



# A Venetian Odyssey for Turkish cinema



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## By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**T**he 71<sup>st</sup> edition of the world's oldest and highly celebrated Venice International Film Festival begins today on the Adriatic-swept and lagoon-washed island of Lido, with Alejandro Inarritu's *Birdman* (also known as *The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*). Starring Michael Keaton, Edward Norton, Amy Ryan, Emma Stone and Naomi Watts, *Birdman* is a black comedy about a Broadway actor struggling to mount a play. And how he does this by subduing his own ego and getting his career and family back on track is what Inarritu's work is going to tell us.

In the days that will follow the opening night, Turkish cinema may well hold centre stage. This is not just 100 years of the country's movie industry, but also the dawn of a realisation that Turkey is capable of creating some great work on screen.

We saw an example of this last May at Cannes, when Nuri Bilge Ceylan, showed his brilliant *Winter Sleep*. Tracing the life of a former theatre actor – who grapples with newspaper columns, the small hotel he runs in a remote mountainous region and the moods of his pretty, young wife and divorced sister – *Winter Sleep* clinched Cannes's highest trophy, Golden Palm, and later became Turkey's official Oscar submission in the foreign language category. Not just this, Ceylan and *Winter Sleep* appear to have nudged the world into wakefulness about Turkish cinema.

Interestingly, this cinema will be quite visible at Venice this year. Veteran Fatih Akin

will showcase his *The Cut*, while newcomer Kaan Mujdeci will unroll his *Sivas*.

Akin caused a furore last April when he withdrew *The Cut* from the Cannes Film Festival lineup citing "personal reasons". The movie starring French actor Tahar Rahim, focuses on the touchy issue of the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Turkey under the Ottomans. *The Cut* is the final part of Akin's trilogy called, Love, Death and the Devil. The first two films were *Head-On* and *Edge of Heaven*.

While 20 countries see the 1915 mass killing as genocide and hold Ankara responsible for it, the rest of the world ignores this issue, preferring to maintain a relationship with Turkey, which has been living in denial of the whole thing.

And obviously *The Cut* has become a point of friction between Akin – who now lives in Germany and whose cinema combines political and social criticism with a bit of humour – and Turkish nationalists. The fact that Akin makes great pictures which have won international acclaim does not cut ice in Turkey. For some Turks, the genocide is absolute taboo.

The radicals in Turkey have now called for a boycott of *The Cut*, competing for the Golden Lion at Venice. They have also issued death threats against Akin, and said he would not be allowed to enter Turkey.

(All this seems like a replay of what is happening in many parts of the world. Iran does not tolerate screen dissent. Jafer Panahi is under house arrest and banned from making movies for a long time. China is as ruthless with helmers who do not toe the official line. In India, films run into problems too: even after they are duly censored, some political organisation or the other finds

something to quarrel about and tries its best to stop screenings. There has been a spurt in such incidents of late.)

Akin's original plan was to direct a movie on the late Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, who sought a dialogue between Armenia and Turkey. He also wrote a great deal about the genocide. In January 2007, he was shot dead in broad daylight.

His murder shocked and angered both liberal-minded Turks and Armenians, and they demanded the repeal of an Act under which anyone found accusing Turkey of the genocide could be jailed. Even the Nobel Laureate, Orhan Pamuk, was tried for talking about the genocide to a Swiss newspaper. The charges against him were dropped after a huge international outcry.

Given the dangerous trend, it is not surprising that Akin could not find a Turkish actor willing to portray Dink. The director had to give up this project, and take on *The Cut* – where a young man, Nazareth Manogian (Rahim), who survives the genocide realises that his daughters may be alive. He search for them takes him to Turkey, Syria, Cuba and the US.

As for Kaan Mujdeci's *Sivas*, it is non-controversial. Set in the Anatolian province of Yozgat, *Sivas* follows the life of an 11-year-old child and his friendship with a fighting dog. The Festival Director, Alberto Barbera, told the media recently that Mujdeci "had great talent. He is a real cineaste and we want him to be better known as a director."

### Frances McDormand

The Venice International Film Festival will honour American actress Frances McDormand with the Persol Tribute to Visionary Talent Award 2014. The prize



### PUTTING TURKEY ON THE MOVIE

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will be given away on September 1, and the ceremony will be followed by the screening of Olive Kitteridge, helmed by Lisa Cholodenko and starring McDormand, Richard Jenkins and Bill Murray.

McDormand has had four Academy Award nominations – *Fargo* (1996) *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Almost Famous* (2000), and *North Country* (2005). She won the statuette for *Fargo* – where she excels as a pregnant cop who nails a car company salesman for a murder. Indian actress Vidya Balan playing a pregnant woman in *Kahaani* a couple of years ago reminded me of McDormand in *Fargo*. I felt that much of Balan's mannerism had been lifted from *Fargo*.

McDormand's other movies include *Promised Land*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, *This Must Be The Place*, *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted*, *Burn After Reading*, *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, *Friends With Money*, *Laurel Canyon*, *Something's Gotta Give*, *Wonder Boys*, *City By The Sea*, *Madeline*, *Primal Fear*, *Lone Star*, *Palookaville*, *Chattahoochee*, *Darkman*, *Hidden Agenda*, *Short Cuts*, *Beyond Rangoon*, *Paradise Road*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *Raising Arizona*, and *Blood Simple*.

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