

Turkish Cinema Reclaims Regional Leadership

By Greg Burris

13-17 minutes

In the last two decades, Turkish cinema has re-emerged as an extraordinarily popular and successful industry, one with growing influence throughout the region. Based primarily in Istanbul, Turkish film companies are now producing motion pictures at the rate of around one hundred per year, and the Turkish box office regularly sells over 40 million tickets annually—this in a country with a population of just over 70 million. The majority of ticket sales are for domestic productions, making Turkey one of the few countries in the world where local films account for a larger percentage of the box office take than Hollywood productions. Turkey's top blockbusters now regularly gross in the \$20-25 million range, and the biggest hit of 2012, the epic *Fetih 1453 (Conquest 1453)*, broke all of the Turkish film industry's records, bringing in over 30 million dollars.

Here are four reasons why the Turkish film industry is a place to watch:

1. Recent successes mark the revival of a once prolific film industry that was hit hard by political turmoil during the 1980s

and 1990s.

2. The recent revival of Turkish cinema has been encouraged by government support.

3. Turkish films are popular with the diaspora and with Arab audiences throughout the Middle East.

4. Government policies aim to attract international partners, including Hollywood.

1. Recent successes mark the revival of a once prolific film industry that was hit hard by political turmoil during the 1980s and 1990s.



Istanbul has a rich history as a hub for film production. From the 1950s until the 1980s, Turkish firms produced hundreds of films each year, reaching an apex in 1972 and 1973 when they released nearly 300 titles. *Yeşilçam* cinema, named after the street in Istanbul where most film companies were based, included all types of genres—everything from dramas and romances to swords-and-sandals fantasies. In the 1970s, the Turkish film industry even produced a high number of pornographic films.

The Turkish government has played a significant role in shaping the film industry. In 1948, for instance, the government mandated a 20 percent tax on tickets for domestic films and a 75 percent tax for foreign films. By encouraging customers to see Turkish productions, the government helped pave the way for the glory days of the *Yeşilçam* era.

Yeşilçam went into decline in the 1980s, as a result of political and economic turmoil following the 1980 military coup. During this time, the quality of filmmaking became dismal, and a number of productions were just cheap rip-offs of Hollywood sci-fi films, the most famous example being *Dünya'yı Kurtaran Adam* (*The Man Who Saves the World*, 1982)—more commonly known as *Turkish Star Wars*. Despite these factors, film output remained relatively high until the mid-1980s, with over a hundred films produced annually.

Yet just as government regulations had encouraged Turkish cinema during the heyday of the *Yeşilçam* era, they started to take a toll on film production during the 1990s. While movie companies worldwide were struggling to cope with the introduction of home entertainment devices and cable television, in Turkey, the film industry also had to deal with the neoliberal reforms and economic restructuring programs instituted by Turkey's military generals in conjunction with recommendations from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the US government.

This series of structural adjustment policies served as the last nail in the coffin for *Yeşilçam* filmmaking. As Turkey's protectionist regulations were rewritten, foreign companies,

which had previously been unable to penetrate the Turkish film market, saw an opportunity, and soon Turkish filmmakers simply could no longer compete. For a time, Warner Brothers and United International Pictures managed to maintain a virtual monopoly over Turkish cinemas, and of the few Turkish films produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, most were never even exhibited in local cinemas. Protesting this situation, Turkish director Korhan Yurtsever dramatically [burned](#) his film *Zincir* (*The Chain*, 1987) in front of an Istanbul theater. By the mid-1990s, Turkish cinema production had reached a standstill with only a small handful of films being produced each year.

2. The recent revival of Turkish cinema has been encouraged by government support.

Beginning in the late 1990s, the Turkish cinema scene began to show signs of recovery. Following the success of *Eşkiya* (*The Bandit*, 1996), Turkish filmmakers started to reclaim their country's reputation as a hub for cinema. Within a few years, this slow trickle of filmmaking activity turned into a steady stream of high-quality productions. Thus, while Turkey was only producing around 20 films per year in the early 2000s, by the end of that decade, that number had quickly risen, and in 2011, 75 Turkish films were produced. This increase in film production does not yet seem to be at an end, and in early 2012, Turkish Cinema General Director Cem Erkul [stated](#) that his goal is to have 100 films produced annually by the end of 2013.

This revival began in the late 1990s when Turkish politicians gradually began to respond to pressure from filmmakers and

audiences to provide government support for domestic film production. In July 2004, the Turkish government passed legislation that provides substantial financial support for feature film projects, especially those that are perceived to have artistic or social merit. A selection board meets twice a year to review applications for funding. Support ranges anywhere between 200,000 and 400,000 Turkish Lira (TL) (around \$110,000 to \$220,000). In the first five years of this legislation, the government [distributed](#) nearly 30 million TL (around \$17 million) for the production of 140 films. Films to receive funding include award-winning productions like director Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Bir Zamanlar Anadolu'da (Once Upon a Time in Anatolia, 2011)*.

Recently, heated debates have erupted over plans to change the government support system. Pending legislation would direct funding away from art house projects and towards films that are more commercially oriented and films that promote family values, a conservative shift in policy that reflects the broader goals of the currently-ruling Justice and Development (Adalet ve Kalkınma, AK) Party. In early 2012, a petition signed by eighty-two of Turkey's leading filmmakers protested this potential legislation. However, Culture Minister Ertuğrul Günay [responded](#) that there had only been a misunderstanding. Günay claimed, "The incentives will continue as they were. We are trying to create new ways to support more films."

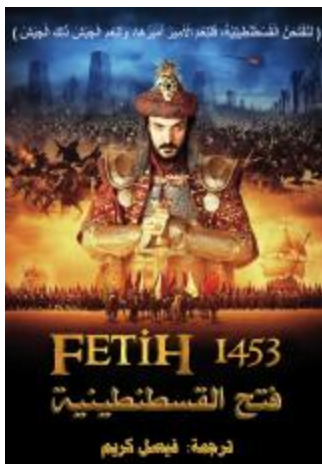
While government support is significant, the major takers at the box office remain in private hands. In recent years, some of the most successful Turkish films have been produced by such newly-formed companies as Aksoy Film and Pana Film. Many of

these companies are involved in multiple forms of media production. Pinema Film, for instance, is heavily involved in film distribution and DVD production, and Med Yapım, the production company behind the 2012 blockbuster *Fetih 1453*, has produced a number of television series. The movie business is no longer a standalone industry but like its counterparts elsewhere is increasingly characterized by transmedia collaboration and conglomeration.

The exhibition sector is likewise experiencing lively growth and corporate concentration. The Mars Entertainment Group, founded in 2001, is the leading cinema exhibitor in the country. Its chain, CineMaximum, currently operates over five hundred screens in twenty-four cities throughout the country. It also operates sixty percent of Turkey's digital screens and all of the country's IMAX theaters. The company is currently on target to operate over [1000 screens](#) by 2018. While most of Turkey's cinemas are concentrated in urban areas, they have spread throughout the country, and in 2011, it was [reported](#) that just five of Turkey's eighty-one provinces lacked cinemas.

It is important to note that even though domestic films have managed to overthrow Hollywood's reign at the Turkish box-office, foreign blockbusters are still enormously successful. Moreover, some of the most financially [successful](#) Turkish films are distributed by US-based companies—namely, Warner Bros. and United International Pictures, a joint venture of Universal Studios and Paramount Pictures.

3. Turkish films are popular with the diaspora and with Arab audiences throughout the Middle East.



While Turkish production companies have so far been unsuccessful exporting their films to the North American market, Turkish films circulate widely in the Middle East, and they are popular with Arab audiences who also watch Turkish television programs. Indeed, the *Valley of the Wolves* film and television franchise was so popular in Iraq that one reporter [noted](#) that some Iraqi cafes were being named after its characters, and according to Asuman Suner, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* was viewed by more than half a million people outside of Turkey.^[1] Turkish films are also shown in countries with large Turkish minorities—namely, Austria, Belgium, and Germany. Indeed, when Turkish films are [screened](#) in European countries with large Turkish-speaking populations, they are often presented with no subtitles.

Some have argued that the popularity of Turkish films amongst Middle Eastern audiences can at least partially be understood as a result of the industry's relative independence from Hollywood. The Turkish film industry is now in a position from which it can mimic Hollywood aesthetics without bowing to Hollywood politics. That is, Turkish cinema often reverses the traditional Orientalist tropes of US action films, presenting

Middle Eastern Muslims as the heroic protagonists and Western agents as the villains. As a blogger for *The Guardian* has [argued](#), “[T]he Turkish industry is learning to employ Hollywood bombast for its own ends. The results might be clumsy or abrasive, but they’re very exciting too. The makings of an alternative, un-American mainstream could be staring us in the face.” The most colorful example of this trend remains the explicitly anti-American action film *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*. At the time of its production in 2005, it was the most expensive production in Turkish film history. While Turkish opinion on *Valley* was far from monolithic, it was wildly successful at the box office, grossing around \$27 million and thereby breaking all existing records and surpassing in ticket sales the previous record-holder, the 2004 sci-fi comedy *G.O.R.A.*

More recently, entrepreneurial filmmakers have looked to extend Turkish film distribution to other global regions including China. In 2013, the Shanghai Film Festival [showcased](#) a series of Turkish films, a welcome development, according to the likes of director Ömer Can who noted the rapidly growing size and scope of the Chinese market.

[1] Asuman Suner. 2010. *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 14.

4. Government policies aim to attract international partners, including Hollywood.

With a few notable exceptions like *Topkapi* (1964) and *The World is Not Enough* (1999), very few major Hollywood

productions have been filmed in Turkey. Historically, the Turkish government has not offered incentives to foreign production companies, but in recent years steps have been taken to change this situation. The high tax rate that had previously been imposed on foreign film production has been abolished and in early 2012 it was [announced](#) that foreign film companies that take their productions to Turkey would be eligible for financial support. In addition to financial incentives, Turkey also offers foreign production companies a diverse variety of shooting locations as well as high quality production equipment including cameras and labs.

Several major Hollywood productions have taken [advantage](#) of these incentives. Scenes from *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (2011) were filmed in Cappadocia in central Turkey, and parts of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011), *Argo* (2012), *Skyfall* (2012), and *The Two Faces of January* (2013) were filmed in Istanbul.

In addition, Turkish politicians have recently [proposed](#) the idea of building a major production facility in Istanbul. During a trip to Los Angeles in April 2013, Turkish economic minister Zafer Çağlayan announced that Entertainment Development Partners (EDP) and Universal Studios were [exploring](#) the potential of this \$3 billion project. Dubbed "[Hollywood on the Bosphorus](#)," the facility would also include a theme park, hotels, and a cruise ship terminal.

On the one hand the Turkish industry has made a dramatic comeback, offering some of the most successful and distinctive

feature films in the Mideast. Yet on the other hand this success is marked by growing scale and concentration of the industry as well as pressures to globalize its increasingly costly and stylish blockbusters. While some hail the success and rising stature of the industry, others worry that it is losing its distinctive qualities and its connection to the national audience. The current revival of Turkish cinema therefore represents a new phase for a film industry with a long and at times turbulent history. While many have praised this industry's recent successes for bringing foreign investment and positive international attention to Turkey, others worry that local interests are being neglected. They question the necessity of creating a "Hollywood on the Bosphorus" in a city that is already over-populated and heavily congested, and they are also concerned about the effect this industrial growth is having on small, privately owned theaters which can no longer compete in an era of big-budget spectacles and national cinema chains. In this regard, it is worth noting that Istanbul's historic Emek Theater was recently demolished in order to make room for a new shopping center. This was done despite months of protests by local activists. The Turkish film industry revival thus presents us with a complicated story marked by both development and destruction.