

Defining Arthouse: The Reception of European Cinema among the Istanbul Arthouse Audiences

by Sena Öndün

Since the early 2000s, Turkey has experienced remarkable growth in its audiovisual industry, with the success of local films dominating the box office charts, Turkish TV series winning global syndication and a notable presence at international film festivals. However, despite this overall success and visibility in the industry, Turkey's position in film circles remains a complex issue to this day. Turkey's historical and cultural components, as well as its geopolitical position between Europe and Asia, make it difficult for the country to position itself. The collaborative nature of filmmaking leads to cross-cultural exchanges between Turkish and European filmmakers. Co-productions and collaborations cross national borders by fostering a cinematic environment that embraces different perspectives. In this blog post, based on a study I conducted on Kadıköy Cinema, an arthouse movie theater in Istanbul, I would like to share some findings on how Turkish audiences perceive and relate to European cinema, and the place of cinema in audiences' cinematic practices.

The results shared here are a part of a bigger study on the only remaining commercial arthouse movie theatre of Istanbul/Turkey “Kadıköy Cinema”, which was conducted between September 2022 and January 2023, engaged 237 participants through an online survey comprising 42 multiple-choice questions and in-depth interviews with 17 participants. While the primary focus was on the audiences’ own narratives, the study tried to understand diverse dimensions of the audiences’ cinematic experiences, ranging from their movie-watching and cinema-going practices before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to their affiliations with film festivals and specific theaters while exploring the intersection of the relationship between the urban landscape and arthouse cinema scene in Istanbul. In the in-depth interviews, I found that the European cinema occupies a very important position for the Turkish arthouse audiences.

For the participants of this study, there is a prominent distinction between arthouse movies and mainstream movies and arthouse cinema has a close relationship with European cinema. One of the major findings in the study was about the audiences’ relationship with festivals. Festivals are the primary channels through which the audiences follow arthouse films, getting to know new directors and following the news from the industry. In the interviews, it was noticeable that some of the participants based a large part of their film-watching on films that were only shown at festivals and on films by directors who participated in festivals. Moreover, I observed that “prestige” has an important place in the audiences’ film preferences, and the audience considers some festivals more important and prestigious than others, and therefore forms their film preferences accordingly: “But not every festival, of course. I mean, there are such prestigious ones in Europe” (Female, 33 years old), “...I started to follow more current arthouse films. Cannes, Venice Film Festival, etc. I am curious about the films I hear about at these events” (Male, 28 years old), “I go through films that have made a splash at big festivals, or I go through certain directors who have made a splash at big festivals in the previous periods and whom I know. I usually discover them at a festival, a festival gives visibility to films after all. I can roughly say I follow four big European festivals: Cannes, Berlin, Venice, and San Sebastian” (Male, 34 years old). One noteworthy aspect here is that the audience generally included only European cinema and European festivals in the definition of arthouse cinema.

Among the festivals named throughout the interviews, only one non-European festival was ever mentioned (Sundance).

In particular, American cinema almost never comes to mind in terms of independent cinema and the concept of "Hollywood film" is used to define mainstream cinema, but the contradiction here is that when we asked the same interviewees about the directors they follow and watch, they easily listed American independent directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and David Lynch, and even a classical Hollywood director such as Alfred Hitchcock. One of the participants defined arthouse film as "A24" movies without knowing that it is an American based entertainment company, which shows how the American independents are also considered something exterior to "Hollywood" and as a part of arthouse cinema. For European arthouse cinema, most frequently named directors by audiences were Yorgos Lanthimos, Michael Haneke, François Ozon, Céline Sciamma, Christian Petzold, Gaspar Noé, Agnès Varda, and Federico Fellini. From Turkey, Zeki Demirkubuz, Emin Alper, Yeşim Ustaoglu, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan were cited. For the participants, European Cinema is considered to be the fortress of independent cinema and art film; leading me to deduct that the European-based idea of "classical" cinephilia continues to have an ideological basis in the eyes of the audience. On the other hand, American Cinema, and the concept of "Hollywood film" fell into the category of mainstream and more "entertaining" films for the participants. It appears that American Cinema has a bad connotation for the arthouse audience. However, in the practical experience of watching, as I have explained earlier, American independent cinema has an undeniable place alongside European cinema.

In conclusion, the question of how European cinema is defined remains ambiguous. However, this study highlights that for the audience, Hollywood versus European, critical prestige versus box office success, and auteur versus mainstream has a place. Arthouse cinema still has an equivalent as auteur cinema: "I prefer auteur cinema, because what we call art cinema actually leads us towards auteur" (Female, 33 years old). The Eurocentric concept of the 'classic' cinephile has a strong place among arthouse audiences in Turkey. As the cinema landscape evolves under the influence of online platforms, the dynamics between European and American cinema continue to shape the arthouse preferences of Turkish audiences. The complex interplay of industry forces, distribution challenges and audience reception raise ongoing questions about the future of arthouse cinema in Istanbul. But it is possible to say that defining European arthouse cinema opposite to Hollywood still has a validity in the eyes of the Turkish arthouse audience.

Suggested Citation: Öndün. S (2024): Defining Arthouse: The Reception of European Cinema among the Istanbul Arthouse Audiences, the REBOOT project, <https://thereboot-project.eu/>

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Disclaimer: This blog post is part of the 'Dissemination, Outreach, and Engagement' activities organized under Work Package 7 of the REBOOT: Reviving, Boosting, Optimizing, and Transforming European Film Competitiveness project. This project has received funding from

the Horizon Europe program of the European Union under the Grant Agreement No 101094769. It does not reflect the views of the European Union and is a publication encapsulated within the project. The original research was conducted with support from the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) 1002 Program, under the Grant Agreement No. 222K172.



Funded by the
European Union