The Politicisation and 'Occupy'sation of the Istanbul Film Festival Audience

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Summary:

This paper aims to reveal the impact of film festivals as powerful political weapons today, challenging the conservative and neo-liberal ideologies. The reason behind this challenge is the availability of films from around the world, the multiplicity of events and protests attached to the film festivals and their ability to create collectivity and solidarity. My film festival ethnography during the Istanbul Film Festival shows that the rise of the Islamist/neo-liberal ideology and the policies of the current government in Turkey, especially related to the urban structure and movie theatres, initiated wide-ranging political activism from the public, including the Istanbul Film Festival audience. From 2010 onwards, the Istanbul Film Festival audience started to take political action and created social protests against the demolition of the *Emek* movie theatre, which was one of the last remaining large format movie theatres in Istanbul. This audience also participated in the much larger uprising of the Occupy *Gezi* Park. The political activism of the Istanbul Film Festival audience transformed their engagement with the film festival. In this research, film festivals are discussed as sites of resistance but also parts of the capitalist market economy.

Keywords: film festivals, audience ethnography, social movements, the Occupy *Gezi* Uprising, activist cosmopolitanism

Introduction

The movie-going practices of the current film festival audience in Istanbul are in transition, due to the impacts of globalisation and the specific policies of the current government *AKP* (Justice and Development Party), such as their synthesis of Islamic and neo-liberal ideologies. The rise of the Islamist/neo-liberal ideology initiated wide-ranging political activism from the Istanbul Film Festival audience. Beginning from 2010, the Istanbul Film

Festival audience has started to take political action. They have created political and social protests against the demolition of the *Emek* movie theatre, which was one of the small movements to launch the Occupy *Gezi* Park Uprising. I argue that these changes, and the resulting political activism against them, transformed the Istanbul Film Festival audience into critical and activist cosmopolitan individuals. They also fuelled the creation of a collective identity and a network of solidarity and resistance. This resistance was not only about the top-down policies of the government but also about the top-down commercial strategies of the Istanbul Film Festival.

In order to understand this transitional film festival scene, I conducted my film festival ethnography during the 31st and 32nd Istanbul Film Festival in April 2013 and 2014, as well as in the summer of 2013. In addition to 62 in-depth interviews and the participant observation I conducted during these two festivals, this research project includes participant observation during the Occupy *Gezi* Park uprising in the summer of 2013. Due to the fact that my informants participated in the uprising, I observed them and tried to understand their changing practices and especially their radical politicisation. Most of them were already political before the uprising, but they started to engage with politics more radically during and after the uprising. In accordance with the increasing political activism of my informants, their use of the movie theatres, their choices and interpretations of the films, and their evaluation of the film festival also changed. As a vivid example of this, my informants not only reacted to the top-down urban regeneration programmes and their impact on the festival attendance, but they also became critical of the gentrification of the film festival itself.

I argue that my research offers an original contribution to the field of film festival studies and contemporary audience research, in conjunction with research on social movements. It aims to position the film festival audience's politicisation and activism in the context of the current Turkish social fabric and political agenda in transition, which are also part of and representative of overall global transformations. In this paper, however, I do not seek to fully represent the diverse experiences and perspectives of those who participated in the two film festivals in 2013 and 2014, the protests against the demolition of *Emek* movie theatre and the protestors who go under the banner of 'Occupy *Gezi*'. Rather, the intention here is to represent the experience of a specific audience, at a specific time period, which is immediately before, during, and right after the Occupy *Gezi* uprising.

A Brief Background on Cinema and Moviegoing in Turkey

The first film screening in Turkey took place in 1896 on *İstiklal* Street, *Beyoğlu* (known as *Pera* at the time), which is the centre of Istanbul Film Festival, with the participation of mainly a Christian population. Nevertheless, 'the first screening in a region where predominantly Muslim populace live, took place a year later, which was different from the former one, both in terms of the setting, the neighbourhood and the participants' (Arslan, 2011, p. 25-26). After the early years of cinema in Turkey, the Turkish film industry, namely

Yeşilçam[1]*,* was rapidly growing in the 1950s. By the 1960s it was one of the largest national industries with 200 movies per year.

After the collapse of the *Yeşilçam* film industry in the late 1980s, Hollywood marketers invested in Turkey in the early 1990s. Starting from this period, a more large-scale form of marketisation and internationalisation blossomed: 'US distribution companies such as Warner Bros. and United International Pictures […] opened branches in Turkey in the 1990s, in order to take over the distribution of American films, while the private ownership of television was commencing at the same time' (Suner, 2010, p. 9). In the 1990s, while Hollywood was slowly becoming the dominant player in the market, 'previous cinema audiences were gradually turning to television. When *Yeşilçam* was over, *Yeşilçam* Street in *Beyoğlu*, where the demolished *Emek* movie theatre was also based, lost its dynamism' (Arslan, 2011, p. 233-235).

The emergence of Turkish film festivals and competitions dates back to *Yeşilçam*'s heyday. As it was a vibrant film culture, *Yeşilçam*'s rise was coupled with various festivals. Due to the rise in the number of films and ticket sales, a *cinephile* culture in the country also developed around the same time. In the 1960s, many competitions were organised in Istanbul and Izmir (Arslan, 2014, p. 135-136). Contrary to popular belief, the oldest film festivals in Turkey were not organised in Istanbul, but were organised in two Mediterranean cities, namely Antalya and Adana in 1963 and 1973 respectively.

Beginning in the 2000s, the film festival scene has since proliferated in Istanbul, coinciding with an increase in ticket sales and popularity of Turkish films in the country. For instance, in 2014, three domestic films were the top choices of the film audiences in Turkey, which was a unique phenomenon in the world.[2] Additionally, the number of art house films produced in Turkey has proliferated and they have been celebrated both nationally and internationally in the 2000s. Similar to the emergence of film festivals in Turkey during *Yeşilçam*'s heyday, the increasing interest in national cinema today is a result of the proliferation of film culture, especially film festivals, such as the launch of the Istanbul Independent Film Festival in 2001, the launch of the Documentarist in 2007, and many others.

However, the internationally best-known film festival in Turkey remains the Istanbul International Film Festival, which was established in 1982 by the Istanbul Culture and Arts Foundation (*IKSV*) (Akser, 2014, p. 141-142). In order to delve deeper into its history, I should highlight that some of the directors of the previous *Cinemateque* Association[3], Vecdi Sayar, Onat Kutlar and Şakir Eczacıbaşı, introduced a festival beginning in 1982. It was initially called *Istanbul Film Günleri* (Istanbul Film Week), which then took the name of the International Istanbul Film Festival in 1989 within the Istanbul Culture and Arts Foundation. Today, the Istanbul Film Festival is a two-week film event that takes place in early April. It attracts around 140,000 attendances each year, indicating that it is still the biggest film event in Turkey.[4]

The reason why I chose the Istanbul Film Festival as my case study is not only because it is the biggest film festival in Turkey and the surrounding regions, but because it

has also become a staple of film culture in Turkey (Arslan, 2014, p. 138). In the 2010s, the Istanbul Film Festival transformed due to the demolition of its earlier movie theatres. Up until 2010, the film festival made use of the independent large format movie theatres in *Beyoğlu*, most of which are demolished today, like *Emek*, *Yeni Rüya*[5] and *Yeni Melek* movie theatres. The film festival still uses the last two remaining large-format movie theatres in *Beyoğlu* today, namely the *Atlas* and *Beyoğlu* movie theatres. The festival also utilises two other small movie theatres within two art museums in the *Beyoğlu* area, namely *Pera* movie theatre in the *Pera* Museum and the Istanbul Modern Museum's movie theatre. The other movie theatres that are in use are in other districts of Istanbul: *Feriye* movie theatre in *Ortaköy* and *Rexx* movie theatre in *Kadıköy*. Today the festival also makes use of a multiplex, called *Nişantaşı City's* in Nişantaşı, which is a luxurious district. The use of this movie theatre drew a negative response from the film festival audience because they were used to the independent and large format movie theatres.

Methodology of the Research: An Activist, Self-Reflexive and Multi-sited Audience Ethnography

I conducted a film festival ethnography, including in-depth interviews and participant observation during the Istanbul Film Festival. This took place at the 32nd and 33rd Istanbul International Film Festival in 2013 and 2014. The initial aim was to limit my ethnographic work to the festival's own time span. However, as my informants thought the protests against the demolition of *Emek* movie theatre was one of the early steps to trigger the Occupy *Gezi* uprising, I decided to continue my ethnography during the summer of 2013.

My research strategy thus involves an 'activist ethnography', which entails both politically engaged research (Scheper-Hughes, 1995, p. 409-10) and a rejection of the divide between the observer and practitioner (Juris, 2008, p. 64). In other words, my political engagement as an activist against the urban regeneration programmes in Istanbul and the *AKP*'s neo-liberal and Islamist ideology, shaped the ways in which I conducted the fieldwork and wrote about it. The overlapping of social movements with film festival attendance radically transformed the methodology being used, as well as my informants and the film festival scene. Due to the fact that protests are not predictable, my ethnography had to transform into a more flexible one.

In order to capture the everyday life of my informants, I conducted interviews before and after screenings around *Beyoğlu* and *Kadıköy*, which are the two centres of Istanbul as well as the film festival. My fieldwork in the Istanbul Film Festival consisted of participant observation in public and semi-public spaces of the streets, such as cafes, parks, metros, shopping malls and movie theatres. I conducted interviews of varying lengths with members of the film festival audience, including workers of the film festival, two curators of the film festival, a translator and a member of the *Fipresci* jury.[6] I also interviewed a member of the non-hierarchical organisation[7], which mobilised the protests against the demolition of the *Emek* movie theatre, during the festivals from 2010 until 2014.

In this research, I used audience ethnography because ethnographic research can access what people really do, rather than what they say or even think they do (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003, p. 222). As my aim was to capture my informants' everyday engagement with the films and activities during the film festival, audience ethnography seemed the most appropriate choice. Furthermore, my position in the field was also an important feature of my overall research, as I have been a part of this audience from 2002 onwards. My ethnography, in this regard, also bears an auto-ethnographic aspect to it. The ethnographer should study culture not from a bottom-up perspective, which stems from my belief that the ethnographies are premised upon a duality between the self and the other, but 'from an insider's perspective, an aim that demands committed, long-term immersion into a setting in order to understand how meaning is created' (Schroder et al, 2003, p. 65).

I thus conducted the film festival ethnography with an acknowledgement that the researcher's subjectivity is a central component to the conceptualisation and production of the audience ethnography. In this regard, ethnographic research is an obviously reflexive endeavour, which simply means a turning back on oneself; a process of self-reference that refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the process and personnel doing the research (Davies, 2008, p. 4). Another way to put it would be to say that 'we become interested primarily in how we 'do' knowledge/knowing in writing, the details of which are intimately connected to our psyches and subjectivities in the worlds we 'doers' inhabit. Reflexivity thus becomes a requirement for how to see and write ethnography' (Schneider, 2002, p. 461-2).

The fact that I worked for the film festival as an artist guide for years and have also worked for a film magazine in Turkey for more than seven years (for three years I have had a press card), facilitated my free participation in films and other events as part of the film festival. Additionally, the fact that I have been in the UK for two and a half years also gave me a chance to gain distance from my own culture. A reflexive research practice thus helped me as a researcher to provide 'an understanding of the social conditions of social scientific knowledge production and its relation to knowledge reception and context and thus its capacity for action' (May, 2004, p. 183). In this sense, my political involvement in the movements in question triggered my immersion in the setting, whereas my field notes and living in the UK allowed me to create the necessary distance in relation to the field.

More importantly, the abovementioned immersion gave me a chance to have a network within the festival and press circuits. An auto-ethnographical and self-reflexive perspective also helped me gain access to "knowledge that might be otherwise inaccessible and undocumentable, including feelings and emotions" (Noy, 2009, p. 102). In order to reach the urban film audiences in Istanbul, I was able to use the snowballing methodology. A sampling procedure may be defined as 'snowball sampling' when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants. By using snowballing methodology, I reached adults with an interest in moviegoing, through personal recommendation of my colleagues and various acquaintances from related film and media sectors. As my informants used the film festival as a political space, I did not face any

difficulties in accessing them. In other words, my informants regarded spending time with me as part of their solidarity with other activists and their resistance against the dominant ideology.

The participants of my film festival ethnography were adults who had a great interest in cinema, occasionally went to movie theatres and most importantly attended film festivals. During the festival period in 2013, I conducted twenty interviews. I attended film screenings with some of my informants, and observed them during the course of screenings and other events. Additionally, I interviewed another fourteen people during the Occupy *Gezi* Park uprising in various parks. In 2014, I interviewed 40 people in total, twelve of which were my previous informants. The remaining informants from 2013, however, had different reasons for not attending the film festival in 2014, ranging from moving abroad to financial reasons. In April 2014, I interviewed 28 new informants, in order to gain a perspective of the changing demographic/audience, as the film festival scene in Istanbul is quite dynamic.

In recent decades, anthropological praxis has moved from closed fields to open ones, in attempts to understand contemporary social, political, and economic life, researchers now have to speak in terms of the distributed, de-territorialised, multi-sited, and not-so-easily-bounded field (Simpson, 2011, p. 381). Because of the fact that my informants from the festival period were attending the Occupy *Gezi* Park uprising and my informants believed that the small protests such as the one against the demolishing of the *Emek* movie theatre were the source of a larger uprising, my film festival ethnography inevitably extended to *Gezi* Park. I attended the screenings and workshops in the *Gezi* Park, when we occupied the park and were using it as an alternative political space. During the uprising, I had a chance to participate in the daily lives of my informants, which gave me an opportunity to observe their identities for longer than two weeks.

I thus consider my ethnography to be a multi-sited one because of the opportunity of comparison of three different periods, before, during, and after the Occupy *Gezi* uprising. Including perspectives from inside the Istanbul Culture and Arts Foundation and the organisation, which mobilised the demonstrations against the demolition of the *Emek* movie theatre and increased the diversity of the voices in my research. However, the fact that my film festival ethnography employed self-reflexive methods and was multi-dimensional – involving three different periods and a diversity of voices – does not imply that my approach was a postmodern one in which the circuits of power are seen as capillary, diffuse and difficult to trace (Scheper-Hughes, 1996, p. 417). Following Scheper-Hughes, I believe territories, states and power circuits in societies are still there, even if globalisation modifies their power and influence.

Other than the issues related to the immersion and participation in the fieldwork, the collection of data and the production of knowledge from the data are a vital component of ethnographic research.[8] After I transcribed all the interviews, together with my field notes from Q&As, panels and protests, I started to think about the ways of producing knowledge. In order to analyse the data I gathered, I used my fieldwork journal and highlighted the emerging patterns and concepts on it starting in May 2014. In ethnographic

research the production of knowledge is a self-reflexive process, which, in my case, also changed because of the radical transformations of the social fabric and political agenda of Turkey. As an example of this, even though I had informed consent from my informants that I could use their full names and information in the research, I decided to use pseudonyms for them because of the ongoing political repression in Turkey.

Transformation and Activism in Film Festival Research

Throughout the last few decades, film festivals have become remarkable networks, connecting films, events, audiences, and film and media industries. Previous literature tended to demonstrate film festivals' origins as a European phenomenon (Evans, 2007; De Valck, 2009; Turan, 2003). Wong notes that the attempts at theorising film festivals up until 2011 still involve 'a European Gaze' into film festivals (Wong, 2011, p. 4). Film festivals, however, have thrived in a variety of non-Western contexts, such as Turkey, since the mid-1950s and especially during the 1960s and 1970s (Iordanova & Van de Peer, 2014, p. XXIV), which was the heyday of the *Yeşilçam* film industry.

Wong (2011) demonstrates Venice Film Festival's embodiment of cultural claims of Fascist Italy, while the strategies of Italy's French opponent marked Cannes' history: 'During the cold war, festivals in Berlin and Karlovy Vary glared each other from opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. Today, while such geopolitical divisions are less apparent in Europe, festivals in Ouagadougou, Mar del Plata, Pusan and Hong Kong challenge Western hegemony in filmmaking, evaluation and distribution' (Wong, 2011, p. 2). In this regard, film festivals have been tied to the nations and cities that host them and the politics of their own eras. Today, Middle Eastern film festivals challenge Western hegemony, similar to their counterparts in Asia and Latin America. Other than questioning the Western hegemony of the film festival scene and research, the politicisation and activism of the Istanbul Film Festival audience challenges the general elitist connotations of festival attendance and consolidates how film festivals remain closely linked to their hosting nation states and cities, as well as global transformations.

Film festivals function as a transformative ground for their participants, due to the fact that festival films[9] can offer their participants an opportunity to engage with personal change, which could be transformational in nature (Matheson, Rimmer & Tinsley, 2014, p. 15). This personal change can trigger collective political activism. As one of my informants Kağan[10] (a journalist, 27, interview: April, 2014) noted:

> The audiences, film critics, academics, who do their own things throughout the year, get together in this festival. They have a chance to discuss and transform themselves altogether, with the help of the festival films and events in the festival.

As Kağan highlighted, film festivals do not only showcase films but they are also spaces where different types of audiences socialise. Film festivals and their relation to collective

political activism, however, is a new subject area in film and media studies. Within the film festival literature, there are discussions about political change and activism within the context of the directors' and critics' reaction to the funding bodies or the sponsorship of particular film festivals. Archibald and Miller's (2011) research is a striking example of this. Their research is based on the discussions and protests at the Toronto Film Festival, which is sponsored by the Israeli government (Archibald & Miller, 2011, p. 274). Other researches focus on the organisation and inception of specific 'political' film festivals such as queer film festivals (Loist & Zieliski, 2012) or human rights film festivals (Grassilli, 2012).

However, little research concentrates on the activism of the audiences at international film festivals. Film festivals, especially the ones creating political activism, such as the Istanbul Film Festival in the 2010s, can trigger collective identity and a network of solidarity. Film festivals can function as a space to get together and collectively address social problems (Sharpe, 2008, p. 218). While many of the early film festivals were associated with the nation-states and national cultures, my research aims to demonstrate their ability as transnational and transformational social spaces to contribute to global culture of resistance to neo-liberalism and conservatism. One of my informants, Hikmet (a film critic and social media specialist, 30, interview: April, 2013) talked about the emergence of the sense of collectivity in film festivals:

> People feel a sense of togetherness here. When people see a film on its general release, they hardly ever clap. In film festivals, however, when you want to show your feelings for a film or a filmmaker, you know that you will not be alone. The basic notion of the collectivity, I think, starts from here.

My informants highlighted the film festival's ability to bring people together and contributing to their political awareness and their ability to create a transnational network for audiences. In film festivals, films that show the decay of capitalism such as *Concerning Violence*, *Life's a Breeze* or *La Jaula de Oro*, are becoming a global phenomenon, and the film festival scene in Istanbul reflects this as well. For instance Bilgen (a cultural studies master student, 28, interview: April 2014) said:

> Nowadays, there are many films in the programme of the Istanbul Film Festival, which give you an idea about social movements, such as the increasing number and visibility of Kurdish films. Of course, there are also more films on these issues now, but they reach their audiences via film festivals. We talk about the democratisation of culture due to social media, especially Twitter, which also holds for films and film festivals. Because of the increasing accessibility of technology, more and more people can make films today and the increasing number of film festivals serves as spaces to showcase these films. For instances people in Egypt made films during the

uprising with their mobile phones and we watched them here in a couple of months. This invites activism and awareness.

In this sense, film festivals enable the worldwide circulation of alternative films and left wing ideas through onscreen representations of political movements in other places. The transnational, dynamic space of the film festival benefits audiences by encouraging awareness and active political involvement.

Nevertheless, the hybrid spaces of film festivals can also be characterised by a degree of ambivalence in terms of being both a site for resistance and counter-cultural movements, and sites of cultural and economic capital (Munro & Jordan, 2013, p. 17). We need to highlight that the festivals are surely influenced by stakeholders, institutions of local government, and an expanding service economy, which benefit from the promotion of the festivals' playfulness and liminality (Jamieson, 2004, p. 65). In other words, film festivals are not exempt from the dominant cultural and economic macrostructures of their times. For instance, the Istanbul Film Festival turned into a prominent cultural 'institution' of the city, and the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts itself developed into an authority that any group attempting to organise a concert, an exhibition, or even a 'festival' would consult with. This is partially related to the fact that the festival organisation is now 'professionalised' amidst a web of international art agencies, festivals networks, and curatorial structures, marked not only by the domination of capital, but also an abundance of promotional exercises and marketing arrangements (Yardımcı, 2007, p. 4-5).

Accordingly, my informants complained about the Istanbul Foundation of Arts and Culture's loyalty card, the *Lale Card,* as well as the overall marketisation strategies used by the film festival. My informants reacted negatively to the promotion of the *Lale* Card because it went against their understanding of solidarity and sharing. The Istanbul Foundation of Arts and Culture differentiates the *Lale* Card customers from ordinary festival-goers and gives them different levels of engagement with the festival. The *Lale* Card membership program, which has been initiated by *IKSV* since 2002, is described as 'a program to gather up its members that are in four different categories and gives them lots of privileges and priorities' on the Istanbul Film Festival's website.[11] As a member, you can support culture and art, and you can also benefit from lots of privileges such as discounts, priorities and instalment payments. For instance Mehmet (a student and a freelance photographer, 25, interview: July, 2013) said:

> I am annoyed about the privilege given to the *Lale* Card owners, not that they can buy cheaper tickets, but that they are able to buy the tickets before us. This is a bit discriminatory.

Nihan (a drummer and project manager, 36, interview: April 2013) added:

> After the *Lale* Card was added to the film festival, festival's status has changed for me. It has become a place where only some people can enjoy, a contaminated group of people are able to reach it now.

Ayşen (a sociologist, 30, interview: April, 2013) put it this way:

> I hate sponsors and I wish that there were a way to do these things invisibly. If the *IKSV* cannot do this alone, I totally understand, it is fine. But even the *IKSV* sometimes acts like a sponsorship company, they constantly open their own tables in the movie theatres and sell the *Lale* Card.

Cemal (an academic, 35, interview: June, 2013) not only criticised the *Lale* Card but also the fact that the film festival has started to work with *Biletix*, which is the counterpart of Ticketmaster in Turkey:

> It used to be easy to have access to the tickets. There were rituals of buying these tickets from the foyers of the movie theatres or inside the building of the *IKSV*. Now because they cooperate with *Biletix*, it has turned into a craze. Today the tickets are more expensive and people fill all the seats even from the first day. Before you get to study the catalogue, all the tickets are sold out.

My informants were critical of the commercial strategies of the *IKSV*, especially the *Lale* Card and *Biletix*. In this regard, the Istanbul Film Festival audience felt strongly about the cultural value of the festival as something positive, but equally as strong about the commerciality of the event as negative. My informants were this bothered because they regarded the commercial strategies as a symbol of global capitalism.

Globalisation and Activist Cosmopolitanism

The current radical transformations regarding the growing authoritarian and Islamist feature of the Turkish state trigger various movements and resistances in the country, which in turn, have a great impact on my informants' identities and everyday lives. Beginning from the early 2000s and increasingly in the 2010s, Turkey has been ruled by an authoritarian neo-liberal regime that is at the same time pro-Islamic, conservative and globalist (Moudouras, 2014, p. 186-9). The increasing involvement of the *AKP* government on people's everyday lives, starting in 2012, such as the regulation of the sale and consumption of alcohol, the ban on abortion, the transformation of the education system from a more secular to a more Islamic system and the increasing loss of cultural and historical heritage of Istanbul, were significant in politicising the people of Istanbul. The specific position of the Turkish state, which mixes Islam and neo-liberalism, is the main reason behind the current transformations in Istanbul and the identity of the Istanbul Film Festival audience. The

recent rise and promotion of conservative ideologies has been a global phenomenon, not only in the Middle East but also across the world. In general, it would not be an over-generalisation to assume that neo-liberalism operates hand in hand with conservatism, in this case pro-Islamist conservatism.

Despite the drawbacks of globalisation, such as brutal urban regeneration programmes, the economic empowerment of core nations, increasing poverty, and growing Americanisation of societies (Sassen, 2000; Schiller, 1991; Garreth, 1998), it also creates a transnational network for film audiences and activists. As Appiah notes, those 'who complain about the homogeneity produced by globalisation often fail to notice that globalisation is, equally, a threat to homogeneity' (Appiah, 2010, p. 101). Today, identity patterns are becoming more complex, as 'people assert local loyalties but want to share in global values and lifestyles' (Pieterse, 1994, p. 165). Because of my informants' disengagement with the nation-state ideology, which increasingly threatened their lifestyles and global values, they became politicised, which led to them acquiring an activist cosmopolitan identity. The discussions on cosmopolitanism challenge the foundations of traditional, nation-state-centred social and urban research and identities (Hannerz, 1990; Delanty, 2006). The migration streams and trans-border movements of people and cultural goods blur cultural lines and make national cultures more complex (Perkins & Thorns, 2012, p. 40).

However, the traditional understanding of cosmopolitanism is still a Western-oriented concept, which remains closely associated with the rhetoric of former imperial colonisers or moralising elites (Hall, 2002, p. 29-30; Mignolo, 2000, p. 722-3). It is born out of economic, political, cultural and even linguistic privileges (Mendieta, 2009, p. 242-243). In this respect, the festival films challenge the Western-oriented notion of cosmopolitanism and the transitional atmosphere in Istanbul directs my informants' attention to other types of resistances, such as the Kurdish resistance, and different cultures in the world, rather than the dominant ones. Although Istanbul has not been known for its free cosmopolitan communities and spaces throughout its republican history, especially for minorities such as Greeks, Jews or Armenians (Navaro-Yaşin, 2002, p. 65; Werbner, 2014, p. 10), this situation is slowly changing through the increasing availability of transnational spaces such as social movements in the city and film festivals, which screen films from around the world. Selda (a chemical engineer, 29, interview: April 2013), for instance, chose films from distant cultures:

> I choose films from countries that are not on the media, such as China. Even if the representation is true or not, I learn a view from a Chinese person. This makes me want to learn about China more.

Similar to how Selda chose films from different cultures, Hikmet also learnt about unfamiliar cultures through their representation in films screening at the festival:

> I learn loads of things from the representation in the films I watch in the festival. They have broken my resistance about certain issues. They educate you even if and when you are not aware. For example, if you watch these kinds of films, you do not feel tense when two men kiss each other in front of you, even as a youngster. By showing you 'unfamiliar worlds', the films shown in the film festivals help you construct a 'cultural archive'. You get to know many other cultures and lifestyles through the represented worlds in the films. You learn about a transition in Taiwan for instance, even if it is a country far away from where you are.

Like Hikmet, Candan (a bank employee, 32, interview: April, 2014) also learnt about the cultures that she would not be informed about via mainstream media:

> My aim in coming to the film festival is not only to watch films; I also learn about different cultures through the film festival. You can also buy a book about the history of that culture, but the stories I watch here are a lot more influential on me. For example I watched a film from Greenland two years ago at the festival. When I close my eyes, the imagery and the characters are still right in front of me now. The fact that I learnt something about a culture that I have never even thought of, let alone be informed by the media, was very important to me.

Perihan's (a sales director, 38, interview: April, 2013) practices and lifestyle actually changed through these films:

> These films create cultural interaction for me. For instance I watched a film shot in Colombia. It was a film about the guerrillas' life in the rain forests. After seeing the film, I was moved. I researched the country's history and wanted to go there. And eventually I went there.

Perihan's understanding of cultural interaction and tourism is evidently different from other tourists', who do not genuinely interact with the local people or culture. My informants' cultural interaction and further political activism within the context of the film festival turned them into critical, activist cosmopolitan individuals and brought them together as a community. I believe that the screening of foreign films blurs cultural lines and makes Turkish culture more complex.

Activist Cosmopolitanism in the face of Bulldozer Neo-liberalism in Istanbul

My informants had concerns for the resocialisation of space and the protection of public spaces against privatisation (Munro & Jordan, 2013, p. 17). In order to understand these changing practices and the transformation of the Istanbul Film Festival audience into active

citizens, I should also highlight the effects of the 'bulldozer neo-liberalism' (Lovering & Türkmen, 2011) on Istanbul as a global city. In parallel to the rise of conservative ideologies and governments all around the world, the brutal urban regeneration programmes are common traits of today's urban culture and politics in Istanbul, as well as in other European and British potential tourist cities such as Manchester and Hamburg. These programmes aim to bulldoze the historical and cultural quarters of cities, in an attempt to transform them into more profitable spaces, such as shopping malls, student housing, studios, or offices.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, neo-liberal policies of economic and spatial restructuring have targeted Istanbul with the aim of transforming it into Turkey's global city (Keyder & Öncü, 1993, p. 385; Geniş, 2007, p. 777). Although Istanbul's change into a global city is more visible today, Istanbul has been the target of all political parties since the 1980s. Even though the approaches and styles have been different, 'all political parties from Istanbul's history, until the early 1980s, have thought that Istanbul has already been fragmented in an irreversible manner and needs managerial and financial strategies to survive' (Bora, 1997, p. 150).

In the late 1980s, Istanbul was already being designated as a tourist attraction and a capital of commerce. This implies the arrival of shopping malls, five-star hotels, office buildings, world brands etc. In this regard, since the mid-1980s 'the physical transformation of Istanbul has been taking place, such as the mushrooming of gated communities, five-star hotels, new office towers and also the city is designed as a consumption artefact for tourists' (Öncü, 1997, p. 57). In other words, Istanbul's identity as a global city is not a new phenomenon; it actually did not start with the current ruling party *AKP*, even if 'brutal restructuring' or 'bulldozing' of the urban cityscape is happening now during the *AKP* period.

However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, this global vision achieved only piecemeal results (Aksoy, 2012, p. 97). Clearly, in the new political economy of globalising Istanbul, as more and more city spaces are handed over to developers to be turned into moneymaking assets, the historic neighbourhoods of the city increasingly become incorporated into the market logic (Aksoy, 2012, p. 105). A dominant political force throughout the decades of effort to elevate Istanbul into a global city was Turkish political Islam. Within this context, *AKP*'s policies were the most comprehensive and systematic. Islam's harmonisation with neo-liberalism has become a political 'obsession' of rebuilding the entire Istanbul and converting it into a symbol of the new Turkish 'global profile' (Moudouros, 2014, p. 188).

The *Beyoğlu* municipality was the first to allow private developers to regenerate the district, which is the heart of Istanbul and the centre of the film festival. Many other parts of *Beyoğlu*, such as *Tünel, Galata* and *Cihangir* have rapidly been gentrified since the 2000s. Additionally, in other parts of *Beyoğlu*, such as *Tarlabaşı*, marginal and low-income groups were displaced as part of a tourism-based strategy initiated by the municipality. The pre-existent independent cafes, bars and studios have also closed down one by one due to increasing rents. The director of the Istanbul Film Festival, Azize Tan (interview: April, 2014) articulated the transformation of *Beyoğlu* in the 2000s and the 2010s this way:

> *Beyoğlu* is radically transforming today. The fact that the municipality asked for the removal of chairs and tables from outside cafes and bars, the closing down of independent shops and the opening of chain stores such as H&M or Starbucks, the possible closing down of the historical bookstore Robinson Crusoe[12], the shutting down of the historical arcades changed the '*Beyoğlu* as we know it'. The disposition of the *Beyoğlu* and Istanbul municipalities is to turn it completely into a touristic space. The image of *Beyoğlu* as a cultural and historical site is slowly diminishing.[13]

Emek movie theatre was one of these spaces that was destroyed more recently. *Emek* was a historic movie theatre with 875 seats. It was very significant for the *Yeşilçam* film industry in Turkey and a symbolic venue for the festival throughout the years. It was constructed in 1924 as a large format movie theatre and in 2010 the municipality announced the demolishing project of *Emek* Movie Theatre—the symbol of *Yeşilçam* Street. The last screening in the movie theatre took place in October 2009, as part of the *Film Ekimi* (Film October) festival, organised by the *IKSV*. From that point onwards, the state locked the gate of the movie theatre, in order to transform it into a shopping mall, as part of the historical complex *Cercle D'orient*, since it was not profitable anymore. It was later demolished along with the *Cercle D'orient* in 2013 and a brand new shopping mall is to be constructed in place of it.

People's political activism reached its peak with the government's decision to demolish the *Emek* movie theatre in 2013. Although the demolition project was announced in 2010, the fact that it was implemented at the opening of the film festival in 2013 fuelled the protests further and increased the participation of the public. One of my informants Sanem, who is a film critic and one of the organisers of the protests (36, interview: April 2014), described the story of these protests as follows:

> The protests against the demolishing first started at the opening of the film festival in 2010. The protests started with the opening of the festival and ended with the closing of the festival. These protests became an indispensible part of the Istanbul Film Festival. They were also related to that street, where the movie theatre is situated. That street represents the history of cinema in Turkey and you cannot isolate the movie theatre from the street of *Yeşilçam*. We turned that street into an active street again. We screened films on the street when the doors of the movie theatre were locked. We organised alternative openings and closings of the festival there, while we were also participating in the events of the film festival.

Similarly, Fatma (a civil servant, 28, interview: April 2014) said:

Rather than 'actual' movie theatres which stand in their own right, I am forced to be in places where I cannot breathe, I cannot reach out into the street easily, I feel claustrophobic. They promote this kind of an exhibition in order to prohibit people's habits and activities on the streets and make them consume more. They also want to prevent people from doing 'something' on the streets. I do not consider *Emek*'s demolishing, however, as any different from other processes in *Beyoğlu*. The government wants to turn *Beyoğlu* into a tourist artefact. They do not want those with 5-10 pounds to come here anymore.

This indicates that it is impossible to isolate what happened to *Emek* from film-going. One of my informants, İbrahim (a student, 24, interview: July 2013) told me about the reasons behind the protests:

The system creates and consolidates a certain kind of reception of films. Current states or the capitalist system in general do not want to let you watch films that question the validity of this system. That is why the old movie theatres are being demolished or closed down today, as they were showing the films against the logic of neo-liberalism. Just because multiplexes are close to their homes or because of other comforts they promise, people tend to use them and they got used to these movie theatres, but it is in fact the system itself, which monopolises different receptions of films and makes you watch the films that are available in shopping malls.

My informants argued that the small movements, like the one against the demolition of the *Emek* movie theatre before the Occupy *Gezi* uprising, contributed to a bigger protest. Since the idea of space is central to discussions of political protest, and today notions of political and social conflict arise as a result of search for space (Abbas & Yiğit, 2014, p. 1), the protests against the demolishing of the *Emek* movie theatre and later the Occupy *Gezi* Park uprising are central in understanding current urban culture in Istanbul. Similar to any other Occupy movements around the world today, the *Gezi* uprising originated as a response to the transformation of *Gezi* Park into a shopping mall. *Gezi* Park is the one of very few remaining green areas in the centre of Istanbul. Thus, its possible demise created a mass movement and united a lot of other small movements. Sanem talked about the protests against the demolishing in relation to the uprising:

I think a certain segment of society, which was not quite on the streets before, was mobilised against the demolishing of the movie theatre. Our movement was not only about urban culture and heritage but also about cinema. All of these small movements such as the ones on animal rights, the ban of abortion and the Internet paved the way to Occupy *Gezi* uprising.

Similar to Sanem, Zuhal (a short film and documentary director, 31, interview: April 2014) also said:

> The *Emek* protest was one of the antecedents of the *Gezi* movement. We were exposed to state violence for the first time during the *Emek* protests. I found shelter in a bakery from the water canons and tear gas. This was the first time that I was exposed to direct state violence; it was horrid. I find *Emek* protests so just, even the occupation itself.

One of the key findings from my *Gezi* Park ethnography, which contrasted with my findings within festival time, was that my informants in *Gezi* Park were taking a stand to no longer attend multiplexes. They no longer attended out of political reasons – i.e. the multiplex as a post-modern commercial space. During the film festival in 2014, nearly eight months after the Occupy Gezi Park uprising, my informants not only protested the demolition of the *Emek* movie theatre but they were also increasingly critical about the festival's use of the *Nişantaşı City's* multiplex.

Bilgen described the changes in her practices this way:

> I never liked shopping malls anyway, but with the *Gezi* Park uprising my awareness increased. I have always had more interest in the Third Cinema movement or documentaries on various resistances but after *Gezi*, I chose them more.

Similar to Bilgen, Ahmet's (an editor and translator, 34: interview April 2014) festival attendance also changed after the Occupy *Gezi* Park Uprising:

> I was going to political films and documentaries before, but after *Gezi* I increasingly go only to these films. I do not find some cliché films attractive anymore; such as a quirky Danish film like *Melancholia*, in which a couple of Danish people get bored of life or *Only Lovers Left Alive* sort of hipster films, in which Detroit, with loads of social and political history, is romanticised and even aestheticised. The documentaries about political movements and resistances come to the film festivals, which is the greatest thing about film festivals. We are connected and united in that way; we all see in different parts of the world that the world is going downhill and there are people standing against it. We want to make something about it too.

My informants, in this regard, differentiated between 'Eurocentric' films and other political films they had watched in the context of the film festival. As I previously stated, my informants' lives and cinematic practices were radically politicised during the uprising. As Janset (a film critic and academic, 32, interview: June 2013) claimed:

> Coming to the parks where you can experience participant democracy, you can socialise with revolutionary people, you can swap clothes, you can freely sit and talk with friends, is more cinematographic. Now I think this is the real cinema and I come here. I think the Occupy *Gezi* uprising is going to change the film culture in Istanbul and I am sure it will create new directions in cinema in Turkey too.

In this respect, 'the park culture' changed my informants' understanding of cinema and it can potentially transform the cinema in Turkey. Gözde's (art director and project coordinator, 30, interview: August 2014), whom I met at a shopping mall before, had radically changed her practices also:

> Now my park culture has advanced, which makes me use the city more. We have protected *Gezi* as a park and I believe we can do other things for the movie theatres in the future. In that period, all of my daily activities and practices changed. I was not going to shopping malls that often, but I was still going. Now I will never shop there. I have started to go to independent movie theatres more often.

There were, however, different opinions about how *Gezi* contributed to the film culture, such as Mehmet's (a student and freelance photographer, 26, Interview: July 2014) view:

> I think *Gezi* did not contribute to our film culture. I think the solidarity culture has made us more mature, our beliefs and hopes have escalated, our characters have strengthened. We could not go to movie theatres, as you put all your energy and labour into the uprising, demonstrating etc. But it would not affect my movie-going in general. We lost *Emek* but they cannot close down the *Beyoğlu* movie theatre after this, we won't buy it!

The culture of sharing and the solidarity present in the *Gezi* Park uprising have become even more prominent characteristics of this audience, especially the alternative circulation of tickets and films amongst them, during and after festival time. In addition to having access to films during festivals, personal hard drives are shared as a way of coping with the scarce availability of 'good films' on release. The heavy urban regeneration programmes and the 'shopping mall-isation' of culture in Istanbul has not only changed my informants' use of the movie theatres and the film festival, but it has also transformed my informants' everyday practices of watching films at home, after the film festival.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to show the impact of film festivals as powerful political weapons, which challenge the dominant cultures in circulation and go against the increasing conservative

and neo-liberal ideologies in our current age. The reason behind this power is the availability of films from around the world at film festivals, as well as the multiplicity of events and protests attached to them. As this case study of Istanbul Film Festival shows, attendance at film festivals is discussed in relation to attempts to protect social space and cultural heritage in global cities where changes are taking place that are beyond the control, and often against the will, of their citizens. This research suggests that attendance at film festivals could be seen as an attempt to protect of one's own identity and space against the impact of bulldozer neo-liberalism.

Even if the Istanbul Film Festival scene is somewhat gentrified through the *Lale* Card, *Biletix* and the use of multiplexes as festival spaces, the activist tendencies of its audience transform the film festival culture. This case study shows that political engagement and activism change the habits of film festival audiences, in terms of their choice of films, reactions to the commercial strategies, and decisions to attend, or not attend, particular movie theatres (i.e. deciding not to attend commercial multiplexes). As a result of their autonomy in the protests, my informants' quest for agency through political activism turned their cosmopolitanism into a critical discourse of activism *and* critical cosmopolitanism. In other words, rather than an 'elitist' cosmopolitanism, they embraced an activist cosmopolitanism, which led them to genuinely interact with different cultures. This, in turn, transformed their identities and informed their own resistance against global capitalism. The audience ethnography at the Istanbul Film Festival revealed that film festivals are also affected by current politics and transitions in hosting countries and cities, such as brutal urban regeneration programmes implemented by the governments on the hosting cities. However, film festivals are not exempt from the global culture, such as the impact of global resistance against the official/dominant cultures. Rather than merely showcasing world cinema and events related to them, film festivals can thus become sites where political activities and solidarity between audiences are practiced.

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Appendix:

Questions[14]

1) When did your interest in the film festival start? How did you hear about it?
2) Where did you see the first films in the film festival?
3) Were the spaces of film exhibition important for you?
4) Were you with other people during the film festival? If so, who were they?
5) What kind of festival films were you watching then?
6) How were you choosing these films?
7) Do you follow the national selections or international selections in the film festival? Why or why not?
8) Which one of these do you think the film festival contributes to the most?
9) How do you choose your films now?
10) What kind of films do you watch in the film festival now?
11) Do you follow the media on these films? If so, what kind of media?
12) Do you watch their trailers?
13) Does advertising on films and the sponsorship affect your festival attendance?
14) Do you take a look at the booklet? Are the sections in the booklet important for your choices of the films and events?
15) How do you buy your tickets? Do you wait at the queue or use *Biletix*?
16) Do you have a *Lale* Card? What do you think about *Lale* Card?
17) Does attendance to the film festival change your everyday life? Is it a different from your everyday life practices?
18) Does the film festival change your understanding of other cultures? How?
19) Has your festival attendance to the film festival changed now? If so, in what ways?
20) Does your television viewing change your attendance to the film festival?
21) Have other avenues of distribution, such as DVDs, pirate copies or streaming changed your frequency of going to the festival?
22) Do you access the festival films other than during the festival time? How do you have access to them?
23) Does *Başka* Cinema affect your attendance to the film festival?
24) Does the film festival change your use of the city? How?

25) Does the film festival change your consumption habits? How?

26) Do you attend these films with other people now? Do you meet new people during the films?

27) Do you eat or drink during the films in the film festival? What do you think about other people's eating or drinking?

28) Do you make comments while watching the films? What do you think of other people's commentary?

29) Do you feel uncomfortable by other people's acts in the movie theatre? If so, what makes you feel that way?

30) Have you ever experienced any protests or a reaction from the audience during the film festival?

31) Do you attend the festival's social events, such as master-classes, panels or parties?

32) Have the recent changes in the festival scene affected your festival attendance?

33) What do you think about the existing movie theatres that the film festival uses? Do they satisfy your needs?

34) Did you follow the protests against the demolishing of *Emek* movie theatre?

35) Are you involved in these protests?

36) Do you have any reasons to attend/not to attend?

37) Do the recent changes in social fabric and political agenda in Turkey change your festival attendance? How?

38) Did you attend the Occupy *Gezi* Park uprising?

39) If so, do you think the Occupy *Gezi* Park changes your festival-going practices and activities?

Notes:

[1] *Yeşilçam* was the name of the Turkish film industry; mostly referred to as Turkish Hollywood, which was active between 1950s until late 1980s.

[2] This detailed picture of the box offices beyond the US and the UK gives an idea of the popular films in Turkey, Egypt, Brazil etc, which provides an important picture of national film cultures: http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/nov/25/beyond-the-uk-and-us-what-films-is-the-rest-of-the-world-watching (last accessed on the 20th of January, 2015).

[3] Turkish Cinemateque Association was founded by Onat Kutlar in 1965. It was closed down during the coup d'etat in 1980.

[4] In their own website, the IKSV refers to the utmost number of attendance as 170000 in 2007. http://film.iksv.org/en/thefestival/history (last accessed on the 15th of April, 2015).

[5] *Yeni Rüya* and *Emek* movie theatres were both located within the same historical complex of *Cercle D'Orient*. Yeni Rüya movie theatre was consisted of 1000 seats and the last screening took place in 2010. It was demolished in 2013, to be replaced by a shopping mall.

[6] The International Federation of Film Critics.

[7] This organisation is consisted of Chamber of Architects, Istanbul Branch (TMMOB) and 'the Platform of Emek is Ours, Istanbul is Ours', which is composed of individual activists from a variety of civil societies, organisations, and communities.

[8] During the course of my film festival ethnography, I recorded the interviews of my informants, who had given their consent, with the help of a recorder and my phone. I am also aware that it is not permissible to audio or video record any activity or conversation where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy without the consent of the participants (ASA Ethical Guidelines, 2011, p. 5). I did not record any of these activities or my interaction with the people, who were not aware of the

fact that I was doing fieldwork. Instead, I took notes after these events, in order to write about them later on.

[9] 'Festival films' have been discussed as a genre in film and media studies, especially starting from the 2000s. Following Elsaesser, film festival films today can be described as films that are 'made to measure and made to order' for the festival circuit, creating a 'genre' sometimes referred to somewhat disparagingly as the 'festival film' (Elsaesser, 2005, pp. 88). Today there are many auteurs like Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Bruno Dumont, Abbas Kiarostami, Wong Kar Wai and Nuri Bilge Ceylan whose careers have been established and supported by the film festival and whose work, arguably, forms an international auteur cinema, which cannot compete with Hollywood in terms of box office but whose dissemination transcends the national (Mazdon, 2007, pp. 14).

[10] I used pseudonyms for all my informants.

[11] There are five different types of the loyalty card: blue, yellow, red, white and black *Lale* Cards. All of these cards provide the members with different privileges. For a more comprehensive understanding of *Lale* card: http://www.lalekart.org (last accessed on the 20th of January, 2015).

[12] This bookstore was demolished later in 2014, after I finished my fieldwork.

[13] Azize Tan, who is the organisor of the film festival, became 'an expert' on the urban regeneration programmes in Beyoğlu, as these processes have impact on their festival and institution, she participated in various meetings on the issue.

[14] These were my questions for the general audience at the Istanbul Film Festival. For members of the non-hierarchical organisation, who participated in my research, I added a few more questions about the protests and how they organised them. For the two coordinators of the film festival, I asked additional questions about their organisation, programming and working conditions of the film festival, as well as general questions relating to their own experience of the film festival as regular audience members.