the smells and yells from street vendors infiltrate the senses; a few students try to waylay the crowd with flyers courtesy of the Turkish Communist Party; all kinds of music blends with the chatter flowing out of street cafés. This is the district of Beyoğlu, a hub of activity on any given day or night of the week, and its numerous cinemas are hosting, as always, the annual Istanbul International Film Festival.

Taking place over the course of two weeks every April, this year's film festival marks the 30th time that both world and local films have been presented to the public, devotees of the industry have been awarded, newcomers have been encouraged and guests ranging from Emir Kusturica, Theo Angelopoulos to John Malkovich have been hosted. Although going from strength to strength in terms of scope, variety and numbers (the last few years have seen an audience of almost 100,000), on its 30th anniversary it seems all the more disappointingly clear that the festival hasn't remained unaffected by the tidal wave of consumerism, the private business ventures and globalisation sweeping its way up this historic district.

"When the festival – then called The Istanbul Film Weeks – first began in 1981, the yearning for artistic cinema within a certain slice of society was positively tangible," says Atilla Dorsay, one of the founders of the festival and a celebrated film critic today. "We could never have dared to imagine, in those times of scarcity, that what began with seven would in 30 years be 230 films. From the very start, it gained a momentum of its own. I remember, one day, we were discussing the possibility of introducing film awards to the festival agenda. I popped out to the loo, and by the time I came back the Golden Tulip Awards had been established."

What was obvious from early on, however, was keeping this event in what was one of the oldest and most culturally rich districts of the city:

"It was apparent that, only a few years after the festival's inception, Beyoğlu was its heart and soul,"

Dorsay adds. "Guests would come for the city as much as for the films. The festival was so under-financed that there were times we paid for the guests' dinners out of our own pockets or thanks to the easygoing kindness of the local restaurant owners."

As Dorsay recalls 1988's closing ceremony, spent on a protest walk against a wave of censorship with friend and celebrated Greek-American director Elia Kazan, he is unable to hold back his tears.

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Undoubtedly, the emotional investment in this cultural venture is very high for those who have followed its progress from the start. Yet it is also the intangible aura surrounding the festival that – no longer in any organisational position – he is finding hard to let go of. It is a sense of shared interest, enthusiasm and belonging, which you are immediately a part of no matter how later on in life you've decided to participate. Complete strangers strike up conversations out of mutual love for a particular director's work; veteran festival-goers reminisce; a feeling of locality is fostered, which is no small feat considering the usual anonymity felt in a city of 15 million.

Despite these strong social ties to its location, last year saw the closure of the foremost host of the festival, the Emek Cinema, which has stood in all its art nouveau splendor since 1924. A reaction of outrage followed the news that a complete knock-down of the 1884 building and the subsequent construction of a shopping centre were being planned. Walks were organised and petitions signed, yet when the 30th Film Festival rolled around, Emek's doors were still boarded up; it seems as soon as media and public attention dies down the original plans shall commence. Istanbul, which already boasts the largest shopping centre in Europe, is gaining its 112th shopping centre whilst losing a legacy.

Two more festival-hosting cinemas have since shut their doors. Cevdet Pişkin, the manager of a third cinema that is in danger, believes the portion of blame that should be assigned to the public is no small one:

“People no longer treat the experience of going to the cinema as one where you dress well, build a rapport with other movie-goers, and grow familiar with everyone from manager down to the ticket boys. Old-school values and one festival a year doesn't fill up your seats. Take the Emek Cinema for instance; it seats nine hundred people. Do you think a quarter-full film showing covers the heating bill that big old room racks up in an hour?”

He has a point indeed; festival-goers forget that these cinemas are open and running all year. Staying afloat depends on sustained public interest, not a sudden overflow of people for two weeks out of fifty-two. It seems the “yearning for film” Atilla Dorsay speaks of with such nostalgia has been overtaken, like much else, by the global yearning for goods, brands and mainstream culture.

Indeed, although today the festival itself has a strong foundation, it is largely kept alive by private organisations. The contributions of Akbank, owned by one of the most powerful mercantile families in Turkey, and the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), have been very beneficial. However, there is a glaringly obvious lack of government involvement, despite the festival's contributions towards tourism, international recognition and cultural growth.



The private sponsors are standing firm, but it is disheartening to find the government so disconnected from the needs of this outnumbered but rooted handful within modern Turkish society. Yet this was not always the case; those like Dorsay who remember the festival's past have oftentimes had to deal with a not-so-welcome degree of government interest too.

"We are a nation of rather, ah, sensitive souls," Dorsay says with the hint of a self-mocking smile. "Every other thing seems to be considered an 'insult to Turkishness'."

In the early 80s, the festival managed to continue despite a nationwide military coup and its resulting clampdown on freedom of expression. In those years, journalist Mehmet Öztürk writes, it was a "window opening onto the outside world", even though the number of films featured were pitifully few.

In the late 80s, it had to struggle to provide the kind of variety it wished to due to the continuously heavy-handed government approval process. Festival films would have to submit to the same kind of assessment that blockbusters underwent before meeting approval, thus stripping the festival of its platform for independent, experimental cinema.

"Communism and nudity were the big no-nos," Dorsay explains. "It frustrated me so much to see films which were real gems being cast aside by a panel of government officials who didn't know or care to know the first thing about cinema."

In fact, Gönül Üsnet, a local and a film enthusiast who hasn't missed the festival for the last 25 years, believes this is the only manner in which the government has ever noted the festival's existence:

"The only so-called 'contribution' the government has ever made to the festival in its thirty-year-long duration has been to look on with a continuously suspicious eye," she recalls.

At times, it was almost entirely down to the respect owed Şakir Eczacıbaşı - a long-time benefactor of the Arts and patriarch of an old bourgeois family - that some films ever had the chance to greet an audience.

"Where the entreaties of us 'left-journalist-types' fell on deaf ears, Şakir became our advocate and spokesperson," says Dorsay.

"In '89, our predicament was finally resolved. Festival films were no longer required to submit to a process of approval, and with this freedom we were able to expand to include ever more films and nurture many up-and-coming Turkish filmmakers." Indeed, the "Meeting at the Bridge" category of films are reserved particularly for the promotion of joint productions, most of which are Turkish-German, French-Turkish and Turkish-Armenian films.

Azize Tan, director of the festival today, says that one of their key missions now is to ensure the festival remains loyal to its original aims: "The festival is still the place to go in order to discover what's happening in Turkish cinema. We have now increased the number to 50 domestic films and around 150

international.” Yet how this hope for growth is going to be sustained when, simply, the number of screens available for the festival’s use are decreasing, remains without a viable answer.

Istanbul is an impossibly diverse city that today holds more immigrants from all corners of Turkey than it does those who are second or third generation locals. The level of education, cultural awareness and the income to pursue these things vary enormously across the population. Hence, it may not be such a bad thing for the festival to try and retain a manageable scope and remain in its characteristic surroundings.

Indeed, Cevdet Pişkin the cinema manager believes this is already the case, arguing it is the same demographic that keeps the festival upright:

“It is the same people who comprise the audience – parents start to bring their older children as aging followers of film begin to stay at home. It’s mostly students now: but I think students are this festival’s future.”

Perhaps, despite raising a generation of film enthusiasts, the Istanbul International Film Festival will never even be noticed by the majority of Istanbul’s population. Yet if it wants to expand the variety and quality of films it chooses to present, it surely should be able to do this on its own terms and not because the unstoppable momentum of globalisation is on its doorstep.

As a society we can’t afford to realise, only too late, the futility in searching for the kind of intellectual and emotional nourishment we find in an hour and a half of cinema in absurd substitutes like shopping centres. Here’s hoping that this festival, with such strong roots and unwavering public interest, will see another thirty years’ worth of obstacles overcome.



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## 2 comments

the ceiling spider

12 May '11 at 9:54 pm

Big fan of your writing! I have recently been to Istanbul, unfortunately not during the festival, but I fell in love with the city! Keep it up!

[Report](#)

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Bengee

21 May '11 at 11:32 am

Fantastic article, beautifully written

[Report](#)

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