Film Festivals in Turkey: Promoting National Cinema While Nourshing Film Culture.

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Dönmez-Colin’s chapter on festivals in Turkey covers two festivals in depth and scrapes the surface of the other more specialized oriented festivals. Historically, the culture of the ‘cinematheque’ was virtually non-existent due to an environment of political censorship and accessibility to films. Even though film festivals continue live under these conditions, they do provide a space for creating dialogue between national cinema and foreign press and potential buyers. With considerably more interest perked around film festivals due to the rise in film programs in the academic world in Turkey, it led to a surge in the quantity film festivals across the country.

Turkey has had a history of severe censorship that continues the plague the country till today. In the 70s Turkish cinema was not being seen outside its own borders. And television was state controlled so Turkish people were denied any fresh content on their screens. There was a national urge for new images. The most prestigious festival in Turkey, today called the International Istanbul film festival (IIF) had its debut in 1982 and progressed to be a fully-fledged festival in 1988. It had two goals – bring foreign cinema in to create a culture of film watching and to showcase national Turkish cinema of high quality to the international world. The festival played a vital role in creating a platform to showcase Turkish content to foreigners who attended the festival. In addition, the IIF ‘raised a generation of filmmakers’ that now had access to film magicians from across the world.

The festival quickly came to be sponsored by the Istanbul Kültür Sanat Vakfı (IKVS) that was a non-governmental organization comprised of businessmen and art enthusiasts who had the same goal as the festival - promote national Turkish art and expose Turkey to the international art scene. However, over time the festival has faced obstacles and the largest one being availability of exhibition spaces. The festival would always play at local cinema houses but many have shut down unable to compete with the multiplexes in shopping centres. Even with attempts to save some, the centre of the festival – Emek cinema, which was one of the oldest movie theatres in the world, has been closed to serve as a new shopping complex. When this
article was written, the project had been halted due to demonstrations during the festival however, since then the building has been demolished.

The festival’s initial goal of bridging communication between Turkish filmmakers and the world has now become obsolete considering the increase in film graduates who are already conscious of the film world and participate in it regardless of Turkish film festival’s intervention. At IIF, women presence is small as society still favours a conservative and traditional approach to the world regarding the festival unworthy of their time or not financially accessible. In addition, urban spaces in Turkey are struggling with identity crises that primarily affect the petty bourgeoisie who align themselves more with Europe than anywhere else. Cannes, Venice and Berlinale serve as prerequisites for non-European cinema to play in Istanbul or to gain any legitimacy with its people.

The oldest festival in Turkey, the International Antalya Golden Orange Festival started as a competition in 1956 as part of a larger Antalya Arts festival that paid little attention to cinema. Over the years the festival has been ridden with scandals, film withdrawals, censorship and poor attendance. The festival has seemed to favour the political administration more often than not, leading to cancellations and poorly constructed off shoot projects like the Eurasia Film Festival that attempted to compete with the likes of Cannes by bringing in Hollywood stars on extravagant budgets. It didn’t last long. In 2010 the Golden Orange festival took an interesting turn to further expand its audience by including large screens in prison yards and screenwriting workshops for prisoners. Films, workshops and panels addressing themes of sociopolitical and economic interaction were the main focus. However, politics still played a huge role in controversy around the festival leading to boycotts by prominent figures.

Another festival that was affected negatively by political motives was the ‘Festival on Wheels’. This festival had an amazing start in the city of Kars selling 300,000 tickets to a city with 60,000 people. The newly elected Kars Mayor eventually banned the festival. It then moved to Artvin where finding a decent hall to screen in became the biggest hurdle.

Turkey’s capital city, Ankara, hosts the ‘Flying Broom International Women’s Film Festival’ which is a well-respected event. The Flying Broom organization started in 1996 to foster better communication between women groups and the general public, two years later the
film festival started. Apart from films made by female filmmakers the festival has extended its reach to exhibition and installation works. Its 12th edition saw an exhibition on memory of the 1980 coup that was limited to women only. It included handwritten letters, cartoons and graphic work. The festival has received backlash from conservative and Islamic circles with claims of screening pornography in the name of art.

The other existing Turkish film festivals are also catered to more specialized audiences such as the International Adana Golden Boll Film Festival which began in 1969 but had several cancellations over the years due to political and natural catastrophes. It focused on films from the Mediterranean region with emphasis on Turkish national features and student shorts as well. There are also two documentary film festivals in Istanbul, namely Istanbul Documentary Festival and International 1001 Istanbul documentary festival. The latter was started by the association of documentary filmmakers in Turkey that has membership sourced from a wide range of fields such as University professors and students and documentary makers at Turkish Television and Radio.1

Discussion Questions:

1. The IIF director argues each festival has its own function, but is there a necessity in having a multitude of festivals in a society already fragmented into clashing political identities?
2. In contrast to the title of this article, can national cinema that’s tied into parochial concepts of nationalism lead to a ‘nourishing’ film culture?
3. What is the role of the state, if any, in creating structures for a sustainable cinema industry and hence reflecting a collective identity?
4. Can the diaspora be considered part of national cinema? What is the role of Turkish diaspora cinema in promoting the national?

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1 Other film festivals in Turkey include !f Istanbul AFM International Independent Film Festival, Istanbul international Meeting of History and Cinema, Istanbul Animation Film Festival, the International Architecture and Urban Film Festival, the Bursa Silk Road Film Festival and Film Harvest.