

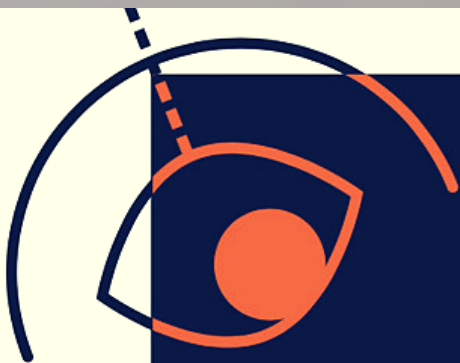
# SHORT PAPER SERIES



A  
BRIEF  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
TURKISH  
CINEMATHEQUE  
ASSOCIATION

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AYSECAN AY



OBSERVATOIRE  
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Institut Français de Géopolitique

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TURKISH CINEMATHEQUE ASSOCIATION**

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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TURKISH CINEMATHEQUE ASSOCIATION

Ayşecan Ay

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*The idea of preserving films is as old as the film history itself, however the idea of a proper institution that preserves and screens films as well as making a film museum had been realized by the one and only Cinémathèque Française. Founded in Paris by Henri Langlois in 1936 who saved huge numbers of films and film-related documents during the World War II, the Cinémathèque has functioned as a school for young cinephiles and filmmakers particularly during 1950s and 1960s. Some of its regulars were Turkish intellectuals like Onat Kutlar, Hüseyin Baş and Şakir Eczacıbaşı who dared to dream of having a Cinémathèque in their own country. This brief paper is an attempt to illuminate the realization of a dream and its heritage in Turkish cultural life.*

### Introduction

The Turkish Cinémathèque Association was unsurprisingly the product of a particular historical conjuncture. During the 1960s, throughout the world, a new generation of auteurs like Satyajit Ray, Akira Kurosawa, Andrei Tarkovsky, Ingmar Bergman emerged who regarded cinema exclusively as an art form. In the meantime, Turkish cinema was just ripening into an industry and reaching unprecedented numbers of motion picture productions per year, albeit not exactly following the above-mentioned trend in the world cinema.

Turkish cinema had long been dominated by theater players who simply treated cinema as a form of theater, hence unintentionally impeded the development of a genuine cinematic language. On top of that, European films' access to the Turkish market was disrupted by the World War II and instead, heaps of typically fatalistic Egyptian melodramas were imported and eagerly consumed by audience in Turkey.

Producers were well-aware of this eagerness and reluctant to let go of its financial return. In a developing country with a deep-seated authoritarian state tradition, it was not surprising to see movie moguls stick to profitable tear-jerkers instead of explicitly adopting a critical stance and use the medium to criticize and possibly alter the existing state of affairs. Even today, one can still observe the effects of this period of melodramas on the majority of Turkish TV series.

The Constitution of 1961 which was introduced following the 1960 coup d'état proved to have a relatively liberating effect. For the following ten years literature, music, theatre and art milieus in general enjoyed a fruitful period by and large; cultural activities became an integral part of the urban life and were adopted by diverse segments of the society. By then, "the masterless master" Lütü Ö. Akad appeared on the cinema stage and practically ended the theater players'

dominance by inventing a long-awaited cinematic language. In the meantime, a generation of well-read intellectuals who wished to see the films of their favorite foreign directors on the big screen had started to articulate and act on their wish. After all, in the beginning of the 1960's, one could hardly have access to a film archive of any kind let alone talk about an established movie culture. Not in Turkey at least.

The idea of preserving films is as old as the film history itself whereas the idea of a proper institution that preserves, conserves, restores and screens films as well as containing a film museum had been realized by the one and only Cinémathèque Française.

Founded in Paris by Henri Langlois in 1936 who saved huge numbers of films and film-related documents during the World War II, the Cinémathèque has functioned as a school for young cinephiles and filmmakers especially during 1950's and 1960's.

Some of its regulars were Turkish intellectuals like Onat Kutlar, Hüseyin Baş and Şakir Eczacıbaşı who dared to dream of having a Cinémathèque in their own country. Kutlar and Baş were already friends from Paris and they met Eczacıbaşı when they were all back in Turkey. They were then joined by Aziz Albek, Semih Tuğrul, Tunç Yalman, Tuncan Okan, Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, Cevat Çapan, Macit Gökberk, Nijat Özön and Muhsin Ertuğrul.



*Photo 1: Hüseyin Baş, Onat Kutlar, Jak Şalom during a meeting in 1967*

## The French Connection: Foundation of Turkish Cinematheque in Istanbul

The founding team hired an office in Mis Street, Beyoğlu and started screening movies in Kervan Cinema, Şişli with 600 seats. Later on in 1970, the movie theater moved to Sıraselviler, Taksim. The office in Mis Street was a one room, simple apartment. The Turkish Cinémathèque Association was founded on August 1965, showing French New Wave films sent by Langlois himself. At the outset, the association was screening 3 movies a week and by 1972, the number of weekly screenings had risen up to 20. The movies in question mostly consisted of French New Wave, Italian neorealism, Eastern European, USSR and American productions.

The association did not include Turkish productions and it not by a coincidence or a mistake; it was rather a deliberate expression of the association's harsh criticism towards the Turkish movie

industry. They criticized the industry for serving the economic interests of local capital and US imperialism. The local industry reacted just as harshly, accusing the association of working for CIA at first, and then they blamed them back for serving communism.

Augmenting the distinction between popular films and arthouse films, the dispute marked the beginning of an intense feud not to wear off in half a century. Yılmaz Güney who had a political stance similar to the Cinémathèque team was an exception to the embargo. He was considered an honor to the notorious local film industry. Lütfi Ö. Akad had already made three films with him and after having watched *Umut* (*Hope*, 1970) in the Turkish Cinémathèque with Güney, he was reportedly very excited and said that it was "our first realist film".



*Photo 2: Altan Yalçın, Yılmaz Güney, Jak Şalom in 1971.*



## Criticism and Censure

The association viewed cinema as a medium capable of displaying the gap between current reality and the potential it holds for change. Therefore, dissident intellectuals have always regarded and defended the medium as a realm for effective criticism whereas the state has always attempted to keep this threatening realm under control. Initially, the Turkish Cinémathèque managed to screen films without any censure thanks to the Cinémathèque Française and the consulates general of Eastern European countries.

However, as its impact grew, state institutions started to force censure mechanisms on the association. Consulates did not want their 35mm copies to be damaged in the notorious censure board in Ankara, refrained from submitting the copies to the board hence many films could not be screened. Yet it is ironic that, instead of the films that could be censored

due to several reasons, the association always screened either Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potemkin* (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1925) or Mikhail Romm's *Obyknoennyy fashizm* (*Ordinary Fascism*, 1965). One night, *Battleship Potemkin* was actually scheduled to play at the movie theater and even the secret policemen who waited at the theater door at every screening were amazed by the hundreds waiting to get in the theater.

The audience of the association mainly consisted of people from middle class and students and they were all very politicized. So much so that after the 12 March 1971 Military Memorandum, a high rank military officer told Şakir Eczacıbaşı that they were planning to shut down the association because they found a Cinémathèque membership card on every person they arrested or detained and surely there had to be a reason behind this!

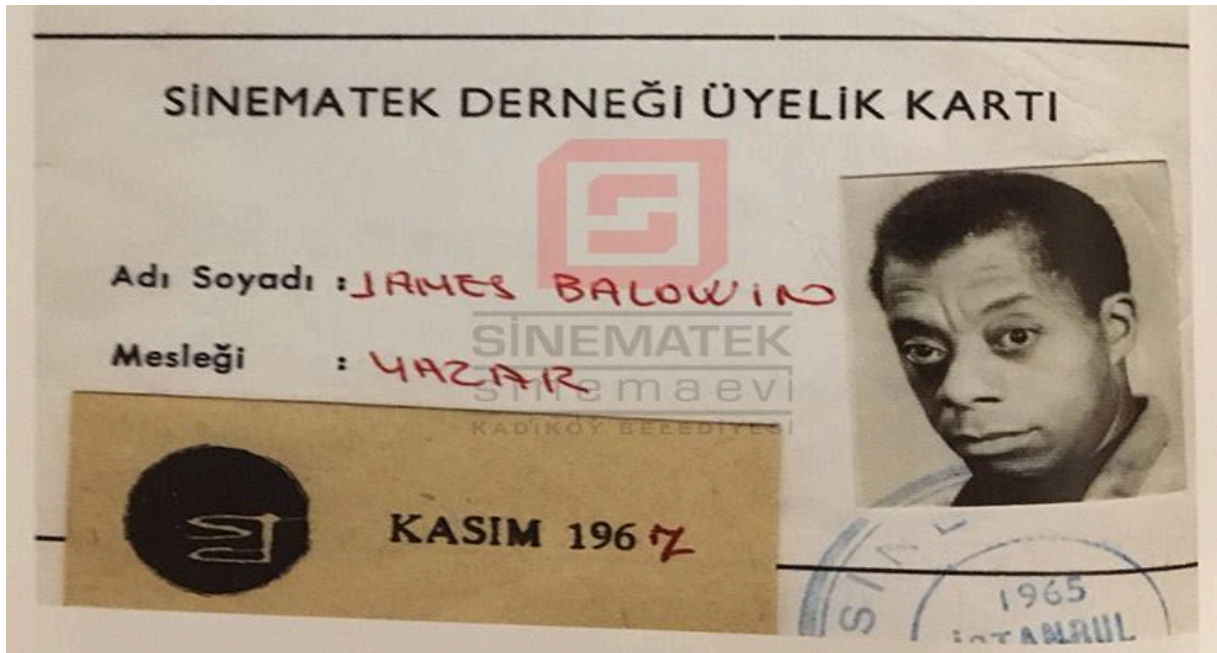


Photo 3: Turkish Cinematheque Association membership card of James Baldwin, 1967.

## Golden Years of Turkish Cinematheque: 1965-75

The most active period of the Turkish Cinémathèque Association was 1965-1975. Within these 10 years, the association screened approximately 3,000 feature films and 2,000 short movies from 37 countries; hosted almost a hundred guests from abroad; organized panels, programs and conferences and even published a few books.

The association also published a periodical entitled *Yeni Sinema* (New Cinema) that reached 6,000 readers despite difficult economic and technical conditions of the period. The first issue was published on March 1966 and its publication continued until 1970. 30 issues were published in total, except for the 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> issues published in 1980. Initially, it was planned as a monthly periodical but sometimes ended up being quarterly, ranging between 40 and 70 pages, including a leaflet with the list of films to be shown that month.

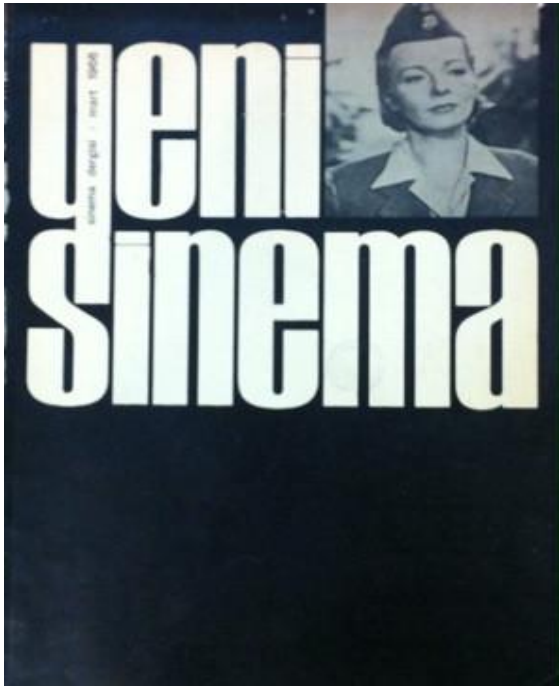


Photo 4: First issue of Yeni Sinema, 1966

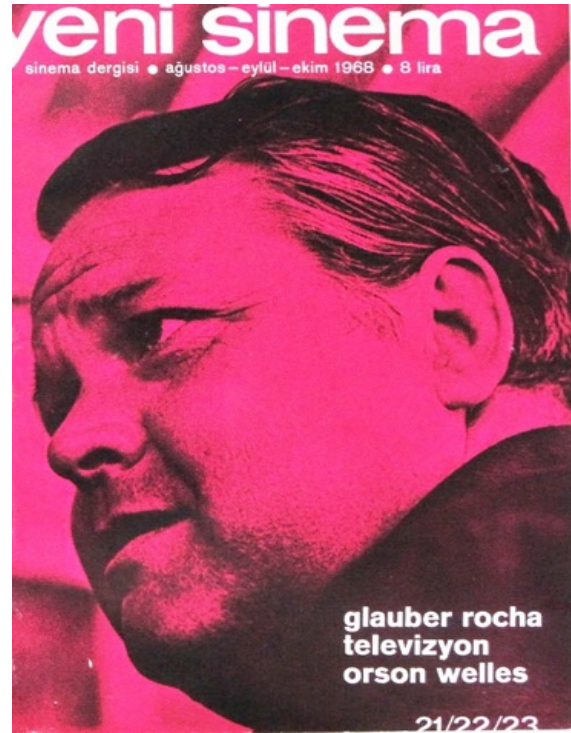


Photo 5: Cover of Yeni Sinema in 1968

The periodical hosted an all-star cast of writers including Onat Kutlar, Nijat Özön, Rekin Teksoy, Giovanni Scognamiglio, Ali Gevgilili, Cevat Çapan and Ülkü Tamer. The publication adopted a Marxist tone of criticism and aimed to create a change in the cinematic status quo of Turkey. It emphasized that cinema had a crucial role in raising political mobilization whereas the Turkish movie industry complied with the political power, distracting its audiences' attentions from social reality. Moreover, its artistic value was also very limited.

The writers explicitly favored 'the third world cinema' rising in various parts of the world and believed that Turkey could be a part of this movement.

Therefore, the articles reiterated their faith in a young generation of filmmakers who were expected to establish a new Turkish

cinema and a new society in general. This new generation of filmmakers was also important in terms of their internationalist cinematic culture as well as their political positions about the oppressive, exploitative state of their own country.

*Yeni Sinema* underlined the necessity of building a strong organization in order to create a new cinema with a new generation of filmmakers. To this end, it has contacted and supported cinema clubs all over Turkey, assigning the Cinémathèque Association as the center of all related activities.



Photo 6: *Yeni Sinema* Special Issue on Turkish Cinema

*Yeni Sinema* criticized the filmmakers' relations with state institutions, defining censure as a major problem. It also emphasized the lack of film education as the primary obstacle for progress of the

cinema industry. Pointing at the depoliticized character of existing movie scripts, it offered a more revolutionary style of script-writing in particular and filmmaking in general by giving examples from Italian neorealism and French New Wave. The authors defined Turkish cinema as the cinema of an underdeveloped country and refused to be limited by its narrow horizon. *Yeni Sinema* whose stance was characterized by social realism, helped to raise a new generation of filmmakers and film critics and created a vivid discussion platform.

One can argue that its meticulous, theoretical take on cinema is virtually still unmatched by the current film magazines today.

Despite these accomplishments mentioned above, the Cinémathèque Association was unable to collect films, establish an archive and exhibit non-film items related to film history because it lacked government support.

Nevertheless one could confidently claim that it fulfilled its main purpose: with the aim of creating a suitable environment where an alternative Turkish cinema could flourish, the association screened examples of world cinema to which Turkish audiences had hardly any access until then. Also, it enabled a free space where the films could be discussed after the screenings hence transformed movie watching into a more intellectual experience with an elaborated theoretical debate.

Overall, the association did succeed to develop and disseminate a sophisticated movie culture in the country.



## After the 1980 Coup d'état: From Film Days to a Great Festival

1970s meant a rather turbulent decade in the history of Turkey. Rural-urban migration, urbanization, industrialization and unionization, urban poverty and squatting went hand in hand. Therefore the timing of Lütü Akad's migration trilogy consisting of *Gelin* (The Bride, 1972), *Düğün* (The Wedding, 1973) and *Diyet* (Blood Money, 1974) reflects the atmosphere of this particular period par excellence. Every worldview conflicting in the political arena of the country had its own cinematic take on these social issues. 1960s witnessed the clash of the Cinematheque team's internationalist approach with the National Cinema approach of Halit Refiğ, Metin Erksan and others. The leaders of the National Cinema praised poverty and poor protagonists as the symbols of a lost culture while condemning Western intellectuals' stance as alien and hostile to their own local culture. According to Refiğ, social realism had an elitist tone and had never actually resonated with the general public. On the other hand, Yılmaz Güney viewers would hardly agree with him. During this decade, as was the case in the political space, the filmmakers and auteurs were sharply divided by their different political stances. Yet towards the end of the 70's, the big screen could no longer deny the mounting unrest in the society. Even *Selvi Boylum Al Yazmalım* (The Girl with the Red Scarf, 1977) which is mostly considered a purely romantic film and which is among the most enthusiastically exalted objects of nostalgia today, in fact centers around the main concept of the workers' movement: Labor. So much so that, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Antalya Film

Festival where *Selvi Boylum Al Yazmalım* comes in second, it is *Maden* (The Mine, 1978) that receives the first prize.

When the Turkish Cinémathèque Association was shut down with 12 September 1980 coup d'état, among all the other associations in Turkey, Onat Kutlar and his friends had already been working in the cinema department of the Ministry of Culture since 1975 where they were occupied with organizing Istanbul Film Days. The festival which was first carried out as a film week in the summer of 1982 evolved into International Istanbul Film Days as early as the following year.

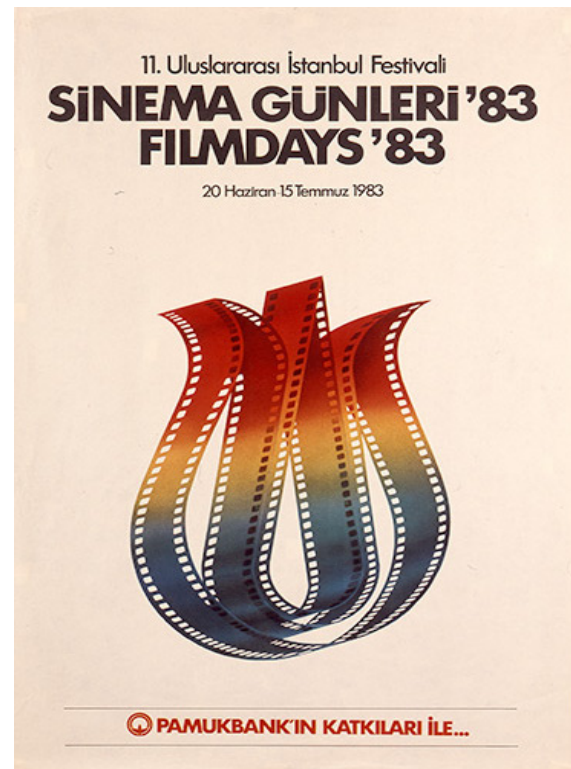


Photo 7: In 1983, under the title “International Istanbul Film Days”, 36 films were shown in one month.



*Photo 8: Posters of Istanbul International Film Festival*

Shifted to April in 1984, the first Golden Tulip prize in the history of the festival was given in 1985 to Michael Radford for his movie *1984*.

In 1989, the film week was recognized by International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) as a “competitive specialized festival” and renamed as the Istanbul International Film Festival. Documentary competition was added to the festival in 2015 and short film competition in 2016 whereas the Seyfi Teoman Best Debut Film prize started to be given in 2013, in memory of the writer, director, producer Seyfi Teoman, who lost his life tragically. In the 25<sup>th</sup> year of the festival, Meetings on the Bridge program was established in order to bring together producers, directors, scriptwriters and various representatives from Turkey and Europe whereas a “Neighbors” platform was launched in 2016 to strengthen relations with the filmmakers of neighboring countries.

By the year 2017, the festival had so far screened a total of more than 5,128 films from 109 countries, to a total audience of

3,842,000. In 2017 alone, 100,000 people attended the screenings.

One of the main creators of this project was Onat Kutlar. Born in 1936, Kutlar completed his high school education in Gaziantep and later, respectively and partly attended the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts, Istanbul University Law School and University of Paris Philosophy Department. After his return to Turkey, he took on an executive role (1965-1976) in the Turkish Cinémathèque Association of which he was among the founders, wrote articles for *Yeni Sinema* (1967-1970) and managed the Ministry of Culture Film Production and Screening Center since its foundation (1978-1980). He was also an executive board member of the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSİ).

In the meantime, he prepared art programs and documentaries for the state TV and penned weekly articles in the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*. No doubt, Kutlar was a very important intellectual. In addition to a great number of film reviews and several translations, he wrote poetry, short stories, essays as well as



Photo 9: 38<sup>th</sup> Istanbul International Film Festival, Poster of 2019.

movie scripts like *Yusuf ile Kenan* (*Yusuf and Kenan*, 1979), *Hazal* (1979) and *Hakkâri'de Bir Mevsim* (*A Season in Hakkâri*, 1982). 1994 recipient of the Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres from France, Onat Kutlar continued to be a crucial figure of the cultural life of Turkey until he lost his life as a result of a bomb attack at the Marmara Hotel, Taksim in 1995.

The year 2015 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Turkish Cinémathèque Association as well as 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kutlar's death. Jak Şalom who was the very first member and later on a devoted volunteer of the association, first organized a panel to commemorate Onat Kutlar and also screened one of Kutlar's favorite films: *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963). This simple yet tender commemoration was followed by the long-running event "Sinematek is Alive! 50 films and 50 presentations in the 50<sup>th</sup> year".

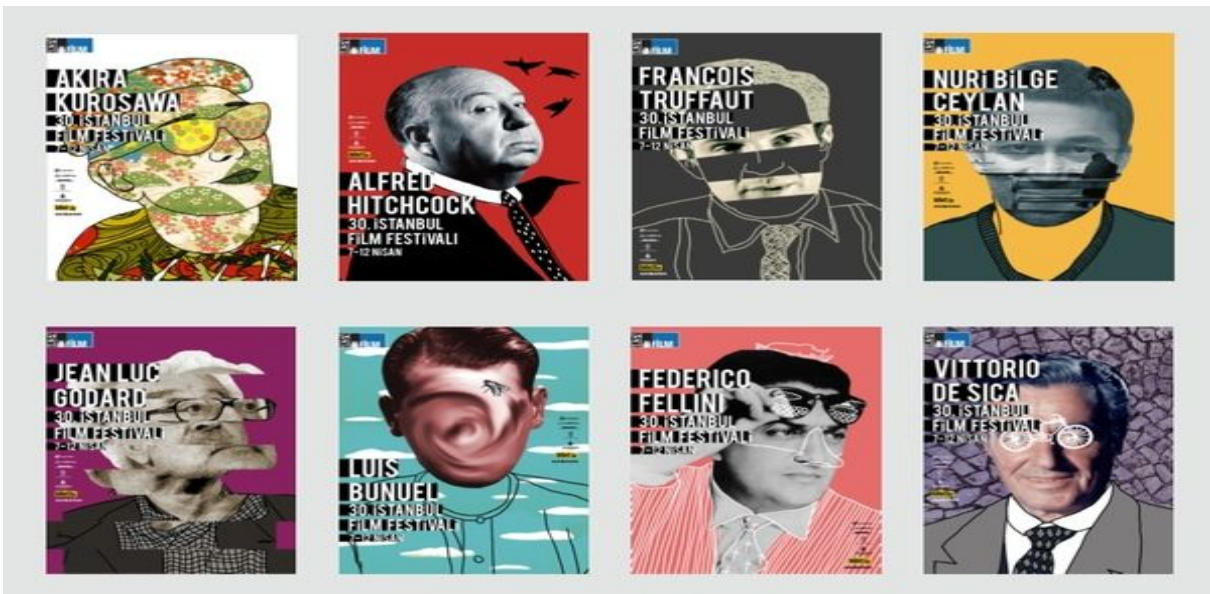


Photo 10: A Collection of Posters of Festival, 2014



## After 50 years “Sinematek is Alive!

With the altruistic and precious efforts of a small group of volunteers like Hakkı Başgüney, the screenings met 500 viewers every week. One of the screening venues belonged to Kadıköy Municipality and the mayor was apparently impressed by the stir that these screenings caused. The rest is history; history of the new Sinematek/Cinema House that will pick up where the Turkish Cinémathèque Association left off and even add to its legacy by serving as a Cinema House for young filmmakers, establishing a proper archive, providing further opportunities for public discussions and individual movie viewing alike.

The new Cinémathèque building will be located near Yoğurtçu Park, Kadıköy. The building will include a 160 seat movie theater, film archive, library, exhibition space and individual movie watching modules. There will be two screenings every day, six days a week. In addition to retrospectives dedicated to filmmakers, film movements and various themes; silent films, documentaries and short movies will be regularly screened. Moreover, exhibitions, panels, seminars, workshops and cinema lessons will be held. Construction of the Sinematek/Cinema House is hopefully planned to be completed by Fall 2019. Until then, Sinematek keeps screening films in different venues in collaboration with various institutions in Istanbul.



*Photo 11: New “Sinematek” to be opened in Istanbul’s Kadıkoy District*



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