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### German, Turkish or Both? Fatih Akin as an International Identity

In the age of globalization and easy travel, it is no longer easy to classify some people by a single nationality. One such person is the director Fatih Akin. Born to Turkish parents living in Germany, Akin's native language is German and he calls Hamburg-Altona home. To the Turkish press, he is a Turkish director. To a minority of the German press and to many film scholars, he is a German director. Yet to much of the German press, Akin is a Turkish-German director. This paper will explore how Fatih Akin is labeled by the media at home and abroad.

### Literature Review

Fatih Akin has been the subject of much research in the academic world, especially regarding his portrayal of young Turkish Germans, Turkey and the borders between Europe and the Middle East. A sampling of that research will be explored in this section.

In a 2004 report for the European Stability Initiative, former German Federal Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer wrote a report, "Turkey's European Perspective: The German View," which mentioned "Head On" and labeled Akin as one of a plethora of

Turkish-Germans contributing to Germany's economy and contemporary culture.

Fischer's mention of the film in this context shows the importance of "Head On" as a German film by a German director of Turkish descent.

In 2006, Daniela Berghahn wrote about Akin's films, "Gegen die Wand," "Solino" and "Kurz und Schmerzlos," as films depicting accented cinema characteristics. Berghahn called Akin "one of the most prominent directors of contemporary German-Turkish cinema," but acknowledged that he, "describes himself as a German filmmaker" (141). She argued that the underlying theme of Akin's films is "the migrant's experience of rootlessness and the redemptive promise inherent in the return to one's Heimat" (141). She also used the terms "eclectic mix" and "cultural hybridity" to describe Akin and his work.

Also in 2006, Courtney E. Johnson wrote a master's thesis about "Gegen die Wand" and Akin's depiction of second-generation Turks living in Germany in that film. Johnson argued that Akin condensed the discussion of cultural identity for German-born Turks into one film with "Gegen die Wand." She calls the film a "victory for all of Germany" and focuses on Akin's role as a director of German films (67).

In 2007, Petra Fachinger discussed Akin's "Kurz und Schmerzlos" and "Gegen die Wand," along with Yadé Kara's "Selam Berlin," calling the films proof that contemporary Turkish-German directors are rewriting the new German Cinema.

Fachinger, who uses the term, "Turkish-German," attributes this rewriting to "a new Turkish-German self-definition...by playfully undermining persisting stereotypes of Turks as well as of what 'ethnic' filmmaking is supposed to be about" (243). Fachinger argues that Akin also depicts multiple value systems beyond traditional Turkish and traditional German value systems.

Also in 2007, Polona Petek wrote that Akin's "Gegen die Wand," through its soundtrack, has the power to "activate musical taste as the axis along which new forms of multicultural bonding can emerge" (177). Petek argues that Akin chose his soundtrack carefully so that it would appeal to viewers from diverse backgrounds, in order to get them to appreciate something from a different culture and accept it into their own cultures.

In 2008, Thomas Elsaesser described Akin as "a German filmmaker with a Turkish name and Turkish parents" (Elsaesser 35). Elsaesser discusses "The Edge of Heaven" ("Auf der anderen Seite") as the second film in Akin's trilogy, following "Gegen die Wand."

## Background

In a country of more than 82 million people, Turks make up the largest minority group (2.4 percent of the population) in Germany (Germany 1). The presence of Turks in Germany is largely attributed to the Marshall Plan, or European Recovery Plan,

which was enacted in the Western occupation zones in 1948 and brought guest workers from around Europe to Germany, Britain, and France to help rebuild those war-ravaged countries (Bullivant 212). The people who came to Germany through this program were thought of as guest workers who would get the country working again and then return home. Yet many Turks remained in Germany, inviting their families to join them and creating homes in the new country. The original guest workers' literature and film was often called "Gastarbeiterliteratur" or "Migrantenkino" (Schäffler 5). It was easy to name these works migrant literature because the people creating them were the first generation of workers, the original *Gastarbeiter*. The terminology became more complicated, however, when those workers' children, who were born on German soil and grew up speaking German, began to produce their own works—and it becomes even more complicated as the third generation begins writing and producing films.

According to film studies scholar Diana Schäffler:

In der Auseinandersetzung mit und der Suche nach ethnischer und gesellschaftlicher Identität ist seit Mitte der 1990er Jahre bis heute bei den jungen deutsch-türkischen Filmemachern die Distanz zu dem "Betroffenheitskino" der 1970er und 1980er Jahre unverkennbar. (Schäffler 30-31).

The second- and third-generation Turks living in Germany do not see themselves as outsiders in the same way the first-generation Turks did. The members of these younger generations are often labeled “Turkish-German,” or “Deutsch-Türke.” Schäffer says the main difference is the level of integration the younger generations have achieved in relation to their parents. For example: “Anders als in den Migrationsfilmen der 70er and 80er Jahre, die immer wieder klar abgegrenzte Kulturen aufeinander prallen ließen, stehen im Zentrum vieler dieser neuen Filme offene Formen des Zusammenlebens in einer hybriden, urbane Gesellschaft” (Schäffler 31). In other words, the new generations are part of a multicultural atmosphere in Germany—and in the world—that erases the borders and boundaries that previously separated the first-generation guest workers from the ethnic Germans. Yet Turkish-German identity is still a contentious issue, especially in the realm of the media. Can a Turkish-German ever be identified simply as “German”? This question will be discussed in the next sections.

### Identification in Germany

Fatih Akin is a popular contemporary figure in Germany. He is frequently interviewed in the media and his films are highly anticipated. When he is introduced in articles and interviews, however, the German media most often identifies Akin by somehow attaching to him the label of being “Turkish.” Several examples of this will be given in this section.

The most common, and natural, place for Akin's ethnicity to be mentioned is in online biographies. The first sentence of his biography on the German film Web site, [filmportal.de](http://filmportal.de), lets the reader know Akin is the son of Turkish immigrants (Fatih Akin—[filmportal.de](http://filmportal.de) 1). His parents' status as *Einwanderer* is also mentioned in biographies of Akin on [kino.de](http://kino.de) and [film-zeit.de](http://film-zeit.de). The wording on the [film-zeit.de](http://film-zeit.de) biography, however, is important because it places Akin more in the realm of being a German director of Turkish heritage than of being a Turkish director who was born in Germany. For example, "Der türkischstämmige Fatih Akin gehört zu den jüngsten und erfolgreichsten Regisseuren Deutschlands" (Fatih Akin—[film-zeit.de](http://film-zeit.de) 1). This is the first line of the biography, and although Akin's parents' *Einwanderer* status is mentioned later in the text, the importance of his parents being Turkish is less prominent because of its placement further down the page.

Another popular medium for discussing Akin is in online film publications. These Web sites are often created for film fans to satiate themselves with information about their favorite actors, directors and films, reviews and interviews. One example is "filmszene special." "filmszene special" interviewed Akin before "Gegen die Wand" came out. The first line of the interview's introduction sets the reader up for an interview with "Der Hamburger Deutsch-Türke Fatih Akin" (Hoffmann 1). The wording places emphasis on Akin's identity as someone who comes from Hamburg, then as a German, and finally as a Turk. While the mention of him as a *Hamburger* and

as being *Deutsch* are enough to identify him as a German director, the author, B. Hoffmann, also threw in the word *Türke* for good measure—to let the reader know Akin’s ethnic background.

The most common place for readers to find information about Akin is in newspaper articles, reviews and interviews. An article about Akin in the online magazine, Deutschland Online, focused on Akin as a German-Turkish director, with the word “deutsch” in first position. The article names Akin “Vorreiter des neuen deutsch-türkischen Kinos” (Nicodemus 1). Unlike scholar Petra Fachinger, who attributed the rewriting of the New German Cinema to Turkish-Germans like Akin, Katja Nicodemus makes the distinction that Akin’s cinema is New German-Turkish Cinema, not just New German Cinema. By using the phrase, “deutsch-türkischen,” Nicodemus makes the distinction that Akin is not an ethnic German, and therefore his films simply cannot be seen as German films; they are Turkish-German films, and must be labeled as such. In the later sections of the article, which mostly reviews “Auf der anderen Seite,” Nicodemus goes on to contradict Schäffler by saying all of Akin’s films “reflektieren die Geschichte der türkischen Migranten in Deutschland” (Nicodemus 2). By saying this, Nicodemus takes on a traditional ethnic German mindset, saying that Turkish-Germans, no matter whether they were born on German or Turkish soil, are still migrants.

Another article, by Hanns-Georg Rodek in the online magazine, Welt Online, takes on a starkly different classification of Akin than that in Nicodemus' article. Rodek's article, "Fatih Akin spricht jetzt ganz sanft zu uns," which reviews "Auf der anderen Seite," never mentions Akin's ethnicity. He is labeled neither a Turkish director nor a German director; he is just Fatih Akin. Perhaps this is a step closer to Akin being identified as a German director. It is not common for an ethnic German to be labeled as German when being identified by the media. That Rodek felt no need to identify Akin as a Turkish-German director, the child of Turkish parents or a German director of Turkish descent perhaps shows that Rodek seems Akin simply as a German director.

Another article that does not mention Akin's nationality or ethnicity is Alexander Carlo Stenzel's review, "Archiv: Deutsch-türkische Identität: 'Auf der anderen Seite' von Fatih Akin." Although the title uses the term German-Turkish to describe the discussion of identity in "Auf der anderen Seite," Stenzel never attributes it to Akin. Here again, as in Rodek's article, Faith Akin is simply Fatih Akin, with no need for an ethnic or national descriptor. In the review, the idea of German-Turkish identity is discussed in terms of the characters' interactions with one another, but not in terms of their individual identities. This could signal the term "deutsch-türkische" being used solely to describe the exchange between the inhabitants of two different countries, rather than to describe the identity of one person living in either country. Akin is also written about without being identified as Turkish in the Stern article, "Matinee mit

Fatih Akin: ‘Kommt Zeit, kommt Teufel!’” and in the [Gala.de](#) article, “Fatih Akin: Ausgezeichneter Regisseur” (Senffleben 1; Fatih Akin—Gala 1). In the German version of [Vanity Fair](#), he is number 84 out of the Top 100 Germans (Vanity Fair 1).

An interesting phenomenon that encapsulates all of the above ways of identifying Fatih Akin is present in a group of articles from [Spiegel Online](#). Three articles from the online site for the German newspaper [Der Spiegel](#) identify Akin in three different ways. In Anke Dürr and Marianne Wellershoff’s interview, “Turkey is neither Eastern nor Western. Or is it Both?” Akin is identified in the first sentence as a “Turkish German director” (Dürr 1). In Lars-Olav Beier and Matthias Matussek’s interview, “From Istanbul to New York,” Akin is identified as a German director. And in Christian Buß’s review, “Jedem seine eigene Heimat,” Akin is identified simply as “Regisseur Fatih Akin” (Buß 1). That three different ways for identifying one person can exist within a single publication—one of Germany’s top news publications, at that—shows that there is no canon for identifying the second- and third-generation minorities living in Germany. It appears the preference of each individual journalist, and how he or she views Akin within the journalist’s realm as a German, dictates how Akin should be identified, because the purpose of the three articles is similar—to discuss Akin’s work for the audience.

## Identification Abroad

The construction of Akin's identity by the German media is problematic because it is the construction of his identity at home, often as someone who must be identified as being of a different ethnicity. The way Akin is identified abroad, however, travels on a different tangent. Abroad, Akin is seen either as a Turkish director or simply as a director, with his nationality and ethnicity being of little importance.

In an "All Things Considered" interview with Akin that ran on National Public Radio on May 12, 2009, Akin is identified as "Filmmaker Fatih Akin" (Norris 1). His background is only briefly discussed, and the interview and accompanying article focus on him as a filmmaker who deals with a variety of issues in German and Turkish life. He is similarly described in an interview with Cinema Without Borders, identified solely as Fatih Akin and with his background being only minimally discussed. An article in The Japan Times, "The Man in Gray," describes Akin as having no definite identity. The article begins by discussing Akin as, "Praised for bringing Germany a long overdue win at Berlin, and in Turkey as a victory for a Turkish filmmaker, Akin comes across as being of both countries and neither" (Fazio 1). These three examples show a more globalized view of identity, attributing no single identity to Akin and recognizing him for his talents.

But when it comes to identifying Akin within the Turkish media, Akin is a Turkish director. In an article on the Istanbul Convention Visitors Bureau Web site, under "Turkey News," Akin is mentioned as "Turkish director Fatih Akin" and attributed with helping promote Turkey at the 60<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival (Turkish News 1). Akin is also thought of as a Turkish director in articles and reviews written by the Turkish media, and by Turkish film viewers writing on blogs and Internet fan sites.

#### Akin's Own Perspective

What the media in Germany and abroad cannot do is attribute its identification of Akin to his own self-identification. Akin sees himself as German, but acknowledges his Turkish heritage as part of what makes him who he is:

Me personally, I stand in opposition of tradition, but I am also loyal to tradition. I don't say everything is wrong. I don't believe in that. I would like to keep a lot of stuff from the Turkish heritage, some things I would not like to keep because I don't accept them. I was born in Germany, went to German school. (Volodina 1)

In that sense, Akin sees himself as a German of Turkish heritage. He rejects the notion that he is an immigrant, as Schäffler noted in "Deutscher Film mit türkischer Seele": "Der Regisseur wehrt sich immer wieder gegen die Festlegung, er mache 'Immigrantenf়ilme,' er versteht sich vielmehr als junger deutscher Filmschaffender, der

mitten aus dem Leben erzählt" (Schäffler 57). Akin sees himself as more German than anything else, and calls himself German rather than Turkish German. At the same time, he recognizes that his perspective can not be the same as that of the traditional German perspective, because of his Turkish heritage:

Unser Blick auf die deutsche Gesellschaft ist ein anderer. Und dadurch auch der auf das Kino. Wir haben noch einen zweiten Blick, den unserer Herkunftsländer. Dann sehen wir das Land durch ganz andere Augen. Das macht unsere Filme anders. Nicht, dass sie dadurch besser würden, das ist keine Frage der Qualität. Aber wir bringen einfach eine andere Perspektive ein. (Schäffler 36)

Akin acknowledges that his perspective is different than that of other Germans who are ethnically German. "He also realizes that ethnic Germans see him as more Turkish than German, perhaps because of his complexion, name or his parents' origins: "When you are born as a Turkish kid in Germany, you are born as an outsider; you are born as a minority" (Tehrani 3). Akin realizes that, German as he feels, he is still seen by some Germans as an outsider.

When Akin talks about Turkey, he also talks about it from an outsider point of view. In an article with the German online newspaper, taz, Akin said his depiction of Turkey in "Auf der anderen Seite" is very cynical. He said he had to do a lot of research

about Turkey, the Turkish government and Turkish politics before filming the movie (Glombitza 3). Because he comes from Germany and the German perspective on Turkey, Akin has to do lots of research to accurately depict Turkey. If he were really Turkish, Akin would know these things without having to research them—or at least that is the perception many of Akin’s fans and the media might have. But because he is German, Akin must educate himself about Turkey before attempting to portray it to audiences around the world.

Another example of Akin’s status as an outsider in Turkey is his 2005 film, “Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul.” Akin uses German musician Alexander Hacke as the central protagonist and travel journalist who introduces the viewer to the music scene in Istanbul. Because Akin is also an outsider in Turkey, it makes more sense for him to put an ethnic German in the external outsider position, introducing the viewer to Istanbul music in the same way Akin might if he were on camera. This is more acceptable to viewers who expect Hacke to be clueless about Turkey but who would expect Akin to be more knowledgeable about all things Turkish because of his heritage.

Although Akin does not see himself as Turkish and is constantly striving to educate himself about Turkey before filming it, he does not entirely mind being labeled Turkish by the media. In the “All Things Considered” interview on National Public

Radio, Michele Norris mentioned Akin surprised at being embraced as a Turkish filmmaker in Turkey:

“It’s OK with me, because I love my parents,” he says. “I love the country of my parents. If my parents want to consider me as Turkish, I don’t have a problem with that. So I’m both.” ... “I never had the feeling I want to be a messenger or the guy crossing the bridges and link the two worlds – no, no, no,” he says. (Norris 2)

Akin does not see himself in between two worlds. The notion of being labeled “Turkish-German” suggests being between Turkish and German, but at the same time being Turkish and German. From Akin’s perspective, however, the proper label would seem to be German of Turkish descent.

## Conclusion

In the United States, there are very few times when the media is allowed to mention a person’s identity. It is often seen as imprudent for a journalist to describe a source as black, Japanese, Native American or Hispanic unless the source’s ethnicity is absolutely necessary to the story. In Germany, however, a country that has long been homogenous, such sensitivity is rarely observed in the media. This is visible in the above-mentioned articles about Akin, where he is diversely described as Turkish German, A Turk and of Turkish descent by various news organizations. Although Akin

seems to have a simple way of describing himself, the larger discourse—how to identify the second- and third-generation minorities living in Germany—is as complicated as ever and does not yet seem to have an end in sight.

As a representative for second-generation Turks living in Germany, Akin seems comfortable with the notion that he is German. Yet he also does not mind being called Turkish because of his parents' origins, even if he does not see himself as Turkish.

Perhaps Akin said it best himself, in an article on the German film Web site

[medienhandbuch.de](http://medienhandbuch.de): “‘Mein Film ist Globalisierung,’ sagt der 34-jährige weiter. ‘Ich bin Globalisierung. Ich bin zu Hause in Hamburg, gleichzeitig ein Kind türkischer Eltern.

Und eigentlich ist das nichts Neues” (Medienhandbuch 1). Fatih Akin is best left to himself by the media—no reporter can describe Akin's identity better than he can.

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