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The International Labour Film Festival in Turkey

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In Turkey Covid-19 poses a particularly significant threat to the fragile existence of alternative exhibition networks, such as arthouse cinemas, film collectives, and small-size film festivals. The future of film exhibition and production has been among the hot topics in the wake of the lockdown.[1] The role of film festivals in the public sphere, as well as the transformation (or digitalisation) of the public sphere in the pandemic, raised new concerns. These questions became even more accentuated in the special case of one smaller film festival which coincided with the lockdown: the International Labour Film Festival. In this review, I will focus on the challenges brought by Covid-19 to the vocation of a non-commercial, political film festival. I will contextualise its response to Covid-19 within the wider political context that threaten the cultural scene in Turkey, such as persisting issues in the film industry and rising concerns about freedom of expression.

A workers' film festival

The International Labour Film Festival has been organised annually since 2006 by a small team, with the support of the largest labour organisations in the country such as the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions and the Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions. The festival screens feature films and documentaries from all across the world, amplifying working class issues. With its internationalist ethos showing solidarity with class struggles across the globe, the festival fulfils a social space where the predicament of workers can be represented and discussed through cinema. Every screening is open and free, resisting the commercialisation of cinema as well as

making it accessible to low income earners and precarious groups. Screenings provide ample space for discussion, attracting a combination of workers, activists, filmmakers, students, and cinephiles. Going against the competition-driven disposition of major film festivals, the Labour Film Festival has no marketplace, no industry events, and no competition. Screenings and panels are held at multiple locations ranging from arthouse theatres to factories and community centres in a number of cities. Instead of honouring a single festival venue, it spreads across the country with the intention of creating room for social gathering, safe space for discussion about the predicament of working-class struggles, and political organisation, in Diyarbakir, Eskisehir, Adana, and Northern Cyprus, alongside Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara. The festival opens every year on the 1st of May – International Workers' Day. The opening ceremony takes place the following day and gives the stage to workers to address the theme of that year.



Fig. 1: The festival poster depicted the vital professions.

This year the fifteenth edition of the festival coincided with the lockdown, and the organisers faced the difficult decision of either postponing this year's edition indefinitely or migrating to online streaming platforms. Free *accessibility* to films, *connectivity* among festivalgoers, and *collectivity* of the watching experience are the pillars of the festival's identity. The organisers weighed any possibility against these principles.[2] In my interview, the director of the festival Önder Özdemir stated that migrating the programme to YouTube was embraced collectively in the emergency meeting, since this would allow audiences to access the films without costs, to simulate a collective viewing experience in programmed streaming, and to connect viewers in online discussion. While migrating the content of the festival to YouTube is not extremely innovative or unique, in the case of International Labour Film Festival this spotlighted the question of using such digital platforms as an easy substitute or alternative for physical gatherings, which form the backbone of leftist organisational practices.

Putting the working-class on the cultural agenda

Two weeks into the lockdown forbidding public events, the festival sent around a press release announcing that the event would move online. The theme of this new edition spotlighted the main dilemma encountered by the working class globally during the pandemic: 'workers who cannot afford to stay home'. In the press release, the organisers spelled out the glaring truth about the so-called 'vital professions', or key workers, whose jobs are deemed crucial to maintain public health and safety. This announcement came at a time when in the alternative media there was increasing coverage of the topic.[3] One of the few surviving oppositional news websites in Turkey (*Duvar*) published a weekly interview series with the workers who could not afford to stay home.[4] A sex worker, a healthcare professional, and a cabin attendant, among others, frankly reported to the interviewer Pınar Ögünç on their experiences of having to be on the work-floor during lockdown. The calls by government officials and outbreak management teams to stay home and keep one-and-a-half-metre physical distance did not apply to these professions, who increasingly voiced their concerns via their respective labour organisations and demanded safe working conditions. For example, set workers and technicians, organised around the Cinema and Television Workers Union, started a social media campaign #SetleriDurdurun (literally:

stop filming), emphasising the unsafe working conditions on film production sets. The announcement of the Labour Film Festival resonated with these reports and demands.

The festival's teaser, titled 'See those who are unable to stay home', increased the visibility of such concerns further. Circulated via the festival's social media channels, it gave a glimpse of the working conditions during the pandemic[5]; the teaser consisted of short videos filmed by the workers themselves using their mobile phones.[6] Stylistically, the teaser expanded the vocation of the festival to bring together workers from a wide range of sectors and lands and amplify their shared struggle. In line with this aim, the online opening ceremony included video calls with workers on duty.[7] A health worker in the Covid-19 unit tuned in to talk about working conditions in the hospital, such as the shortage of PPE.



Fig. 2: Still from the festival teaser.

The predicament of Turkey's cinema sector

In order to spotlight the impact of Covid-19 on the film industry, the festival organised a series of online discussions on a weekly basis. These sessions addressed three major themes – film festivals, film journalism, and film production – to give people working in these sectors room to share their experiences, expectations, what they see as potential risks, and how to mitigate them. A shared concern was the economic problems ahead, which endanger the activities of all branches related to the cinema industry. How to collec-

tively imagine, or construct, the new normal after Covid-19 was a major question. This question was taken up in the online workshop, dedicated to a cooperative model of independent film production and distribution as a potential way out. The workshop was a significant contribution to enrich the ongoing discussions in the cinema sector in Turkey.

The cinema sector in Turkey has long been facing major problems, and these are expected to worsen due to the impact of Covid-19. First, the monopolisation of film distribution and exhibition networks has resulted in an impoverished independent cinema scene. Independent theatres with a long history, some of which are iconic buildings worthy of monumental status, were pushed to insolvency, closed down, destroyed, or annexed to transnational distribution networks.[8] Under Covid-19, such independent theatres are in dire need of collective support; add to this the increasing cases of censorship targeting film festivals. In 2014 and 2015, two major censorship cases at the largest film festivals – Antalya International Film Festival and Istanbul Film Festival, respectively – had a traumatising effect on Turkey’s cinema scene, creating a polarising divide.[9]

In this context where independent film production and exhibition face significant threats, inventing new and solidary forms of artistic expression, funding mechanisms, production systems, and distribution models are extremely valuable. In the eyes of the organisers, the festival’s online workshop on cooperative models of independent film production and distribution made a valuable contribution to collectively imagining and constructing ‘the new’ after Covid-19’s deep impact. Still available to watch on YouTube, the workshop has spotlighted the need for solidarity and collaboration across the actors of film industry.[10]

Transposing the collective to the virtual

A significant challenge posed by Covid-19 to the International Labour Film Festival was to maintain its capacity to assemble workers, filmmakers, students, and cinephiles in gratis screenings to stimulate open discussion, exchange of experiences, and political intervention. In this sense, the festival’s decision to move all screenings online raised the question of how that public component would be incorporated. Among different models, the International Labour Film Festival opted for YouTube premieres. Transposing the festival programme, which was originally curated for theatre screenings, to

YouTube streaming required a new set of criteria (such as running time, online copyright issues, festival lifespan of films, etc.), based on which the programmers had to make a narrower selection of 41 films out of the originally selected 150.[11] Films were streamed at the scheduled time on YouTube, and once over they were removed from the channel. For the organisers, having scheduled screenings on YouTube would ensure a collective viewing experience and allow connectivity among viewers, simulating the experience of watching a film together in a theatre. The viewers did exchange views via the live chat function; however, as Özdemir later admitted, two moderators were constantly present to check the posts to avoid any hate speech. Immediately after the screenings, the discussion sessions with the directors were streamed live. These were recorded separately, and are still available to watch on the festival's YouTube channel. These discussion sessions saw more active participation – spectators asked questions and interacted with each other.

After the festival, the organisers shared a press release and contentedly underlined the unprecedented wide reach of the videos. The numbers were quite high when compared to the on-site spectatorship. One screening saw more than 700 viewers, surpassing the capacity of the festival's usual screening venues. However, when it comes to live interaction, my observation was that the collective experience of spectatorship could hardly be translated into the virtual. In the screenings that I participated in the discussions were mostly very limited and lively debates did not take place.

This observation sparked a few questions that may continue to be intriguing for film festivals and film exhibition practices at a wider scale. First, as Van Dijk et al. argue in their book *The Platform Society*, internet-based platforms may give the impression of offering products or services directly without having to rely on 'offline' intermediaries, therefore able to bypass existing social institutions.[12] From this perspective, YouTube may appear as a 'direct' way for the festival to reach a wider audience without having to rely on arrangements with cinemas, exhibitors, or other involved parties. It could even be argued that, the absence of a commercial exhibition license would cease to be a problem in this model. In fact, in the wake of the censorship of *Bakur*, making the film available on YouTube was suggested as a quick and effective way to bypass the state-imposed censorship. The filmmakers repeatedly stated that this would not *solve* the actual problem, and they would first want to challenge this newly-imposed rule, which enabled censorship on the grounds of a commercial exhibition license.[13]

Second, then, as Van Dijk et al. say, 'platforms are neither neutral, nor value-free constructs; they come with specific norms and values inscribed in their architectures'.^[14] They name for instance concerns over privacy, safety, and transparency. While the platforms may facilitate connectivity, and collective experience to a certain extent, they do not automatically safeguard public values. From this perspective, Turkey's unsettling recent spate of social media prosecutions are worrisome. A record numbers of users were prosecuted for their critical posts on social media platforms.^[15] In countries such as Turkey, where the government has effective and widespread surveillance mechanisms across social media, platforms and virtual spaces do not always provide an easy way out to simulate the collective experience of spectatorship and open discussion. As the grip of Erdogan's powers over media and freedom of expression constantly tightens, not only filmmakers and film festivals, but also ordinary citizens may slip into self-censorship for various reasons.^[16] This context poses a significant challenge to imagining social media platforms as alternatives to simulate collective spectatorship experiences and open discussion in the Covid-19 era.

On 29 July the parliament passed a new social media bill that is expected to cripple freedom of expression yet further. The new law requires social media companies such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to have a local representative to regulate content and comply with take-down orders from the Turkish court. In this newly emerging situation it will remain a challenge for the film industry to find or create alternative spaces for democratic exchange and political organisation. Cooperative models may provide a potential way out for film production, distribution, and exhibition practices. However, as online platforms increasingly mediate social life at a more rapid pace than ever with the rise of Covid-19,^[17] the struggle for public values will continue to be a harsh battle. For film festivals with a political ethos, such as International Labour Film Festival, the challenge is creating ample space for global solidarity across working class struggles in times of pandemic and in times of increased surveillance, censorship, and restrictions on freedom of expression.

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Notes

- [1] Altyazi Fasikül: Ozgur Cinema 2020
- [2] Ö. Özdemir, personal communication, 27 August 2020.
- [3] Hamsici & Elden 2020.
- [4] A collection of Öğünç's interviews can be accessed via this link: <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2020/05/22/son-soz-niyetine-pandemi-zaiyati/> (accessed on 31 August 2020).
- [5] The festival teaser with English subtitles can be viewed at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3FH63KeOe0&t=45s> (accessed on 31 August 2020).
- [6] The idea was suggested by the in-house designer, who contacted the workers and gave them instructions on how to record themselves in the best way. Ö. Özdemir, personal communication, 27 August 2020.

- [7] The festival opening ceremony can be viewed at this link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaF_wmi26N0&t=3377s (accessed on 31 August 2020).
- [8] Probably the most iconic moment in the struggle to protect independent cinemas was the Emek Theatre protests in Istanbul in 2013. A documentary about these protests, *Audience Emancipated – The Struggle for the Emek Movie Theatre*, is available to view online, with English subtitles, via this link: <https://vimeo.com/187255898> (accessed on 31 August 2020).
- [9] Genc 2020; Lebow 2020; and the report Türkiye’de Covid-19 Kısıtlamaları Altında Film Yapımlarında Güvenli Çalışma Koşulları ve Alınması Gereken Önlemler.
- [10] The full recording of the workshop can be viewed here, without English subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4cXhdi9F6E&t=4622s> (accessed on 31 August 2020).
- [11] Ö. Özdemir, personal communication, 27 August 2020.
- [12] Van Dijk et al. 2018.
- [13] The producer of the film *Bakur*, Ayse Cetinbas, emphasised this in an emergency meeting which was held right after the film was censored in 2015.
- [14] Van Dijk et al. 2018, p. 3.
- [15] Freedom House 2017.
- [16] Basyigit 2020, p. 15.
- [17] Wigglesworth 2020.