

## Do film festivals help or hurt their host cities?

From Venice to Sundance, festivals often use huge amounts of a city's resources – but their social impact and financial benefits are undeniable.

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"I found shelter in a bakery from the water canons and tear gas," says Yasemin\*, a resident of Istanbul, recalling one fateful day in April 2013. She is not describing one of the many demonstrations that would snowball into Istanbul's massive Gezi Park protests only a month later. Yasemin is remembering the 32nd Istanbul International Film Festival.

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The Emek Resistance, as it came to be known, started when the Turkish authorities began to demolish the film festival's flagship location, the historic Emek cinema. News that the 875-seater 1920s building was to be replaced with yet another shopping centre (Istanbul had around 100 shopping centres at the time; today it has 114) politicised old and young festival-goers alike. Istanbulers like Yasemin took to the streets to demonstrate against unchecked urban development in the district of Beyoğlu. It was a precursor to a summer of city-wide dissent.

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What the 2013 Istanbul International Film Festival triggered was in many ways unique — but its political and social impact was not. Film festivals have long facilitated alternative cultural practices, avant-garde aesthetics, and the meeting of groups marginalised due to their political beliefs, sexualities or ethnicities.

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Film festivals have been around for almost a century, but more than three-quarters of those currently active were created in the past 20 years. Today there are over 500 major international film festivals, and thousands of local, niche, and intermittent ones. They are a truly global phenomena, cropping up everywhere from the Gambia, where the Cinekambiya International Film Festival promotes indigenous language films, to Iraqi Kurdistan, whose Duhok International Film Festival continued right through the 2016 siege of nearby Mosul.

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But, from Venice to Park City, Cannes to Shanghai, do film festivals turn their host cities wealthier year-round or bleed their resources? Do they help preserve a city's character or globalise it?

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The world's earliest film festivals, Venice and Cannes, were founded in 1932 and 1939 respectively but only blossomed after the second world war. Technology improved as Europe focused on economic recovery and urban reconstruction, spurring a re-invigoration of the arts. Film festivals also coupled conveniently with post-war efforts at international diplomacy and tourism – in fact the first president of the Venice Film Festival was the founder of a hotel chain.

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Today, film festivals operate more like micro economies. They can make smaller cities boom by bringing in business, giving young people a reason to remain in the region, and developing a city's national and international links. Park City in Utah, home of the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, is one example. At least 122,000 people attended the 2019 edition this winter, with out-of-state visitors spending an estimated \$149m (£120m). Planning and producing festival events created 3,052 jobs for residents. Miles Hansen, president and CEO of the state's World Trade Center, says: "Sundance is often one of the first things international business and government leaders know about Utah."

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But when a city becomes this synonymous with its film festival – and the kind of visitor that the global arthouse circuit draws – the effects can be mixed.

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The economic boosts delivered by a festival, such as large visitor numbers, can also drive up prices and put undue strain on the local environment. Venice is a case in point. The city has tried everything from taxes on day-trippers to bans on wheeled suitcases in an attempt to limit tourist numbers, but attendees of the Venice International Film Festival would hardly blink at €10. Widely seen as an Academy Award launchpad, it draws both the Hollywood glitterati and the discreet rich of the European indie arthouse circuit. The festival's logistical

60 demands temporarily monopolise Venice’s human resources. The end result is that businesses servicing the needs and desires of this high-flying group – luxury restaurants, private transport companies, florists, hotels – benefit, while those that provide city residents with their everyday needs – grocers, pharmacies, schools – usually don’t.

65 But a host city’s inhabitants can also claim a film festival as their own, especially if the programme is specialised. These can be identity-based, like BFI’s Flare LGBTQI+ Film Festival in London and the American Black Film Festival in Miami; issue-based, like the multi-city Human Rights Watch Film Festival and Kuala Lumpur’s Eco Film Festival; or hyper-local, like London’s East End Film Festival and the Brooklyn Film Festival.

70 These festivals cement a sense of community by helping like-minded people find each other in their city. In conservative societies, this can be a rare feeling for minorities. John Badalu, who founded Jakarta’s Q! Film Festival in 2001, recalls that, at the time, Indonesia’s LGBT communities had never seen themselves represented on screen. “People didn’t know how to search for gay and lesbian films,” says. “When we asked them to come to our festival, they asked, ‘are there such films?’”

80 Independent programming also tends to better resist state censorship, because closer relationships with the filmmakers and greater control over the programme means organisers can be agile in the face of the unexpected. The Istanbul International Film Festival is a case in point – despite the Turkish state’s attempts at dubbing it “terrorist propaganda”, it continues to showcase Kurdish documentaries. When a screening of North by Çayan Demirel and Ertuğrul Mavioglu was banned at the 2015 festival, for example, programmers organised an alternative screening, “unaffiliated” with the festival, for members of the public.

85 Sometimes, however, organisers cannot take that risk – or they have no say in the matter at all. Just this month, Beijing censored the opening film of the 2019 Shanghai International Film Festival. The 1930s war drama The Eight Hundred, which lionises the role of a small group of rebel Chinese soldiers in defeating the Japanese, was abruptly replaced for “technical reasons” – a popular euphemism for censorship. The social power of movies has long been a thorn on the side of authority, from the days of British rule in India to the Soviet Union in Africa.

90 In Kiev, the Docudays UA International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival screens films on complex topical issues – last year’s was focused on human rights and the “digitalisation” of life. Programme coordinator Olga Birzul believes the festival content “has contributed to an increase of critical thinking” and played a part in creating active citizenship in a post-Soviet city. With a secessionist war in Ukraine’s Donbass region ongoing, the festival organisers are trying to increase Kiev residents’ literacy around human rights, encouraging the city’s inhabitants to reject us-versus-them thinking.

100 In Istanbul, the film festival enabled a grassroots progressive movement that allowed locals to vocalise long-held grievances about the destruction of Istanbul’s historic neighbourhoods, the co-optation of public urban space, and money laundering via ill-conceived building projects. The AK government did demolish Emek Cinema, but it caved in to public pressure and scrapped the shopping centre idea. The “New Emek”, a faithful replica of the original, was completed in 2016.

105 “The film festival takes me to parts of the city where I feel like I’m around my kind of people,” says Ege, a graduate student from Istanbul. “It makes me think, ‘oh ok, so there are a lot of people who care about the issues I do’.”

*\*Some names have been changed*

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