Cinema in Turkey has seen a significant renaissance within the last decade, with film and audience numbers rising, as well as major awards for Turkish auteurs from international film festivals. For over six years, the highest grossing films in Turkey have been local fare, surpassing any Harry Potter or Transformers sequel, or even Avatar. Some of these are significantly large productions, backed by the largest Turkish production companies, such as the action film Valley of the Wolves (Kurtlar Vadisi, Akar, 2006). Others are comedies with smaller budgets, like the Recep Ivedik films, the first two of which (Gökbakar, 2008 and 2009 respectively) share the top two spots of all-time Turkish box office.1 Alternatively, internationally acclaimed directors such as Semih Kaplanoğlu and Yeşim Ustaoğlu take advantage of a relatively new state support system as well as international initiatives such as Eurimages. Every year, however, more and more films get made in Turkey, and many of them are unable to receive these types of funding – and more significantly, fail to succeed commercially. For every Turkish film that becomes the box-office champion, there is another one that occupies the bottom position at the box office. But these films too, get made, demonstrating a certain faith and dedication shared by aspiring filmmakers across the world. In this paper, I will look at the contemporary Turkish film industry, focusing on different types of financing models.

There have been two recent studies that have analyzed the financing resources in contemporary Turkish cinema. One is part of a broader research project undertaken by a team lead by Hülya Uğur Tanrıöver and commissioned by the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce; the other study, by Eylem Arslan, is titled “The Evaluation of the Production Resources Used in Turkish Cinema Before and After 2000s.”2 Both reports mention a variety of resources, but mainly focus on the state funding and Eurimages, which ultimately account for a very small portion of financing of all films released.3 As structured and clearly defined support systems, both the state funding and Eurimages are much easier to track, analyze and describe. Where most of the money for other productions comes from is referenced under the very general heading of “own resources.” This includes anything from the corporate decisions by ‘angel investors’ to borrowing money from friends and family. These resources are hardly ever disclosed by filmmakers, and never discussed publicly, paving the way to rumors of tax evasion and even money laundering. This, of course, is an investigation that will have to be lead not by film scholars but other authorized parties. For my part, I will try to classify the main

Follow the Money: financing practices in contemporary international cinema
funding types into three categories and discuss them with three production companies as case studies. But in order to make a clearer sense of the current dynamics underlying the web of relations in Turkish cinema, it is useful to take a look at its history.

A Brief History of Turkish Film Industry

Cinema in Turkey started out as a state affair, with the army producing the first documentary and short footage in the country, which was then the Ottoman Empire. While the initial production companies were founded in the early 1920s, these were rather limited in their output, and it was not until the 1940s that the number of companies showed an increase. Following a tax break for local films that was instituted in 1948 many more companies entered the market, although most were short-lived. The ‘Yeşilçam’ period is named after Yeşilçam Street, on which most production companies were based. This significant era started in the late 1950s, and its peak was reached in the 1960s with an average of 150 films per year. Funding was often based on a “bond system”, which was in effect an extended IOU structure. All labor was dependent on future payments, consequently relying on loan sharks: illegal bankers who carried significant weight within the industry.

Also during this period, regional distributors started gaining importance, significantly influencing the types of films that got made. From the early 1960s on, Anatolia was divided into regions and sub-regions, with the distributors only focusing on the region within which they were located. These distributors took over all the work previously done by production companies themselves. Beyond mere intermediaries, these companies often dictated producers in Istanbul what types of stories with which stars were demanded by the audiences, and provided them with the payments - the initial bonds - which essentially financed the entire production.

The heyday of Yeşilçam continued until the mid-1970s, with an average of about 175 films yearly. In 1972, Turkish cinema set a record with 299 films, making Turkey one of the most prolific countries in the world. In the 1960s and the 1970s, 224 and 237 more firms were founded, respectively. In her in-depth account of ‘Yeşilçam’, Serpil Kirel lists the largest 17 production companies that made 637 of the 1710 Turkish films released between 1960-69. These 637 films account for only 37% of the entire output. Unlike its American counterpart, the Turkish film industry has never been a strong oligopoly. Possibly as a result of this, the companies also failed to be long-lasting: out of these 17 companies, only four still survive today, and only Arzu Film is currently active as producer of theatrical releases.

The dominance of local productions came to an end in the late 1970s for a number of reasons. After the 1973 OPEC crisis and the 1974 military intervention in Cyprus, the general well-being of Turkish economy deteriorated notably. As the ticket prices went up, the overall attendance at movie theaters declined greatly. The general unrest in the society that made the streets unsafe kept families away from the theaters, and the proliferation of television further abetted the decline of ticket sales. The popularity of soft porn

Recep Ivedik (2008), one of the highest grossing Turkish films of all times

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films, along with the musical ‘arabesk’ genre, both aimed at the poor male immigrants in urban areas, helped keep production levels still relatively high in the late 1970s despite the drop in general admissions. All the same, the number of films produced per year sharply declined throughout the following two decades. Concurrently, the number of cinemas also declined, and particularly, a large number of the smaller independent theaters closed down.

After the coup d’état of 1980, Turkey underwent enormous social changes. In the film industry, many of the smaller companies shut down, giving way to new producers that targeted the newly flourishing video market. The structure of distribution was also drastically altered. In 1989, Warner Bros. (WB) and United International Pictures (UIP) started distributing both local and foreign films in Turkey. Throughout the 1990s, the prominence of these foreign distribution firms was seen as one of the reasons why Turkish cinema could not recuperate its former health. While films were still being produced in Turkey, getting distribution was a significant problem. Out of 37 films produced per year in 1995 and 1996, only ten were released in theaters each year.

It was one of these ten films released in 1996 that is now often seen as the turning point for the country’s film industry. Yavuz Turgul’s *The Bandit* (*Eşkıya*) came out in November, and ultimately sold over 2.5 million tickets. As the box-office numbers from the ‘Yeşilçam’ era were not properly archived, *The Bandit* was considered the highest grossing film in Turkish film history. It remains ever popular, as it was voted “Best Turkish Film of All Times” in a recent poll conducted by *Sinema* magazine. Since *The Bandit*, forty local films have surpassed the million-ticket benchmark. The market share of Turkish films does fluctuate, but there has been a steady overall increase since 2002. More importantly, the overall number for movie-going audiences showed an increase of over 50 per cent, from 25,257,326 in 2000 to 38,528,956 in 2008, where it has remained since.

1996 was also a turning point for independent film-making in Turkey, as Derviş Zaim’s *Somersault in a Coffin* (*Tabutta Rövaşata*), an ultra-low-budget art-house picture, picked up four awards at the Antalya Film Festival, the oldest and most prestigious national film event. Other major directors of the era, the new generation of the nineties, have also made a splash at festivals following Zaim. In 1997, Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s first feature, *The Small Town* (*Kasaba*) debuted in Berlin, where it received the Caligari Prize. The same year, awards at Antalya were divided between Ferzan Özpetek’s *Steam: The Turkish Bath* (*Hamam*) and Zeki Demirkubuz’s *Innocence* (*Masumiyet*). Özpetek went on to become a leading figure in transnational cinema as a Turkish-Italian filmmaker, and Demirkubuz became one of the key figures of low-budget filmmaking in Turkey.
and the first private channel, Magic Box, legalized its broadcast by 1993, when it was restructured. During the earlier half of the 1990s, a number of production companies have had pre-sales deals with the new television channels but this practice was discontinued after the economic crisis of 1994. The expansion in television has led to a similar growth in advertisements, the largest component that contributes to television channels’ revenues. The increase in advertising production further expanded the audio-visual sector in Turkey, and contributed to the betterment of local film laboratories, which also cater to theatrical releases.

Another visible and significant influence to fire up Turkish cinema in the 2000s is the support system set up by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. After years of complaints from the industry about how the state never provided any help to the cinematic sector, ‘The Law for the Evaluation, Classification and Support of Feature Films’ was passed in July 2004, followed by the ‘Regulation for the Support of Feature Films’ established in November of the same year. Since 2005, the selection board has been convening twice a year to determine the projects to be supported in development, production and post-production.

The situation in Turkey is similar to that in countries such as Iran or Romania in the sense that the examples of popular cinema remain strictly local and films that do make the cinema of ‘Turkey ‘hot’ abroad are rarely seen in domestic theatres. Transnational film-makers like Özpetek and Fatih Akin do have their films released in Europe and garner respectable audiences, but whether their films can be considered ‘Turkish’ is another debate. Additionally, popular Turkish films are released in countries with significant Turkish immigrant communities, such as Germany, Austria and the Netherlands. These films are often shown without subtitles, and their box-office success frequently mirrors their fortunes in their native market. Out of roughly 300 films released between 2006-2011, forty sold more than a million tickets each, but more than half have sold less than 100,000. While the break-even number obviously depends on the film’s budget, it is safe to say that the low ticket sales most of these films attain not enough to recuperate expenses for any production.

The largest source, as discussed by E. Arslan, is the income from distribution channels, mainly from theaters. Clearly, this does not apply to first-time filmmakers. Television sales can account for a small part of the budget, but again, first-time filmmakers can often not seal advance sales deals with television channels and it is the larger projects that do receive significant sales to television. Home theater market revenues are estimated to be about one tenth of box office revenues, again sidestepping new entrants. Distribution companies provide some assistance, either by paying advances on box office revenues or by facilitating loans from banks for filmmakers. State support and Eurimages comprise the two largest structured resources, along with funding that comes from (mostly) European national and regional funds with international co-productions. Sponsorship and product placement have also been employed in recent years, but are restricted largely to more mainstream and potentially popular films. Nearly all these resources come from within the sector, where money gained from filmmaking is re-invested. Input from adjacent sectors like television or advertising, or financing secured through outside means, like the loans mentioned above, are often neglected in accounts of resources. Their significance, especially for first-time filmmakers, is enormous.

MAJORS, MAVERICKS AND CONTENTERS

The current production environment in Turkey allows for the existence of a relatively large number of production companies. Between 2006 and November 2011, 312 films were (co-)produced by 227 different production companies. Many of these are minor ventures that work on a small scale, the contenders. In fact, 172 firms are associated with just a single project, and 25 with only two. Major players, who have produced five or more films in the last few years, are also the commercially successful ones, creating a cycle where films that earn money at the box office allow the companies to invest further into production. In between lie auteur-producers, the mavericks who consistently make films every few years.

A look at the highest grossing films of the last decade reveals a clear major player: Fida Film. Fida (co-)produced ten of the highest grossing –
i.e. with sales above one million tickets - Turkish films since 2004, when it released its first film. Fida Film was founded in 1965 as a screen advertising company. For over forty years, the company has been marketing the theaters to advertisers and currently is a national monopoly in this domain. It is furthermore involved in various stages of filmmaking. Fidalab was established in September 2010 in order to print copies of feature films as well as commercials. Fida’s foreign film department, active since 2004, acquired theatrical, home video and television domestic distribution rights from studios and sales companies such as New Line, Lionsgate, Summit, and Mandate Pictures.

The decision to embark upon production had been taken by Fida Film due to its long term involvement with the country’s distribution and exhibition systems. In this sense, it makes business sense for a company that already possesses detailed market data and know-how about consumer choices to engage in the production process. Fida Film’s first co-production was in 2004, with The Class of Chaos (Hababam Sınıfı, Tibet); the next year, it released The Class of Chaos in the Army (Hababam Sınıfı Askerde, Eğilmez). The Class of Chaos was the remake of a classic Yeşilçam era comedy series from the 1970s. Both of these films were co-produced with Arzu Film, the original producer of the series. Entering a new field with an experienced partner was a conscious choice, as was choosing a beloved franchise that audiences already had a rapport with. Moreover, the release of potential hits that would increase overall audience numbers in Turkey would be (and has been) further beneficial to Fida Film, which stood to gain from this growth in terms of its advertising business. As initial investment, Fida used the revenues from its other businesses, and as a co-producer, made sound deals that would recoup its investment quickly.

In December 2007, 70% of Fida Film was purchased by SU Private Equity, a fairly new private equity fund established by Standard Ünlü Bank in 2006. This has allowed for a relatively more comfortable cash flow of resources for production budgets, benefiting from the various other investments Standard Ünlü has, as well as its ability to raise funds more readily. Fida has also started producing films without partners; but in all cases, the company favors a minimum-risk approach, favoring large-budget projects that appear likely to achieve a certain level of ticket sales over smaller ones that may (or not) become runaway hits. Since its involvement in production began in 2004 until the end of 2011, the company co-produced 20 films. It is no small feat to have half of these surpass the million-ticket mark. Project decisions still lie largely with Murat Akdilek, president of Fida Film. In May 2011, Fida purchased Tiglon, one of the largest Turkish theatrical distributors, a representative of 20th Century Fox, and leading home video company with 70% market share. Through this acquisition and the potential synergy of its ownership of such a large distribution company, Fida further enhanced its position in the sector.

The second category is comprised of filmmakers who have already established themselves and can raise funding through state and international support systems. Many of the directors within the festival circuits have their own production companies, allowing them to work independently. Semih Kaplanoğlu, who won the Golden Bear in 2010 with Honey (Bal), is also the owner of Kaplan Film, which only produces his projects. Kaplanoğlu justifies the founding of his company by pointing to the negative experiences during the shooting of his feature debut, which was externally produced. Similarly, Yeşim Ustaoğlu founded Ustaoğlu Film in 2003 to produce only her own films. The financial backing for these productions comes from the traditional ‘arthouse’ structures: state support, international funds, as well as rewards won at festivals.

The greater part of the funding provided by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism is allocated for feature films. These are to be repaid to the Ministry only in case the film can recuperate its production costs at the box office. Although producers who are unable to repay their support funds are not allowed to apply with a new project for three years, if their film is invited to a competitive feature film festival or wins a significant award, this waiting period is deferred. The selection board has been evaluating feature film debut projects separately since 2008, presenting new filmmakers with an opportunity by evaluating them on a different set of criteria than the more experienced and established directors. The support for a first feature film is slightly lower,
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varying between 160,000 and 250,000 Turkish liras (around USD 80,000-140,000) for all projects. From 2005 until 2009, a total of 140 films have been given nearly 30 million Turkish liras. While the amounts handed out may be only a portion of the films’ budgets, they do provide a good starting point. Especially for first-time directors, support from the state functions like a reference facilitating application to international funds. Unfortunately, failing to get the state support often results in not being able to secure any further financing from international bodies.

Eurimages is the Council of Europe fund for the co-production, distribution and exhibition of European cinematographic works. Shortly after Eurimages’ founding in 1988, Turkey became its eighteenth member in 1990. Meeting four times a year, Eurimages currently offers four types of assistance: for co-production, for distribution, to cinemas, and to digitization for Eurimages-funded projects. Among these categories, supporting co-production is by far the most significant, amounting to 90 per cent of the fund’s resources. Since its establishment, Eurimages has supported 1306 European co-productions for a total amount of approximately 390 million euros. Of these co-productions, 61 have Turkish companies as their primary producers, and these pictures have received a total support of nearly 13 million euros over two decades. Like the Turkish ministry funds, these amounts are interest-free loans that are repayable from each producer’s net receipts. Production support from the fund almost directly results in closer attention on behalf of international festivals and distributors.

In addition to Eurimages, the Hubert Bals Fund established by the International Film Festival Rotterdam, has been a major source for various stages of funding for Turkish filmmakers since 2005. Similarly, the Berlinale’s World Cinema Fund also provides production and distribution support. While these funds often offer smaller amounts, their well-regarded status allows films that receive a grant from these programmes to move into important networks and festivals. Exposure in major festivals enables international sales, and helps create networks for future productions. More recently, national festivals have become a significant source of cash infusion for the lucky few. The oldest national film festival is held in Antalya every fall, and its Best Film prize comes along with a 350,000 TL award. Trying to establish itself as a viable competition for Antalya, Adana Film Festival has increased its Best Film award to the same amount. Other festivals also offer smaller prizes. Since 2008, TURSAK (Turkish Cinema and Audiovisual Foundation) has been giving out the Yeşilçam Awards in cooperation with Beyoğlu Municipality (the site of the original Yeşilçam Street), modeled after the Oscars. The Best Film selected by a jury reportedly comprised of 1500 members of the industry and “the cultural elite” wins 250,000 TL. Clearly, there is no guarantee for a film to receive any of these awards. In case of a win, the cash gains either go towards financing the next project, or in the case of most newcomers, towards covering up existing debt taken out to complete the film.

Derviş Zaim established Marathon Filmcilik in 1996, while shooting his debut feature Somersault in a Coffin. He has since made five more films, in a variety of production modes. For his feature debut, he was unable to raise any outside funds initially and shot the film with his own money, personal loans and help from friends. As a director/producer, he is able to choose from his existing projects and adapt to existing conditions. Hence, as his first and nearly budgetless production, he preferred a small story with a limited number of actors and very few locations. For post-production, he was able to secure a deal with IFR Productions, then an advertising company looking to enter the feature film business, and completed the film with their support. The success of Somersault in a Coffin opened a path that enabled Zaim to continue with his directing career. For his second project, Elephants and Grass (Filler ve Çimen), he collaborated with Pan Film, and used a mixture of personal resources and support from industry members in the form of cheap rentals of equipment and volunteer labor, without any formalized funding.

Having established himself as a filmmaker, Zaim started employing transnational funding with Mud (Çamur) in 2002. Mud was shot largely with financing from the Swiss foundation Montecinemaverite, with Marco Muller acting as co-producer. It received funding from Eurimages, but had no Turkish financial support. One of
the major reasons for this was that the film dealt with Cyprus, the filmmaker’s homeland and still a delicate issue within the Turkish context. It was only after Mud that Zaim was able to secure television sales for his following films, his trilogy based on traditional Turkish arts. Waiting for Heaven (Cenneti Beklerken, 2006) received Eurimages support, Dot (Nokta, 2008) was made on a very limited budget with funding from the ministry and his latest film, Shadows and Faces (Gölgeler ve Suretler, 2010) was his first to receive a pre-sale to a television channel.

Zaim’s success lies not only in his direction, but also in his ability to act as a flexible director/producer, using different types of production schemes according to each project’s requirements, and choosing projects according to available resources. The achievements of his initial projects have allowed him to make further work possible. Not all filmmakers can accomplish this. Many first-time filmmakers are unable to continue with their directing careers. Which brings us to the third and final category, which comprises the majority of films in Turkey: those made without the aid of existing fan bases and outside of domestic and/or foreign state aid structures. These are the films made by production companies that can shoot only one or two films, and ultimately fold. The case study I want to focus on is One Day or Another (El Yazısı, Vatansever, 2012), not yet released at the time of this writing. The production company, Terminal, is active in “film, photography and graphic design.” Terminal was founded by Ali Vatansever, Selin Vatansever and Oya Özden. The former also happens to be the director of One Day or Another, while the latter two function as its producers.

One Day or Another started its journey on a high note, with a script development grant from the 45th International Antalya Film Festival in 2008. Putting the project together and raising funds took a long time, however, and the shooting was only done in the summer of 2011. The project was unable to receive any support from the state, and as a result, it was unable to obtain further international funding. As a first film without significant star presence, it also did not receive any sponsorship deals. Terminal then had to turn towards its own sources: filmmakers took out personal loans from the bank, as many small production companies often do. They also turned toward their family and friends for help, and raised funds through personal connections. Although it is very risky, many first-time filmmakers employ methods such as these to fund their films. Regrettably, the box-office revenues consistently fail to meet the cost of the films, leaving the investors in the red. This pattern...
also helps to explain the 172 production companies that have only produced one film.

What set Terminal apart from those companies was its creative approach to fundraising: through the filmmakers’ personal interest in new media and alternative ways to raise money, crowd funding emerged as an option and *One Day or Another* became the first Turkish film to employ this method to create resources. Crowd funding is the creation of a network to collect money through small donations, often via Internet. As with many film projects who have employed this method in the U.S. and Europe, supporters could choose one of the several categories. 10USD, the minimum amount of support, gets a mention on the website, with increasing amounts receiving various perks such as a signed poster, special mention in the credits sequence, a DVD copy of the film, a visit to the set, becoming an extra in the film, and for 5,000USD, an associate producer credit. While the campaign did not generate a significant amount of funds (about 15,000USD total), it did create an interest in the film in the mainstream media, which ultimately helped its public relations. While it is unlikely for any film to raise its entire budget this way, crowd funding can be seen as an alternative to buttress existing funds for smaller projects.

From personal bank loans to private equity involvement; from awards to state support; from sponsorship to crowd funding; the myriad different methods employed by filmmakers and producers at all levels all point out to both the weakness and the strength of the Turkish film industry. Its dearth of formalized systems for fundraising limits the filmmakers from a financial point of view. Possible changes to the financing system, allowing more popular and family-friendly productions to benefit from aid have been suggested, but it is too early to tell whether this will affect the smaller production companies. But at the same time, the lack of ossified systems allows for greater flexibility and creativity both for financing and for a general sense of the project. For those who can manage to survive, it is a world full of opportunities.

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Endnotes

1 Out of 264 films shown in the country in 2008, 50 were Turkish and 214 foreign (19 per cent and 81 per cent, respectively); nonetheless, Turkish films reached 60 per cent of the market share in terms of the number of tickets sold, placing the country fourth in the world after the United States, India and South Korea (Yunus Kaya, “Türk Sinema Sektöründe 2008 Yılı Değerlendirmesi,” 8 November 2009, http://www.gedik.com/GetData/FmmWebDosya.ashx?Dizin=AnalizDosyaKlasoru&Fi le=111.pdf&DownloadFile=2008 YILI SINEMA SEKTORU DEGERLENDIRMESI.pdf). While this share has decreased in the following years, it has remained persistently above 50%.


3 Only 22% of the films released between 2006-2010 received support from the state, and only 4% of the films produced between 2005-2010 were supported by Eurimage. Tannröver 56, 58.


7 S. Arslan 104-105.

9 Abisel, 103.
12 Serpil Kurel, Yeşilçam Öykü Sineması (Istanbul: Babil Yayınları, 2005), 58.
13 Erkılıç, 177
14 “100 Best Turkish Films” Sinema (Special Issue, November 2011)
15 Market share figures for Turkish films are as follows: 8.5% in 2002, 22.9% in 2003, 37.4% in 2004, 42% in 2005, 51.8% in 2006, 38.1% in 2007, 60.1% in 2008 and 50.9% in 2009. All figures are from Antrakt weekly magazine.
16 One would need to note that the average annual attendance per capita for the whole population has increased from 0.37 to only 0.53 per year. In comparison, French audiences go to the cinema around 3 times per year per capita (http://stats.uis.unesco.org).
17 Erkılıç, 167
18 E. Arslan, 26.
20 E. Arslan, 28.
22 Interview with Orhan Erkal, an executive producer at Fida Film. November 7th 2009.
23 Zeynep Özbatur, “Bağımsız Yapımcılar ve Yönetmenler”, Türk Film Araştırmalarında Yeni Yönelimler 7, ed. Deniz Bayrakdar (İstanbul: Bağlam Yayınları, 2008), 146.
24 Production support from WCF has been granted to three projects as of 2012: Kaplanoğlu’s Süt (Milk, 2008) and Ustaoğlu’s Pandora’nın Kutusu (Pandora’s Box, 2008) and Araf (Somewhere in Between, 2012)
25 The information pertaining to this section has been obtained via a personal interview conducted with D. Zaim on November 30, 2011.
26 Marco Muller was formerly the head of Rotterdam and Locarno Film Festivals, and currently heads the film section of the Venice Biennale. He has also been active as a film critic as well as a producer, and has founded Fondazione Montecinemaverità.
27 The information pertaining to this section has been obtained via a personal interview conducted with A. Vatansever, S. Vatansever and O. Özden on November 23, 2011.