

Documentarist 2013 means more in light of Gezi Resistance

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The 6th Istanbul Documentary Days was blessed with an outstanding location for a documentary film festival: a park which has become a cause and a symbol of an

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urban uprising movement that has spread to the whole of the country. What makes it even more fantastic is that it was not meant to be so. It all happened naturally, so to speak.

In 2012, an announcement was made that there was a plan to turn Gezi Park, a small historical park in central Istanbul, into a shopping mall area. Activists for environmental as well urban rights launched a campaign to preserve the park. As work which would destroy the park began in the second half of May this year, a small group of activists set up tents in the park to stage a peaceful protest.

As the police reacted violently to push the protesters out of the park, tens of thousands of people gathered in there the next day to raise their voices against police violence as well as the destruction of public and natural areas for development, which has been the engine of the Turkish economy for about a decade.

As the expanding protests were met with escalated violence. The park became the symbol of the urban uprising movement reacting against the ruling moderate Islamist AKP and the Prime Minister R.T. Erdoğan's policies, which made those who didn't share his conservative leanings begin to feel concerned about their personal rights and lifestyles.

So the park was transformed into an area of communal liberation. People shared ideas and organized concerts and other social events. For two weeks, the park was filled with the tents of environmentalists, feminists, gay rights organizations, and people from all walks of life. But it did not last long. A month later, the police attacked the park even more violently, although there was hope for reconciliation after Erdoğan met representative groups of the Gezi Resistance. But now, the park remains empty. It is forbidden to enter there except for the police forces guarding it. However, across the country demonstrations are being held almost every day in protest against the police violence that has resulted in the deaths of three protesters and many more injured.

The opening ceremony of Documentarist, or Istanbul Documentary Days, was supposed to be on the 31st of May, but not surprisingly the festival organizers announced that the ceremony would be cancelled and invited all the guests to take

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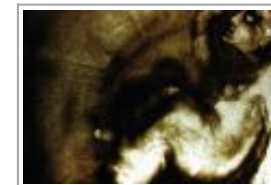
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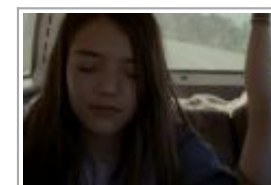
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part in the demonstration to be held in solidarity with the Gezi Resistance. That was also the night when tens of thousands took to the streets, and the 1st of June was marked by street clashes, some of which literally occurred in front of the two main venues of the Documentarist, Aksanat and the French Cultural Center, which inevitably resulted in the cancellation of the first day of screenings.

In the next two days, screenings were held although some changes were made to the program, apart from those at Aksanat where all the screenings were cancelled because the building's windows had been broken. On the 4th of June, the festival organizers announced that in solidarity with the resistance all screenings at the festival would be free of charge. That solidarity intensified as a screen was set up in the park to show films from the festival.

On the 5th of June, the festival committee made another announcement: that the festival would be extended for three more days with films about resistance added to the program and that the closing ceremony would be held on the 9th in Gezi Park.

The film that took the festival's JvdK New Talent award could not have been more appropriate: "My Father, The Revolution and Me" (Mon Père, la Révolution et moi, 2013) by Ufuk Emiroğlu, which is the personal story of the daughter of a Turkish revolutionary who has been in exile in Switzerland for the last thirty years.

In this Swiss-Turkish co-production, director Emiroğlu tells, through the use of documentary, fiction and animation, about her family's migration from Turkey to France and then to Switzerland as political refugees, where they are now settled. With its bitter-sweet atmosphere and stoicism in the face of heartbreaking memories, the film is reminiscent of Marjanne Satrapi's "Persepolis" (2007), a reference made clear with its use of a similar animation style.

In this film, in which Emiroğlu poignantly meditates on her father's revolutionary ideals which led to a major disappointment with the coup d'état in 1980 and her mother's, brother's and own suffering as a result of this, the personal and the social coincide in perfect harmony where only understanding one of the two makes the other comprehensible.

There were two other films screened at the festival, which along with that one,

make for a notable trilogy. One of these is “Belleville Baby” (2013), another documentary which merges fiction with a strong use of photography and visual experimentalism whereby the director, yet another young woman, looks back at her past through the lens of the present.

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In her film, Mia Engberg tells the story of a couple living on the edge, herself and a man she once loved dearly, many years after their separation. Through Engberg’s narration and re-acted dialogues, the film, which is reminiscent of the fictional couple in Dorris Dörrie’s “Bliss” (2011), tells the story of the couple through their thirties. This powerful documentary touches on various facades of social reality with a poetic cinematic language and emphasizes that love is never solely an issue of the private sphere but is always marked by social circumstances.

The other film of note was “Karsu,” by Mercedes Stalenhoef (2012). This documentary is also about a second generation Turkish girl who grew up in a Western European country. Just like Ufuk’s, Karsu’s father was a political refugee whose dreams were shattered by the same military dictatorship that took control in Turkey in 1980.

Stalenhoef follows young Karsu for three years as she gains more and more attention as a jazz singer making way her up to Carnegie Hall and signs a contract with Sony BMG. As a young woman with multiple talents and the support of her

caring and open-minded parents, beautiful Karsu, who brims with joy for life, explains in one scene that her music teacher was surprised to note that she always liked the more melancholic minor scales. By the end of the film the audience can feel that Karsu's melancholy is the result of her beloved father's frustrated desire to create a better world and his constant homesickness for his small village in the ancient, multicultural southern Anatolian city of Antioch.

These three films, which focus on the inner worlds of three young women, were an ideal start for the personal, contemplative films of Alan Berliner whose retrospective was screened at this year's festival. The multi-award winning American director was introduced to festival audiences with a selection of his most acclaimed films such as "The Family Album" (1986), "Intimate Stranger" (1991) and "Nobody's Business" (1996).

"Family," which is a leitmotif of Berliner's films, came to the fore in another outstanding film this year, this time in the context of gender and sexual freedom, with "Benim Çocuğum" (My Child, 2013) by Can Candan. This documentary film resembles the documentary "Ecumenopolis: City Without Limits" (2011) by İmre Azem in terms of its social function; just as Azem's film became a flagship of the movement to stand for rights to the city in Turkey, "Benim Çocuğum" has been the voice of the LBTT movement in Turkey since the very first time it was screened this February.

This film, which has had numerous screenings at universities as well as at the Turkish parliament and the European council, tells the story of the marginalized and excluded LBTT community from the perspective of the parents of gay and lesbian individuals. As such, this touching documentary opens the way for reflection on the suffering of LBTT individuals' parents brought about by prejudice against their children, and the film also highlights the fact that every LBTT individual is the son or daughter of a mother and a father.

In the film, five families from Turkey talk about their LBTT children and the community they have established as LBTT parents. The film excels in its ability to reflect on the power to resist and the hope for a better tomorrow these people gain from this solidarity as well as from the peace they managed to build with their children by freeing themselves from the norms of the heteronormative patriarchal society. This achievement was expressed poetically by one of the

parents in the film: “I had the choice to either stand by society or by my child. I stood by my child.”

This year the festival also had a special section for Brazilian cinema, with a special event on Cinema Novo, as well as sections for documentaries on women and music. The section Arab World: Winds of Change featured films reflecting on the hope for future in Arab countries, and a special selection of environmentally themed films was also screened at the festival.

There was also a section with films from the independent documentary and fiction film producer and sales agent Taskovski Films this year, and the section In Memoriam included one film from each of the following directors who are no longer alive: Chris Marker, Les Blank and Herz Frank.

The posters for Documentarist 2013 depicted documentary audiences wearing gas masks; but when the posters first appeared on walls in Istanbul, nobody could have guessed that in a few days thousands of gas masks would actually be sold on the streets of the city as the police would brutally attack the peaceful demonstrators with hundreds of canisters of tear gas.

The introduction that Necati Sönmez, co-art director of the festival, wrote for the festival booklet could not have been more appropriate given the circumstances: “Over 100 years ago Mark Twain said ‘Truth is stranger than fiction’. In our days, as the boundaries between the reality and surreal/irrational fade away, seeing the truth clearly gains vital importance. And documentary cinema continues to be one of the means of expression with the highest potential to let the truth breathe.”





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