

Blinking by the Bosphorus

Discoveries at the
24th International
Istanbul Film Festival
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by Bilge Ebiri



The Play

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Attending a film festival in Istanbul is a distracting experience. That's not to say that the International Istanbul Film Festival, now in its 24th year, is not well-organised – it is, and with each passing year the festival's organisation gets a little better, a little more efficient and more user-friendly. But Istanbul is a city of distractions. Despite boasting many big screens, in some sense it's not an ideal place to see films; not when some of Europe's great historic monuments are constantly peeking in through your hotel windows, and not when the hustle and bustle of Beyoglu – one of the city's most historic neighbourhoods – throbs and teems with life right outside the exit doors. (Nearly all the theatres used by the festival are situated in the heart of this district, which was traditionally the domain of the Ottoman capital's Christian residents.)

That may sound like ad copy for a tourist brochure, but it happens to be the truth, at least for the foreign journalists I encountered during Istanbul. For a festival, the city is both a blessing and a curse: it's a great draw, to be sure, but the big, ancient metropolis constantly beckons the weary critic. I imagine Venice would have a similar problem if it wasn't hosting major international premieres. (For all I know, maybe it still does.)

Still, for those of us who want to see movies, Istanbul has them in loads. The Festival serves two distinct purposes. For international observers (and there were a surprisingly wide variety of foreign publications represented at the fest)

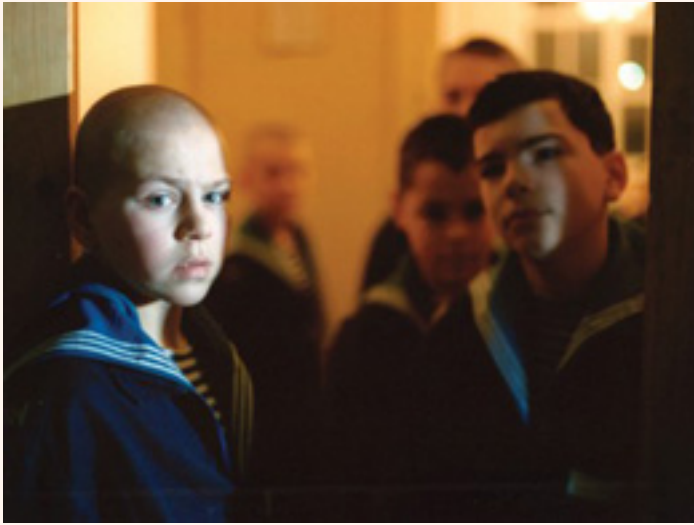
it's an opportunity to view the latest Turkish cinema has to offer: although most of the domestic features that screen during Istanbul have premiered at other Turkish film fests, and in some cases already had their theatrical runs, this is often the first time they are shown to foreign audiences.

To domestic audiences, however, Istanbul is a festival of the order of Toronto, showcasing nearly 200 films for Turkish viewers who may not get many other opportunities to view fare such as Frederic Fonteyne's *Gilles' Wife* (2004) or Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2004) (both titles tied for the Golden Tulip, the Festival's grand prize) or Jia Zhang-ke's *The World* (2004) on the cinema screen. It's also a major source of retrospectives – this year the festival featured spotlights focusing on the works of Roman Polanski, Pietro Germi, John Waters, Neil Jordan and Alain Robbe-Grillet, not to mention a small sidebar of dystopian sci-fi (*Blade Runner*, *Brazil*, *THX-1138*, etc.) and a sampling of South Korean cinema (*Samaritan Girl*, *Oasis*, etc.). Indeed, the Turkish section of the Istanbul film festival is the least promoted part of the event, with most local media coverage focusing on the competition titles, the gala Turkish premieres of films such as *Vera Drake* or *Melinda and Melinda*, or high-profile foreign guests such as Harvey Keitel and Sophia Loren (who were given lifetime achievement awards), or Jane Campion (who headed this year's international jury).

The International Selection: Beyond Familiar Faces

There's not too much left to say about many of the high-profile international films at Istanbul, especially for a critic living in the West who has already read or said plenty about festival warhorses like Wong Kar-wai's *2046* (by far the most popular film at this year's fest, selling out all its additional midnight screenings), Arnaud Desplechin's *Kings and Queen*, or Apichatpong Weeresethakul's *Tropical Malady*. It's better instead to focus on those slightly more obscure discoveries: A wide-ranging festival like Istanbul provides a terrific opportunity to catch up with and unearth some less heavily promoted international films. This is particularly true of films that focus on issues of interest to the Muslim world, which Istanbul's organisers usually make a special effort to represent, for obvious reasons.

Finnish director Pirjo Honkasalo's *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia* (*Melancholian 3 Huonetta*), which centres around the war in Chechnya, has won awards at Sundance and Venice, but really hasn't received the kind of exposure it deserves – perhaps because Chechnya, though still raging with combat, feels like yesterday's news to many in the West. And *Melancholia* isn't exactly populist entertainment. It's an unflinchingly bleak, Olympian look at



The 3 Rooms of Melancholia

particularly for the impressionistic nature of Honkasalo's camerawork and her refusal to divulge much information – *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia*, as its title implies, is more a mood piece than informative non-fiction. But that would be unfair to Honkasalo; unlike Sokurov in his more indulgent and arty moments, she never loses the emotional context of her story. At the same time, this is the farthest thing from the kind of opportunistic, miserabilist film one might expect from such violent conflict. Yet it's still devastating, expertly treading that fine line between obtuse aestheticism and emotional manipulation.

In the Middle East proper, Israeli cinema has had a shaky track record in recent years, but it may be experiencing a resurgence. Thus, Nurit Kedar's *One Shot (Achet Bodedet)* (2004), a brief documentary portrait of Israeli snipers, was met with heavy interest, while it may have been lost elsewhere. The film, a solid example of the onslaught of documentaries emerging from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, combines some alarmingly forthright interviews with the young men recruited to become snipers by the Israeli army, and who seem uncommonly at peace with the shaky morality of their professions, with surprisingly candid footage of the subjects at work.

Eran Riklis' *The Syrian Bride* (2004) isn't exactly obscure – it has already screened at Montreal, Flanders, and Locarno. But this bitter comedy about the wedding day experiences of a Druze woman (Clara Khoury) from the Golan Heights marrying a man in Syria, feels at times like a revelation. It's not formally daring by any stretch of the imagination – Riklis generates disappointingly overbaked performances from most of his cast, and the multi-character narrative is often uneven – but it captures a rare tone, somewhere between broad satire and grim family melodrama, without ever feeling cheap. There's something decidedly Kafkaesque about Riklis' lead character's predicament – even though most of her family is in the Golan Heights, she knows that once she crosses into Syria to be with her new husband, she will never be able to get back in to her homeland. Similarly, her Syrian husband-to-be, a popular TV actor, cannot cross into the Heights to join her for the ceremony. Understandable in a film so concerned with borders, boundaries, and

the Russian children whose lives have become part of the war: from the young orphaned cadets on Russia's Kronstadt island being prepared for imminent combat with the Chechens, to the Muslim orphans on the other side, some of whom have given their lives over to religious fervor and may well become the next generation's radicals.

The sombre, meditative film will probably draw comparisons to the work of Alexander Sokurov,

transgressions, Riklis' use of space and landscape makes it all work – he manages to coax irony from the contrast between the sun-bleached elements around his characters and the pathetic, manmade fences they have to grapple with. This almost Tati-like sensibility serves Riklis well – it undercuts the film's more syrupy moments, resulting in a deceptively odd experience.

Another film with a deft populist touch generally overlooked by more highbrow critics is Jean-Jacques Zilbermann's *Bad Spelling (Les Fautes d'orthographe)* (2004), one of those coming-of-age films that starts off as a fairly stale drama of adolescent embarrassment, but somehow winds up as a portrait of a far more disturbing Oedipal rage, steadily gaining a strange, loopy energy as it tumbles along. Set at a French boarding school in the years before 1968 (although the period references are quite few), it's the story of a young teen (Damien Massu) discovering his sexuality, radical politics, and the humiliations of adolescence (his penis has remained unnaturally small), while also struggling with the fact that his school is run by his parents (Carole Bouquet and Olivier Gourmet). This logline isn't particularly original, but Zilbermann turns the loose end into a virtual art form here: our hero is clearly homosexual, but his sexual issues gain no resolution; an early crush disappears from the picture quite quickly, never to be heard from again; and his flirtation with radical politics leads to the film's deliriously open-ended finale, as the protagonist leads a sudden, school-wide revolt against his parents. (In case you're wondering, we also never get to learn if his manhood ever grew.)

In Hollywood, this would be considered shoddy screenwriting – a plot outline of *Bad Spelling* reads more like a setup than an actual story – but the film's refusal to achieve resolution actually feels right. Its themes of radicalism, of confused sexuality, of parental authority, are the great unresolved questions of our age. In this light, the film's attempts to keep its time period and setting somewhat vague also feel organic.

The Turkish Front: All Too Quiet

With the international exposure given to Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Distant (Uzak)* (2003), the films of Zeki Demirkubuz, and the work of ethnically Turkish filmmakers like Fatih Akın (*Head-On*) (2004) in Germany and Ferzan Özpetek (*Facing Windows*) (2003) in Italy, Turkish cinema has been attracting significant attention in recent years. It helps that Turkish filmmakers have been making better films as well.



Istanbul Tales

Still, I hesitate to call it a fully-fledged resurgence, because these achievements have been largely individual rather than systemic – there is no real “New Turkish Cinema” movement to speak of. Ceylan and Demirkubuz are resolutely independent filmmakers who rightfully don’t see themselves as part of an industry. More importantly, in their absence, there don’t seem to be many directors or films able to take up the slack. Certainly not the eventual winner of the prize for Best Turkish Film, *Istanbul Tales (Anlat Istanbul)* (Ümit Ünal, Kudret Sabanci, Selim Demirdelen, Yücel Yolcu and Ömür Atay, 2005) a harmless though bombastic adaptation of famous fairy tales in a modern Istanbul setting by numerous high-profile directors. More noteworthy was Ugur Yücel’s Best Director winner *Toss-Up (Yazı-Tura)* (2004), a hard-edged DV melodrama about two soldiers returning from the army to a life of disillusionment, and psychological scarring. Yücel’s film proves to be an effectively acted, ambitious tearjerker, and its video quality gives it a stark immediacy usually lacking in films of such scope. But although both it and *Istanbul Tales* were well regarded by local critics, one still got the vague feeling that the industry was whittling on wood, waiting for the Next Big Thing.

Some may beg to differ, of course. Semih Kaplanoglu’s *Angel’s Fall (Melegin Dususu)* (2004) screened at Berlin and has won awards at various Turkish festivals, including the FIPRESCI prize at Istanbul. And Kaplanoglu’s film may well be the Turkish title to look out for on the international festival circuit; it certainly seems the closest heir to the terse urban chill of *Distant*. But Kaplanoglu displays none of Ceylan’s sense of deadpan humour, nor his effective use of narrative shorthand. *Angel’s Fall*, as its title suggests, is full of heavy-handed symbolism – most of it religious – and its story lumbers along with little of the offhand grace of Ceylan’s work. One keeps suspecting that Kaplanoglu wants to tell a more involved story, but is making some necessary concessions to the demands of the festival circuit with his stifflingly static imagery and minimalist narrative. Still, the film is beautifully shot, and its chiaroscuro images won a well-deserved special citation at Istanbul. Kaplanoglu may yet prove to be one of Turkish cinema’s future stars, but he hasn’t quite found his style.

Another potential future star is Ulas Inaç, whose debut feature, the ultra-low-budget DV feature *Derivative (Türev)* (2005) managed to be, despite its many flaws, one of the most energetic films at this year’s festival. Based on a short story featured in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, it is about a young woman who, to test her boyfriend’s fidelity, encourages her attractive best friend to seduce him. Inaç takes this fairly predictable skeleton of a plot and manages to jolt it to life with relentless improvisation and some remarkably vivid *verité* camerawork. For years, Turkish cinema has been averse to improvisation and naturalism, usually due to the vagaries of post-synchronised dialogue (Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s last two films have been a welcome exception to this trend.) The electrifying sight of Turkish youth acting and speaking naturally renders Inaç’s film quite unique. (Even the similarly shot *Toss-Up* relies on more traditionally-minded performances.) This can at times be a curse, too: The film has a tendency to drift, as if it doesn’t exactly know where it’s going, and technical problems are aplenty. (Is abysmal location sound an appropriate trade-off to avoid abysmal

post-synchronisation?) Still, the notion of Inaç exploring naturalism further with a proper budget is serious cause for excitement, even if *Derivative* feels at times like a sketch for something more accomplished.



Yolda

Among the more seasoned set, Erden Kıral's *Yolda* (2005) proved to be one of the more high-profile films at the festival. (It opened in Turkish theatres simultaneously, thus giving it a brief stranglehold on local press coverage.) But for foreign audiences, the film might need some kind of primer. It is inspired by a true event in the life of the legendary Turkish filmmaker Yılmaz Güney, a major action star of the 1960s who later turned towards

directing highly controversial, politically charged films about the underclass that garnered him a major international following: 1978's *The Herd* (*Sürü*) won Locarno's Golden Leopard, 1979's *The Enemy* (*Düşman*) was cited at Berlin, and 1982's *Yol* took the Palme d'Or at Cannes. Güney's work, intensely critical of the status quo and often militant in its politics, predictably made him persona non grata for authorities. His entire career had regularly featured run-ins with the law, but he spent most of the 1970s in prison – first for harboring some fugitives, then for killing a judge. This only added to his box-office allure; he went from being a successful leading man to being a folk hero, not unlike some of the outlaw characters he played early on in his acting career.

Thanks to these frequent incarcerations, Güney's most accomplished films (including the abovementioned three) were directed by proxy, with the jailed producer/writer composing scripts, devising detailed shot lists, and overseeing production and post-production from behind bars. Erden Kıral, once one of Güney's protégés, was originally hired to direct *Yol*, only to be fired from the project after Güney saw his footage; Serif Gören, another protégé, completed the project.

Kıral has since become one of Turkey's more noted directors, but it's clear that the snub still smarts. *Yolda* takes place during a brief period in the early 1980s when Güney (played here by Halil Ergün, one of the stars of the earlier *Yol*) was transferred by car from one prison to another, but its central relationship is between the veteran director and his young, recently fired protégé (played by Serdar Orçin in the film), who trails the prisoner in another car (also containing Güney's long-suffering wife), hoping to find out why he was dismissed from the film.

What makes *Yolda* so intriguing is the manner in which Kıral avoids the political nature of Güney's iconography, instead opting for a silent, subdued journey

through the Turkish landscape, where hills and foggy roads and remote villages serve to underline the characters' own alienation. Watching the film, one even senses why Güney, whose characters' emotions were often writ large, might have dismissed Kiral from *Yol*; the younger director may well have been, ultimately, too inward and naturalistic a filmmaker for Güney's more populist tastes.

Another Güney protégé, Ali Özgentürk, who co-wrote (uncredited) the script for Güney's *The Herd* before going on to direct his own highly acclaimed films, including *Hazal* (1979) and *The Horse (At)* (1982), was present at Istanbul with a film this year. *The Time of the Heart (Kalbin Zamani)* (2004), like *Balalayka* (2000) before it, proceeds in a more classical – some might even say conventional – manner than the director's earlier work, which gained him a small following in the West. (*The Horse* in particular went far; to this day, it's one of a small handful of Turkish films to get a respectable release in the United States.) The new film is a mystery-romance about a woman (Hülya Avsar) who is loved by three different men over a period of three decades. The entire story is set in the historic Pera Palas Hotel in Istanbul, whose guests over the years included Mata Hari, Pierre Loti, Alfred Hitchcock, and Agatha Christie; the latter two are featured in a whimsical animated story Özgentürk uses as a framing device for his film.

Despite an abundance of thriller elements, *The Time of the Heart* is a surprisingly breezy film; even its most menacing scenes are bathed in light, and Özgentürk seems as interested in the hotel's ornate architecture as he is in his characters. There's also an intentional theatricality to his actors' actions and words; as the men swirl around their female object of desire, they seem caught in an endless web of ritual, tradition and performance. The whole movie, in this sense, is a series of dances. And quite appropriately, it ends with an entire restaurant full of people swaying in their seats, as if caught up in the rhythms and rituals the director has circled around them.



The Time of the Heart

Despite a strong showing by some veterans, however, probably the best film among the Turkish works at this year's festival – and, arguably, the best film at the entire fest – was Pelin Esmer's *The Play (Oyun)*, a documentary portrait of a group of women at a small, remote Anatolian village, who form a theatre group and stage their own play, based on their experiences at the hands of lazy, drunken husbands and prudish village authorities. The most striking thing about the film is how much *fun* these women seem to be having – their play is mostly a comedy, even though many of the objects of their scorn are in their only

audience.

Esmer's film had only one screening at the festival, and it screened outside of competition, so it won no awards. And yet the film's electrifying, filled-to-the-rafters screening may have been reward enough; Esmer had the foresight to bring her amazing subjects with her, and their post-screening Q&A eventually devolved into relentless applause and exclamatory praise yelled out from the audience. If it had been Sundance, the director would probably have been canonised by now. Still, she may yet make it onto the international circuit: *The Play's* energetic combination of crowd-pleasing humour and sophisticated social critique should carry well across borders.

The Play was but one of a number of Turkish documentaries at the festival this year, including Berke Bas' *In Transit* (2004), about the lives of Third World refugees living temporarily in Istanbul; Melis Birder's *The Tenth Planet: A Single Life in Baghdad* (2004), a portrait of a vivacious Iraqi woman the director was fortunate enough to meet during a brief stay in Baghdad; and Mehmet Güteryüz's *The Screenwriter of the Golden Age (Altın Çağın Senaristi)* (2004), a look at Bülent Oran, who, from the 1950s to the '70s, was one of Turkish cinema's most prolific, successful screenwriters. Though Esmer's film proved to be a true breakout success, the consistent quality of these works – and the surprisingly high degree of attention paid to them by local audiences – leads one to hope that the festival will soon create a specific category for Turkish documentaries, to increase their exposure and to make a commitment to this vital genre. With the narrative selection in something of a slump, such a commitment might even give a boost to interest in Turkish cinema in general.

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