

Film diplomacy in action at the 23rd Boston Turkish Festival: A critical look at immigrants efforts to promote Turkish culture

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In the turmoil of political relations between the US and Turkey, cultural activities build bridges that facilitate diplomacy and mutual understanding. In this report, I explore how the 23rd Boston Turkish Festival (BTF) serves as a deployment of film diplomacy and presents a strategic image of Turkey in the US via films. The themes covered by BTF films demonstrate how Turkish[1] immigrants aim to affect knowledge circulation about their culture in the US. To explore film diplomacy in the context of the BTF, I first review the festival organisers, supporters, and sponsors. Next, I consider the festival in the larger historical context of the US-Turkey media network. An analysis of the films reveals how an intercultural understanding is communicated through stories of villages, nature, education, and minorities. Finally, I trace how feminist solidarity movements affect festival programming and examine the representation of women's voices at the BTF. While the 23rd BTF attempts to foster meaningful cultural exchanges and solidarities between the US and Turkey, the festival's prioritisation of patriarchal and nationalistic films is an obstacle that whitewashes the turmoil in the region.

Backdrop for the 23rd Boston Turkish Festival

The Boston Turkish festival was initiated in 1996 by Erkut Gömüllü, a native of Turkey now living in Boston, with the intent to showcase 'the diversity and richness of Turkish culture'. [2] In 2004, Gömüllü's programming received the attention of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and he has since

served as Turkey's Volunteer Consul General in Boston.[3] In 2018, the festival celebrated its twenty-third year and the 95th anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. The co-presenters of the festival included the Turkish American Cultural Society, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (MFA), and Boston University (BU); it was also co-sponsored by Turkish Airlines and the Turkish Cultural Foundation. The festival program included a documentary and short film competition with 41 entries, a Turkish food and wine tasting event, an art exhibition, and a dance workshop. Thus, the festival offered an opportunity to present the culture of Turkish immigrants to the people in Boston.

There are currently 373,000 migrants from Turkey in the United States.[4] Immigrants from Turkey to the US engage in diplomacy by organising events to showcase their cultures in schools, museums, community centres, embassies, and public spaces. These occasions try to counter discourses about anti-immigration, a task that is especially relevant given today's US political climate. In the case of the 23rd BTF, the selection of films reflects Turkish immigrants' efforts for recognition and acceptance. The BTF presents Turkish immigrants as a united group contributing their culture to the Boston community and promotes a presentation of Turkey by sugar-coated films that celebrate Turkish culture.

The festival director Gömüllü acts as a cultural ambassador and represents his country through his appearance and behaviour. Gömüllü attended each screening wearing a formal suit and gave a brief introduction to each film. His support networks also make Gömüllü a particularly effective cultural ambassador. The BTF was supported by many notable government agents such as the Ambassador of Turkey to the United States (Serdar Kılıç), the Consul General of Turkey in Boston (Ceylan Özen Erişen), the Governor of Massachusetts (Charlie Baker), and the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts (Karyn Polito).[5] The involvement of both Boston's governing body and Turkish diplomatic agents legitimises the festival as an event for building bridges between people of different cultures. BTF had exhibition spaces at the Museum of Fine Arts and Boston University, which legitimised the festival as an educational and cultural experience.

BTF follows in the footsteps of a long history of transnational film culture between the US and Turkish governments. Starting in the 1950s, the US government established the United States Information Agency (USIA), which constructed cultural centres and film libraries throughout the world. The goal of USIA was to promote the US way of life and persuade international

publics from the bottom to the top (from villagers to transnational elites) about the benefits of US economic programs, educational programs, and foreign policy.[6] USIA sponsored, exhibited, and distributed films to create soft power, the ability to influence ‘through attraction rather than coercion or payments’.[7] Many of these films presented US families, schools, politics, and industries showing everyday life in urban spaces. In Turkey, these films were often exhibited in villages, schools, and public spaces to reach students, minorities, and the general public. During this time, US educational films about Turkey also circulated in US schools. This cultural flow via film encouraged the Turkish government to invest in its own film productions. Indeed, the Educational Film Centre (EFC) was founded in 1952 to produce films sponsored by the Turkish ministries to inform the public about their services.[8] The collaboration between USIA and EFC generated a multimedia network between the US and Turkey that used film diplomacy to transfer culture and information among publics.[9]

What is film diplomacy?

The use of film to communicate with a public and negotiate an understanding of a nation is called *film diplomacy*. The concept is best understood in the context of cultural and public diplomacy.[10] Cultural diplomacy is ‘the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding’.[11] When applied to another nation’s populace, cultural diplomacy transforms into public diplomacy in which governments mobilise culture, values, and policies ‘to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments’.[12] In other words, public diplomacy is ‘the good impression that a country seeks to make on the public of another country’.[13] Film diplomacy is a specific case of public diplomacy in which film is used as the medium for communication. The framework of film diplomacy is useful because film is a tool that compartmentalises audiovisual information, offers a multi-sensory experience, and functions as a package that communicates the themes of its makers and sponsors.

Film festivals are ‘sites of diplomacy and disputes’, as they generate opportunities for screening either *flattering* or *unwelcoming* images of a nation.[14] Indeed, the selection of films at BTF tries to reflect a positive image of Turkey, a consequence of diplomacy. For example, the festival promotes

an openness toward refugees and minorities by screening fiction films about Syrian refugees (*Learning How to Swim* [Yüzme Öğreniyorum, 2017] by Serpil Altın, and *East Side* [Doğu Yakası, 2017] by Harun Durmuş), and nonfiction films about the Kurdish region of Iraq (*Footmark* [Ayak İzi, 2018] by Haydar Demirtaş) and Jewish minorities (*A Fading Language, A Fading Cuisine* [Kaybolan Bir Dil, Kaybolan Bir Mutfak, 2017] by Deniz Alphan). The programming of these films conveys openness, a characteristic of diplomacy, and the ‘ability to attract and persuade audiences’.[15] The goal behind exhibiting these films is to generate a positive public opinion in the US about the openness of Turkey.

Film diplomacy has been investigated across multiple national contexts to demonstrate how films transfer information to communicate about local happenings and create a mutual understanding. For instance, in an article about Japan during the Cold War period, film scholar Michael Baskett indicated that film festival diplomacy functioned as a way ‘for succeeding where governments have failed’.[16] In other words, film diplomacy is a particularly effective way to communicate and change a public’s perspective. Baskett also noted that film festival diplomacy created ‘a mechanism to exclude participation from independent producers with radical political ideologies’.[17] This is to say that the festival selection process gives committees the power to eliminate filmmakers with political ideologies that are different than theirs. Thus, film diplomacy can be used for containment and censorship.

The village as a space of storytelling

The 23rd BTF opened with the outside competition special screening of Tolga Karaçelik’s film *Butterflies* (Kelebekler, 2018). This film was the winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival. Before the BTF screening at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Gömüllü recognised the presence of the Consul Generals of the Republic of Korea, Kim Yonghyon, and Poland, Marek Lesniewski-Laas. The film *Butterflies* portrays the journey of three city-living siblings who return to their father’s village, Hasanlar, where they were born, but for which they have almost no connection left. This disassociation from the past and their present condition created a dark humour that reverberated through the audience’s laughter.

Like *Butterflies*, most of the films at the festival used the ‘village’ as a space for storytelling to depict the beautiful and prosperous nature of Turkey.

These films covered a variety of cinematographic geographies ranging from the Black Sea, Central Anatolia, to the Eastern regions of Turkey. For instance, *Hidden Heaven* (*Saklı Cennet*, 2017) by Çağatay Çelikbaş, a short nonfiction film, features three women and centralises the life of Fatma Salman, a middle-aged farmer living by Mount Ida (Kaz Dağları) in the northwest coast of Anatolia, close to the ruins of Troy. In *Hidden Heaven*, Salman describes how people of her village work collectively to source their goods directly from nature. She notes that people in her village do not use money; instead, they exchange goods and host communal dinners. Furthermore, the film generates an Oriental fantasy about the village as an idealised imaginary space where Turkish people seek natural remedies for healing. For instance, Salman explains some of the remedies that villagers use for health and medicinal purposes. Indeed, she highlights *kantarön yağı* (St. John's Wort oil) for beauty creams, *zeytin sakızı* (olive gum) for tooth pain, and *kulak otu suyu* (ear herb juice) for ear infection. During an interview with Çağatay Çelikbaş, the director of the film noted:

Since we are a *patriarchal society*, which comes across in films, I wanted to show the importance of *women* and their contribution to *home and national economy*. [...] I wanted to make a film that *presents our culture to the festivals abroad*. [...] In order to make my film globally relatable, I wanted to examine ecology. [...] It is impossible to live without *nature*.^[18]



Fig. 1: Fatma Salman in *Hidden Heaven*.

Another short nonfiction film screened later in the festival, *Return* (*Dönüş*, 2018) by Yasin Erda, focused on nature and a remote landscape while documenting the lives of a small group of people living in the forest. The characters' desire to return to nature and create an ecological village resulted from the struggle for higher social status in the chaos of city spaces. *Return* shows how the small group of subjects survive without exploiting another human being or animal. The film presents the dream of leaving the stresses of capitalism behind and starting a new life in a faraway place. This fantasy of going to places to relax, finding remedies from herbs and living in nature, promotes an image of Turkey as a prime tourist destination, an outcome welcomed by the festival co-sponsor Turkish Airlines.

The village continued to be a prominent theme at BTF with the screening of the nonfiction film, *Equal* (*Eşit*, 2017) by Melih Kosif, which aims to bring equal educational opportunities to students in rural areas. In the film, a photographer teaches students how to take pictures with a digital camera. After theoretical lessons, students accompanied the teacher and the film crew to take pictures of trees, animals, buildings, and people in the village. When they return to the classroom, the teacher discusses aesthetics and techniques in taking photographs. Finally, the students attend an exhibition of their own photography in a museum in Samsun. At the end, the film recognises the support from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The initial premise of the film, bringing equal educational opportunities to villages, is sacrificed for the sake of celebrating a government-sponsored photography project. Here, the filmmaker functions as a cameraman for the state, with governmental agendas directing much of the narrative. The film received a special mention in the documentary category of BTF.

Following *Equal*, the festival continued with the village theme in *A Story with Music* (*Müzikli Bir Hikaye*, 2017) by Jale İncekol, one of a handful of films directed by a woman. This film received the Best Documentary Award at BTF. It was sponsored by the Denizli Soroptimist Club, a branch of the larger American Soroptimist organisation founded in 1921 in California, which aims to 'improve the lives of women and girls through programs leading to social and economic empowerment'.^[19] In this film, a woman music teacher, Aslı Tanrıkulu, is appointed to teach in a rural village called Varto in Eastern Anatolia. Initially, Tanrıkulu is hesitant to leave her life in the cosmopolitan city of Istanbul for a rural life in Varto. The film neither contextualises Varto as an area mostly populated with Kurdish Zaza and Kurmanj minorities, nor explains this as a reason why Tanrıkulu might be concerned about the move.

Instead, in an interview in the film, Tanrikulu indicates that her father was a strong motivator for her transition to the village life, attributing her personal growth to the paternal figure of authority. The filmmaker's inclusion of this part of the interview reinforces patriarchal family structures despite the film's outward focus on independence and empowerment of women. Nevertheless, the film demonstrates strength as Tanrikulu persistently tries new methods to teach music while overcoming the villagers' prejudice about singing, performing, and playing instruments. Because of her efforts on social media, she collects musical instruments through donations and teaches her students how to play them. Tanrikulu forms a successful orchestra with the village students and takes them to a music festival to perform in Istanbul. This leads Turkish national media outlets to cover the empowering story of Tanrikulu's students and her accomplishments.



Fig. 2: Asli Tanrikulu and two students in *A Story with Music*.

Feminist solidarity movements affect festival programming

The rising global feminist solidarity movements such as the Women's March and #metoo have encouraged more visibility for films directed by women and films about women's issues in festivals. For example, in the US the advocate group 5050by2020 has been promoting 'an intersectional power movement in arts and entertainment'.^[20] The group advocates for a political change by disseminating stories of women, people of color, and queer people

in order to 'reimagine leadership and reflect diversity'.[21] As a result of the movement, major film festivals such as the Berlin Film Festival, Venice Film Festival, and Cannes Film Festival signed the 5050 pledge to increase the number of women in the festival selection committees and management. Furthermore, Directed by Women is another initiative originating from the US to celebrate women filmmakers, generate communal blogging about women filmmakers' work, and increase the presence online of women filmmakers. The Directed by Women movement has directly influenced the Turkish film community and helped to form the First International Women Directors Short Film Festival (Uluslararası Kadın Yönetmenler Kısa Film Festivali) in September 2019. This festival is sponsored by the municipal of Kadıköy (Kadıköy Belediyesi) and featured fiction, documentary, experimental, and animation films by women.

Historically there have been far fewer women directors in Turkey producing feature films in comparison to male filmmakers. Indeed, 'between 2006 and 2012, 29 films out of 388 released (7.5%) were directed by women, accounting for only 2.2% of the tickets sold'.[22] While this gender inequality describes the commercial cinema in Turkey, since 2012 there has been a new flow of independent and anti-traditional media-making by women about women. For instance, Turkish women YouTubers have created highly watched content. With the rise of social media and accessibility of technology, the number of women who use digital cameras and mobile devices to film has been increasing in Turkey. Moreover, the number of universities and media-related programs in Turkey have also increased, which generated an opportunity for students of different genders to receive formal education in filmmaking.

Despite the importance of women's movements, it was surprising to see only seven films (17%) directed by women in a festival that received 350 applications and selected 41 films. When I approached Gömüllü to ask the reason behind the low number of women filmmakers, he said that the committee selected films based on *quality* and not gender. This is a common 'excuse' to dismiss women and their work. This answer also suggests that the films by male filmmakers supposedly had a better quality in comparison to the work submitted by women. Moreover, determining quality is closely related to taste, which is a social construct that depends on many variables such as class, gender, sex, race, nation, and religion. Determining quality in a fair and open way requires a diverse festival committee. Consequently, the dominance of male filmmakers prioritised the male voice. Indeed, the festival exhibited

multiple father-son stories such as *Broken Wings* (*Kırık Kanatlar*, 2017) by Kadir Eman, *Remnant from Yesterday* (*Dünden Kalan*, 2017) by Salih Toprak, and *Passenger* (*Yolcu*, 2017) by Cem Özay. Selecting and exhibiting 'his stories' over stories by Others is emblematic of patriarchy, which continues to plague film culture in Turkey and is particularly problematic in a festival that aims to influence public opinion about Turkey in a positive way.

It is also important to note that the 2018 BTF program did not exhibit any films about the LGBTQA community. This is not surprising when considered in the context of the discrimination and harassment against LGBTQA members in Turkey. While it is possible that BTF did not receive any films about LGBTQA issues among the 350 applications, the lack of LGBTQA-related films at the festival still contributes towards the representation of Turkey to audiences in Boston. Film diplomacy is as much about what it includes as what it excludes.

The voice of women at BTF

As one of the seven films directed by a woman in the festival, *Wren* (*Çalığışu*, 2018) by Esra Yıldırım highlights the nationalistic and patriarchal influences of Turkey, a characteristic of Turkish film diplomacy. This short nonfiction film was about a woman named Hasibe Özar who becomes a teacher during the early years of the Republic of Turkey. During the interviews, Özar describes the difficulties she faced during her childhood. For example, she had a cataract problem that negatively affected her vision, which, combined with poverty, initially caused her to leave school; then her family wanted her to get married at the age of 14. However, her desire for learning combined with an encounter with the founder of the Republic of Turkey Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (also known as the father of Turks) encouraged her to complete her studies. The presentation of Özar's story combined with the archival photographs and moving images of Atatürk idolises him as the main teacher of the Turkish people, shifting the attention from an ordinary middle-class woman to one of the most elite men in Turkish history, who was a critical instrument of nationalism in Turkey.

Another woman filmmaker explored the institutional and social dynamics in the lives of the albino community in the nonfiction film *Snowflakes* (*Kar Taneleri*, 2017) by Elif Nur Kayalar. Kayalar, an albino herself, aimed to raise awareness about the albino community through her film. She investigated

the problems of people with albinism, a genetic disorder resulting in the absence of pigmentation in skin, hair, and eyes. She collaborated with the Association for Albinism (Albinizm Derneği) to reach out to albinos from different age groups, including a newborn child. While some albinos have difficulty in school because of their vision problems, others describe not being able to see the numbers on buses when they need to use public transportation systems. Furthermore, discrimination is another problem that negatively affects their self-confidence, social lives, and job applications. Although this film was a significant contribution to the festival, besides two festival workers, there were only my friend and myself at the screening at Boston University.[23] This suggests an ineffective advertisement campaign and the festival struggling to reach a niche audience.



Fig. 3: The film poster for Wren featuring Hasibe Özar above an image of Atatürk.

Another film, *A Fading Language, A Fading Cuisine* (*Kaybolan Bir Dil, Kaybolan Bir Mutfak*, 2017) by Deniz Alphan, was directed by a woman and documented memories of a Jewish minority group in Turkey. Through interviews with a series of great storytellers, this film focuses on the language and cuisine of the Sephardic Jews living in Turkey since the times of the Ottoman Empire. Interviewees describe their memories and generational differences be-

tween their grandmothers, mothers, themselves, and children. As one interviewee explains, in order to understand the Judaeo-Spanish or Ladino, one needs to know some Spanish, some Italian, and a little bit of Turkish. Interviewees speak in multiple languages including Ladino, Turkish, and English to explain their languages, stories, songs, and cooking culture. In this film, the younger generation of Jews who have lost interest in Ladino and the Sephardic cuisine become the subject of criticism. However, the film does not offer testimonies by younger people, so the audience does not have exposure to their reasoning and motivations for abandoning the language and cuisine. Without an investigation into how governmental regulations and public attitudes affected the youth to distance themselves from their inherited culture, this film aligns with the purposes of diplomacy to portray mainly the best attributes of the Turkish nation toward Jewish minorities. The audience eventually selected *A Fading Language*, *A Fading Cuisine* for the Best Documentary Audience Award at BTF. The selection and acknowledgement of the film transformed the investigation of the Jewish minority community in Turkey into an opportunity to develop film diplomacy.

Conclusion

While BTF offered a wide variety of films to expose audiences to Turkish culture, it also generated a platform for immigrants to perform Turkish citizenship and contribute to Turkey's soft power in the US. The festival attempts to use film diplomacy to break prejudices and promote acceptance of Turkish immigrants in the US. However, this positive portrayal of the Turkish nation comes with costs; the filmmakers avoid critically investigating the range of complex issues such as ethnic strife and state neglect. Furthermore, the low number of women's stories and no LGBTQA-related films in the festival reflect a gender inequality that continues to celebrate the work of male filmmakers and disseminate male stories. Interestingly, the festival also avoided a critical investigation about contemporary US-Turkey relations and current problems in Turkey such as the judicial system, economic crisis, brain-drain, academic freedom, and so on. Uncritical nonfiction films can be dangerous because they misdiagnose the problems affecting people and downplay the severity of issues for the sake of building national prestige.

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Notes

- [1] Here I use the term 'Turkish' to refer to the people from Turkey and not a single ethnicity.
- [2] 'Boston Turkish Arts and Culture Festival', <http://www.bostonturkishfestival.org/>.
- [3] Munyar, 2019.
- [4] 'Immigrant and Emigrant Populations by Country of Origin and Destination'.
- [5] The 23rd Boston Turkish Festival brochure.
- [6] For more on USIA, please see Cull 2010.
- [7] Nye 2004.
- [8] Etem (forthcoming in 2020).

- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Gharabaghi mentions this idea of documentary diplomacy in the introduction of his Ph.D. dissertation on US-Iran media relations during the 1950s.
- [11] Cummings 2003.
- [12] Nye 2008, p. 95.
- [13] Gilboa 2015.
- [14] De Valck, 2007, pp. 56-57.
- [15] Nye 2019, pp. 7-20.
- [16] Baskett 2014, p. 12.
- [17] Ibid., p. 15.
- [18] I conducted the interview in Turkish and then translated into English. The italics are mine.
- [19] Soroptimist International.
- [20] 5050by2020.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Behlil 2017, p. 269.
- [23] There are two online articles published by *Forum USA* and *Voice of America* that claim that the festival reached 200,000 people over a period of six weeks. As a participant in many of the festival events, I highly suspect that such a number is possible. For more, please see: https://forumusa.com/turk-toplumu/23-boston-turk-kultur-ve-sanat-festivali-sona-erdi/?fbclid=IwAR2_rQwsNwHENWAbdprsz84_l6Vr-ZhHRkMTKb3Yssc7-IBmqNeJbVfIFAk and <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/abddeki-turk-festivali-200-bin-kisiye-ulasi/4713049.html?fbclid=IwAR3bUOE2RaCDbEANGH57Macvu9Iwbult7IoXumrHVGeLkX-eavgMmC-J-xwc> (accessed on 29 August 2019).