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The 36th Istanbul Film Festival: Golden Tulip Scents in Istanbul



Young Karl Marx (Le Jeune Karl Marx)

By N. Buket Cengiz.

No matter how much face Turkey loses on the international stage particularly with its friction with European countries, Istanbul Film Festival is a phenomenon in Turkey that has always been and will always be a symbol of international communication and collaboration. The 36th edition held on 5-15 April was no exception. The festival once again enjoyed competitions where films from Cambodia to Sweden, from Israel to Georgia competed; while the Meetings on the Bridge brought together young talents from various neighbouring countries; and guests from various countries participated in juries and activities in a joyful atmosphere. Many festival goers remarked that this year's festival had the best selection in the last couple of years.

Hard Task for the Jury



Yellow Heat (Sarı Sıcak)

In all the competitions the nominees were strong films. The International Golden Tulip Competition Award went to *The Ornithologist (O Ornitólogo)* by João Pedro Rodrigues. Distilling references to the life of the Portuguese priest Saint Anthony of Padua through a dream-like atmosphere and a beautiful photography, the film received admiration of the jury as well as the audience. While the Golden Tulip for the Best Film in the National Competition went to *Yellow Heat (Sarı Sıcak)* by Fikret Reyhan, FACE Film Award of the Council of Europe was given to *Félicité* by the Senegalese-French director Alain Gomis. The International Golden Tulip Competition Special Jury Prize was received by a film that became an instant festival hit: *Summer 1993 (Estiu 1993)*, a work with autobiographical references by the young Catalan director Carla Simón. The film, about a child who, having lost both of her parents by the age of six, starts living with her uncle, his wife and their little girl, creates an unforgettable universe in the countryside with stunning photography, perfect music, and some unforgettable acting by two children.

While *Summer 1993* was about the hard times of childhood, this year's festival, with an interesting coincidence, brought together some superb coming of age films. *Home* by Fien Troch, which competed for the Golden Tulip, was one of them. The film was particularly interesting in its successful emphasis, through its form as well as its content, on the significance of social media in the lives of youngsters. *Heartstone*

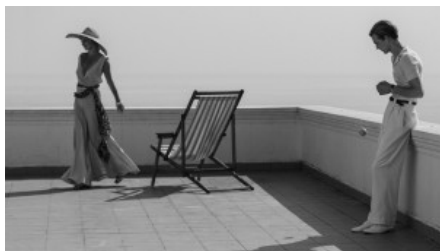
(Hjartasteinn), by Guðmundur Arnar, a co-production between Iceland and Denmark, was another story about difficulties of that weird period of one's life – the transition from childhood to being a young adult. This is coupled together with one's love to someone from the same sex in this film. The young soul step by step turns into a victim of the taboo on homoerotic love expressed in a particularly harsh manner in youngsters' world. The film's strength, however, is particularly in its unique combination of issues of neglect and manipulation of children by their parents, mentally and physically, together with issues of homophobia. When this neat narrative comes together with beautiful photography and music, the film's sweeping of so many awards at so many festivals feels just right.

Weirdos by Bruce McDonald was another film at the festival touching similar issues: problems between teenagers and their parents, and a young boy's brave move to declare his sexual orientation. Contrary to the former, this film is full of optimism for a world stripped away from heteronormative violence, with its happy ending as the reconciled family members, all respectful to each others' decisions, dance away to the final one of the wonderful tunes of the film. This period film with its black and white photography and soundtrack comprising the symbol songs of the seventies was a secret highlight of the festival.

Dreams of a Better World

A film awaited with passion by the festival audience this year was *Young Karl Marx (Le Jeune Karl Marx)* by Raoul Peck. Instead of being too ambitious, the film sets its focus clearly, Karl Marx's life at an early stage of his life: his meeting with Engels, their encounter with Proudhon, and the writing of the *Poverty of Philosophy*. The film deserves praise for the naturalness with which it presents its characters, and particularly with its constant emphasis on the roles of the wives of the two men in their plea, the significance of the two women both in the intellectual output and in the political struggle of Marx and Engels. On the other hand, *Afterimage (Powidoki)* by the master Andrzej Wajda, is about an experience where unwarrantable crimes were committed 'in the name of Marx and Engels's theories' during the Stalinist oppression. This powerful film, where in each scene the mastery and experience of Wajda is felt, is an unforgettable story of an artist, Władysław Strzemiński. Because of his devotion to modern avant-garde art, the artist suffered under the Communist Party's pressure sentencing him to civil death. Those who oppress him forget that Strzemiński believed in the revolution at the beginning, the very revolution imagined by Marx and Engels, until it started deteriorating in the hands of the party officials. Thus, the two films at the festival make a great pair, reminding the audience that understanding and implementing socialist ideals is never easy, therefore should never be left to those who are not sincere.

Trying to express the inexpressible



Paradise (Rai)

With these thoughts in mind, of course one cannot help but think fascism's contribution to the transformation of the good-willed Soviet socialism into something very different. Films set in WWII at this year's festival, therefore, made a resonance with the above mentioned two. The most outstanding of such films at the festival was *Paradise (Rai)* by Andrei Konchalovsky, like Wajda a master from East Europe. This final film by the Russian director has been praised by many and has been disliked by many in the festivals it has been screened. However, the film is obviously unique, even though the experimental edge might feel sort of artificial for some. Yet, it is a striking work, not least because it manages to deal with the horrors of the holocaust through a fresh narrative approach.

Stefan Zweig, Farewell to Europe (Vor Der Morgenröte), the second feature of Maria Schrader (2016), on the other hand, deals with the experience of WWII through the lives of two individuals who end their lives as a reaction to the horrors of Nazism: Jewish Austrian author Zweig and his wife. The film follows the couple as they live in Buenos Aires, New York and Brazil; and ends with their suicide. While it lacks a depiction of the psychological process that leads to that decision, it still manages to create strong feelings in the audience especially through its elaborate depiction of the suicide in its final, in a completely indirect way. *Django* by Etienne Comar, was another biopic at this year's festival set during WWII. In this film the exile is not self-imposed like Zweig's but rather compulsory. The one who flees is the legendary musician Django, the first name that comes to mind when swing jazz is mentioned. Watching *Austerlitz* after these three films at the festival makes the impact of the former much stronger. A documentary by Sergei Loznitsa on how a former Nazi concentration camp turns into a touristic sight, this is a sincere and intelligent look at an extraordinary phenomenon seeming awkwardly normal to so many people.

Women Stories at the Festival

In Between (Bar Bahar) by Maysaloun Hamoud, the winner of the FIPRESCI Award in the International Golden Tulip Competition, received attention with the way it manages, in its narrative, not only various sorts of symbolic violence Palestinian women face in Israel; but also the hypocrisy of men who use Islam as a tool to oppress them. The film, about the lives of three women living in Tel Aviv also discusses what happens if women do not follow the heterosexual normativity.

Lesbian love was at the centre of one of the best documentaries at this year's festival: *Chavela* by Catherine Gund and Daresha Kyi, a documentary about one of the most unique musicians of Latin America. The film, incorporating some ravishing music of the singer through clips from various concerts, tells the story of the diva in a capturing manner, incorporating the gender and sexual orientation dimension smoothly.

The Lives Of Thérèse (Les Vies De Thérèse) by Sébastien Lifshitz, another documentary at the festival focusing on a woman, also touches the issue of sexual orientation, as regards the question of compatibility of radical feminism and heterosexual relationship. The film, about the life of Thérèse Clerc, an iconic figure of feminist activism in France, is an intimate voyage into the life of a brave woman who deserted the middle class life of a family woman with four children for an existence dedicated to fight against patriarchy. As visible, LGBTI theme was very much at the front at this year's festival, appearing in the recipient of the Golden Tulip, winner of the FIPRESCI, and in various films that received great attention by

the audience. It should be noted that, most of these films were not even screened within the *Where Are You My Love* section of the festival, a selection focusing on the LGBTI theme.

Civil Rights and Egalitarian Movement



I Am Not Your Negro

I Am Not Your Negro, an Oscar-nominated documentary by Raoul Peck, was the best documentary of this year's festival, by far, screened to the enthusiasm of the audience. Based on James Baldwin's unfinished script, *Remember this House*, the film makes use of great archival material and stunning narration by Samuel L. Jackson. The result is a mesmerizing documentary film putting forward a brief history of the civil rights movement in the USA against the background of three Afro-American activists' assassinations: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. *An Insignificant Man* by Khushboo Ranka and Vinay Shukla, and *Politics, Instructions Manuel (Política, Manuel De Instrucciones.)* by Fernando León De Aranoa made a great double-bill together, screened on the same day, as they both focus on egalitarian movements that grow out of a tiny spark: the former in India and the latter in Spain. That said, it should be noted that at this year's festival Spain came to the fore as an outstanding country. In addition to this documentary, and *Summer '93* by a Catalan director, *The Distinguished Citizen (El Ciudadano Ilustre)*, a Spain-Argentine co-production by Gaston Duprat and Mariano Cohn also attracted attention at the festival. A perfect dark comedy on the return of a Nobel laureate to his tiny home-town in Argentine achieves to make deep philosophical arguments on the centre and periphery opposition through an intelligent humour that runs from the first to the final second of the film.

Meetings on the Bridge

In the meanwhile, Istanbul Film Festival's Meetings on the Bridge (MoB) activity, twelfth edition of which has been organised this year, is receiving more and more attention. Within the scope of this activity, projects from Turkey and neighbouring countries are presented by filmmakers for the first time in the international context. With these presentations filmmakers find an opportunity to make the necessary networks for international collaborations. Works in the activity includes new projects as well as films in the post-production stage; and various co-productions get developed as the outcome of the activity.

The primary sections of the activity are *Film Development Workshop* and *Work in Progress Awards*. *Film Development Workshop* is a training program based on master-classes, group works and one-to-one meetings with experts on script writing, production, marketing, social media and crowd funding. A pitching expert helps each team before the workshops. After the workshops there are one to one meetings where young filmmakers discuss their projects with directors and producers. Finally, some of the projects are selected as the recipients of the Development Awards by the jury. *Work in Progress Awards* aims at offering financing support for films from Turkey, either feature films or documentaries. Initiated in 2012, this program presents a selection of films in post-production to international distributors, festivals, fund representatives and broadcasters. This year, four films from Turkey were selected for Work in Progress. A new award for post-production is introduced for the first time for the projects from the neighbouring countries this year. In addition to all these activities Meetings on the Bridge hosted eleven cinema talks, three screenings and three case studies. With great films and this important activity, the festival was a success once again this year, and managed to cheer the audience up just before the referendum.

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For more information on Meetings on the Bridge visit [here](#). For more information on the festival, visit [here](#).