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### Facing German Multiculturalism "Head-On"

Fatih Akin, perhaps Germany's most famous director of Turkish descent, has captured the criticism and love of audiences both at home and abroad. One of Akin's most recent accomplishments is the 2007 success, "The Edge of Heaven" ("Auf der anderen Seite"). The 20-time award winning film is the second in Akin's Life, Death and the Devil trilogy, a trilogy that will be completed in 2009 with "Soul Kitchen" and which was begun in 2004 with "Head On" ("Gegen die Wand"). "Head On," which received 23 international awards, shows young Turkish Germans living in contemporary Germany as both modern and Germanized, but still seen as outsiders existing between their respective German and Turkish societies.

#### Literature Review

Fatih Akin has garnered much attention in both the entertainment and the academic world for his films. While "Kurz und Schmerzlos" (1998) has received the most attention, "Head On" is at the center of a growing mountain of scholastic discussion, mostly looking at the film in terms of how it portrays Turkish German identity, and the relationship between Turkish and German culture.

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.

Courtney E. Johnson wrote her 2006 Master's thesis about Fatih Akin: "From Essentialism to Hybridity: Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand* as Portrayal of Second-Generation Turks in Germany." Johnson discussed "Head On" as Akin's contribution to the discussion of Turkish-German identity, specifically in relation to second-generation Turks living in Germany. Johnson's conclusion states that "Head On" is a victory for Germany and a step in the right direction for young Turkish Germans' assimilation in terms of them having a hybrid identity deemed acceptable by German society.

Daniela Berghahn's 2006 article, "No place like home? Or impossible homecomings in the films of Fatih Akin" and Alev Adil's 2007 conference paper, "Longing and (Un)belonging: Displacement and Desire in the Cinematic City," both discuss "Head On" as a film that deals with Turkish identity through a discussion of displacement, desire and diaspora.

Polona Patek wrote "Enabling collisions: Re-thinking multiculturalism through Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand/Head On*" in 2007. The article discusses cinema (especially

film soundtracks) as a medium for multiculturalism to influence a broader audience:

“...film music in particular, has the potential to move beyond both the complacency of the advocates of multiculturalism as well as beyond the resignation of its detractors” (177). Petek focuses on the soundtrack of “Head On” as a means for influencing “multicultural bonding” through musical taste.

Also in 2007, in “A New Kind of Creative Energy: Yadé Kara’s *Selam Berlin* and Fatih Akin’s *Kurz und Schmerzlos* and *Gegen die Wand*,” Petra Fachinger argues that films like “Head On” create “a new Turkish-German self-definition” (243). Fachinger attributes this to Akin refuting stereotypes of Turks and rewriting New German Cinema’s strategies and objectives. She concludes by saying that Turkish German directors are the leaders of the New German Cinema.

In the 2008 article, “Inhabitant, Exhabitant, Cohabitant: Filming Migrants and the Borders of Europe,” Randall Halle discusses Akin’s ability to break new ground in filmic representations of transnationalism: “...he is the first filmmaker to put forward images that truly imagine the possibility of life as a transnational inhabitant” (165). This is, in Halle’s analysis, visible in Akin’s representation of community and the idea of belonging.

This is a sampling of the research discussing Fatih Akin; these articles are among the most prominent contemporary works dealing with “Head On.”

## Background

Fatih Akin can be considered a member of the second-generation Turks living in Germany. His parents immigrated to Germany from Turkey in the 1960s, and Akin was born in Hamburg in 1973 and still lives there today (IMDB—Fatih Akin 1). He studied visual communications at Hamburg's College of Fine Arts from 1994 to 2000 (IMDB—Fatih Akin 1). The first short film he wrote and directed himself was "Sensin – You're The One!" ("Sensin – Du bist es!") in 1995. This film won the Audience Award at the Hamburg International Short Film Festival (IMDB—Fatih Akin 1). Since then he has written and directed 14 feature-length and short films (IMDB—Fatih Akin 1). Akin's first feature-length film, "Short Sharp Stock" ("Kurz und Schmerzlos" – 1998) received several awards and has been the subject of much scholarly debate in relation to Akin's depiction of Turks living in contemporary Germany. "Head On" was Akin's seventh film. He received the Goldener Bär award for this film at the Berlinale (Internationalen Filmfestspiele Berlin), and was the first German director to receive this award since Reinhard Hauff won it for "Stammheim" in 1986 (Fachinger 259).

"Head On" stars Birol Ünel as Cahit Tomruk and Sibel Kekilli as Sibel. The characters meet in a psychiatric ward after both of them attempt suicide—Cahit after a wild night of drinking and doing drugs, and Sibel in rebellion to the strict rules in her parents' home. Sibel proposes to Cahit and the two marry so Sibel can get out of her parents' house. Cahit and Sibel begin to fall in love after they live together for a while, and on the night Sibel decides she definitely loves Cahit, he kills a man (who was

taunting Cahit about not yet having consummated his marriage with Sibel) with an ashtray. Cahit goes to prison for manslaughter and Sibel, whose family disowns her because of the disgrace her husband brought to their family, goes to Istanbul to stay with her cousin. In Istanbul Sibel continues to live the crazy life she and Cahit lived before the murder, and ends up being raped, beaten and stabbed. The film jumps forward a few years after the stabbing, to when Cahit is released from prison. He goes to Istanbul in search of Sibel and finds her there, married and the mother of a toddler. Cahit and Sibel finally consummate their marriage, and Cahit invites Sibel and her daughter to leave with him. Sibel decides not to go, and the film ends with Cahit alone on a bus to Mersin.

### Scene Analysis 1

The first scene in "Head On" to show Cahit and Sibel as outsiders existing wholly within neither of their respective German and Turkish societies is the second scene in the film. In the first shot, the viewer first hears, then sees, patients in the psychiatric ward talking. The camera goes first to a shot of Sibel, with bandages on her wrists, to a shot of Cahit, with a neck brace. The two seem to be looking at one another from across the room. When the doctor enters and calls the name, "Cahit Tomruk," Sibel's interest is instantly piqued (Akin, 6:26). Cahit Tomruk is clearly not a German name, and given that Sibel is Turkish, she would recognize a Turkish-sounding name when she hears one. Both characters do not appear Turkish on an external level—they both wear the same clothing any contemporary German would be wearing and Sibel

does not wear a head scarf. Their only overtly Turkish characteristics are perhaps their dark hair and eyes. Because of Cahit's Turkish name, however, the two characters suddenly have something in common in the sterile waiting room that they did not previously have in common. Not only do they have bandages and reasons for trying to kill themselves, but they also both have Turkish heritage in some form. While Cahit may not yet be aware of this or thinking about it, Sibel's obvious interest in the Turkish name signals it is something she can relate to. On top of them already being outsiders in society because of their current location in a psychiatrist's office, they are both different from the majority of members in German society because they have Turkish blood.

The next signal in this scene that being Turkish in Germany means being different is when Cahit is in the doctor's office, being interviewed as to why he tried to kill himself. The doctor asks him, "Woher kommt eigentlich der Name Tomruk?" (Akin, 7:17). The doctor asking such a question further shows Cahit's foreignness in German society. He does not have a German name, and because of this it is obvious to ethnic Germans that Cahit is an outsider. Cahit shows, however, that he is not an expert on all things Turkish when he replies by saying he has no idea. The doctor, who goes on to say, "Die Namen haben alle schöne Bedeutung," expects Cahit to know enough about his Turkish background to be able to produce his last name's meaning (Akin, 7:22). Cahit is so removed from his Turkish roots, however, that beyond knowing where his family is from in Turkey and being able to speak Turkish, he does not know much about his Turkish background.

In the next sequence of events in the scene, Cahit exits the doctor's office as quickly as he can. Sibel chases him down, asking Cahit in Turkish if he is a Turk and if so, if he will marry her (Akin, 8:36). By asking Cahit first if he really is Turkish, Sibel shows that while she recognizes the Turkish name, she cannot be wholly sure Cahit is really Turkish. Sibel presumably grew up in Germany and has had little contact with Turkey, so her impulse to ask the question first is justified; because she sees herself so much as a German, the question, "Are you a Turk?" is important to make her marriage proposal carry weight with someone she presumes is a Turkish man. She also asks the question in Turkish, signaling her own identity as a woman of Turkish descent. Cahit replies in German, and Sibel replies to him in German, again asking him to marry her. Cahit's response is in Turkish. The code-switching in this conversation shows how embedded both Turkish and German identity is in each character, and how easy it is for both of them to go back and forth from one cultural identity to another. There is no single identity in either character; the two are fluid.

In the next part of this scene, Cahit sits across the cafeteria from Sibel and her family, listening as Sibel's father (Demir Gökgöl), lectures Sibel in Turkish (IMDB—Gegen die Wand 1). Sibel sits with her father, her mother (Aysel Iscan) and her brother (Cem Akin [Fatih Akin's brother]) at a small table (IMDB—Gegen die Wand 1). The close proximity in which the family sits symbolizes their closeness as a family unit and as a micro-community within the larger communities of Hamburg and Germany. Sibel's family, while speaking in Turkish, looks German in their choice of clothing and because

of Sibel's mother's bleach-blonde hair. Except for the language in which they speak, the Güner family could easily pass for German. Sibel's father uses his native tongue to address his daughter, who, like her brother, sits looking at the table while their father speaks. The use of Turkish symbolizes the parental background, as Sibel's parents are possibly first-generation guest workers who moved to Germany to raise their family. While Sibel's father could be speaking in Turkish out of necessity for scolding his daughter in public, as most of the other Germans in the room would not know Turkish, he could also be speaking in the language he is most comfortable using.

The first thing the viewer hears Sibel's father say is, "Die Schande, die du über uns gebracht hast, ist unverzeihlich" (Akin, 9:22 [in Turkish with German subtitles]). Honor is traditionally very important for Turkish families. By bringing up that Sibel has shamed her family, the father is expressing to his daughter how serious her attempted suicide is to him, not just as a father, but as a Turkish father. By trying to kill herself, Sibel has tarnished the family's honor. This is a very Turkish idea in contemporary Germany, and is often drawn attention to in the form of honor killings that exacerbate the differences between ethnic Germans and the Turkish Germans living among them. According to Dicle Koğacioğlu, a professor at Sabancı University in Istanbul:

Another theme of the international news media is the anxiety over the transplantation of honor crimes into areas that are not its "native habitat."  
... Honor crimes are imagined as the sudden eruption of the traditional, the past, and the problematic East where they are not supposed to appear.

This in turn works to reconstitute the intact European and/or “Western self,” depending on the ways in which the dichotomies are aligned. (138-139)

This enforces the notion that honor killings, and the idea of them being commonplace, is very un-German, which helps to place Sibel’s family within the realm of Turkish cultural society because of their care for familial honor.

The idea of familial honor’s importance is further enforced when Sibel’s father finishes his lecture and leaves. Sibel’s brother, Yilmaz, addresses Sibel, saying, “Sibel, merkst du was du dem Mann tuest? Der kapiert doch!” (Akin, 10:03). When Sibel looks like she is about to cry, Yilmaz then switches to Turkish, twice ordering her to look at him. He then switches back to German, saying, “Wenn dem Mann ist was mal passiert, dann schädig’ ich dir” (Akin, 10:15). The idea of honor within the family, both of familial honor and honor to the patriarch, is so strong in Sibel’s family that her brother threatens to hurt her if she does anything that hurts their father. This not only foreshadows events later in the film, but it reinforces the importance of Turkish tradition within Sibel’s family, even though Sibel and Yilmaz have both grown up in German society. By including mention of honor in the beginning of the film, Akin shows how important this idea will be in shaping Sibel and Cahit’s future—as an element of their Turkishness that cannot be extracted from their identities as Turkish Germans, no matter how German they see themselves.

Sibel can also be seen as the outsider within this micro-community because she is the object of her father's scolding. The other family members listen quietly as the father lectures, and Sibel says nothing throughout. She is the object of the family's scorn and the reason for their dishonor; she is not obedient enough and thus not Turkish enough. Therefore, even though she is a member of the family community, Sibel is also an outsider within that unit. Akin uses this scene to set up Sibel and Cahit as the true outsiders in the story—outsiders not only in Hamburg and in Germany, but also psychologically and within the family realm.

## Scene Analysis 2

The second scene in the film that highlights Cahit and Sibel's identities as outsiders within German society is the Turkish night club scene. Sibel prepares a traditional Turkish meal for Cahit, but they argue during dinner and he leaves. Sibel goes to the Turkish night club, Super Taksim Club, after the fight, and Cahit ends up following her there to apologize. The first conflict is when Cahit tries to enter the club. The bouncer refuses to let Cahit in, as Cahit is not accompanied by a woman. Cahit and the bouncer argue in German, and are just about to start pushing each other when Sibel runs outside, yelling at them in Turkish to stop because Cahit is there with her (Akin, 56:19). The conversation again switches back and forth from Turkish to German, showing how fluid the boundaries are between Turkish and German identities, even for other Turkish Germans. This is important because, although Sibel and Cahit are the true outsiders in the film, the other young Turkish Germans share similar characteristics.

This is a sign of Akin using Sibel and Cahit as a mirror of their generation, two examples of a greater issue.

When they are inside the club together, Cahit and Sibel dance among the other Turkish Germans in the club, to Turkish music. The community they are within is definitely a Turkish community within the greater German stratosphere of Hamburg. Yet within this smaller community, Sibel and Cahit can not be completely integrated. Another man tries to dance with Sibel, persisting although she rebuffs him. Cahit steps in to protect his wife, and the other man starts a fight with him, completely disregarding the fact that Cahit and Sibel are a married couple. Suddenly Cahit and the intruder begin to fight, and a large group of men surround Cahit, kicking him on the floor (Akin, 57:54). Such behavior is deemed among ethnic Germans to be typically Turkish—violent and without regard for human rights laws. Akin uses this stereotypical behavior to show the difference between the German community and the Turkish community, both of which Cahit and Sibel belong to. Their tenuous relationships to one sole community is made clearer directly after the beating, as Sibel and Cahit sit on a bench nursing Cahit's wounds. Cahit drinks a German beer—Becks—as Sibel wipes the blood from his face. They speak to one another in German. At one point, Cahit says with a wince, "Scheiß Kanacken" (Akin, 58:29). In German, "Kanacke" is a derogatory term for a Turk. Sibel's response to this slur is notable. She says, "Wieso? Bist auch selber einer" (Akin, 58:30). This witty comeback, telling Cahit he is cut from the same cloth as the Turks who beat him up, shows the extent to which Cahit

feels removed from the Turkish community. He thinks of himself as a German, even though he is of Turkish descent. Sibel, his Turkish German wife, must remind him of this.

Yet Sibel has a similar identity problem, as exhibited in the next sequence. After returning home from their talk on the bench, Cahit and Sibel attempt for the first time to consummate their marriage. Just as Cahit is about to penetrate her, Sibel says, "Hör auf. Hör auf. Hör auf, hör auf. Ich kann's nicht. Ich kann's nicht. Wenn wir es tun, dan werd ich deine Frau und du bist mein Mann" (Akin, 1:00:40). Although they spent the evening bonding, Sibel is not convinced she is ready to be married to Cahit in the religious, consummate sense. She takes the idea of being a "verheiratete türkische Frau" very seriously, perhaps as a result of her traditional upbringing (Akin, 1:04:20). This idea of the sanctity of marriage does not fit with the western lifestyle she has been living, sleeping with various men as she pleased. Such activity is generally seen by conservative Turks as being western behavior, or in this case, German behavior. For example, one Turkish boy living in Germany responded to an honor killing by saying, "She deserved what she got. The whore lived like a German" (Biehl 2). Sibel is so comfortable in her German lifestyle that she is not ready to see herself in the role she assumes she must take on as a Turkish wife, and wishes her relationship with Cahit to stay the same. In this sense, Akin is illustrating how Sibel does not want to accept the standards of the Turkish identity community in favor of continuing the lifestyle she has been living within the greater German community. Both she and Cahit see themselves

as more German than Turkish, and the idea that they are more Turkish than they see themselves upsets both of them.

### Scene Analysis 3

The third scene that shows Cahit and Sibel as outsiders within the Turkish and German communities of Hamburg, and which cements within the film just how different those two communities are from one another, comes directly after the last scene discussed. Shortly after the outing to the Turkish night club, Sibel decides she loves Cahit and is ready to see herself as a “verheiratete türkische Frau.” Seconds before she arrives at a bar to pick up Cahit and take him home to consummate their marriage, Cahit hits Nico (who has been taunting Cahit for not sleeping with Sibel) in the face with an ashtray, killing him instantly. In the aftermath, Cahit is presumably arrested and Sibel returns home to kill herself because she realizes her husband’s actions have once more shamed her family. This inability for Sibel and Cahit to get to a place where they can consummate their marriage once they both realize they love each other shows there is still a barrier between their dual identities that cannot yet be crossed, even though those two identities seem fluid in the forms of language and culture.

In the shots following Sibel’s attempted suicide, the viewer sees a newspaper article covering Nico’s death, accompanied by a photo of Sibel and Cahit on their wedding day. Next the viewer sees that Sibel’s brother, Yilmaz, has been reading the newspaper (Akin, 1:08:52). Yilmaz takes the newspaper to his parents, who are

distraught. Sibel's father immediately disowns his daughter and begins burning all of their photos of Sibel in the kitchen sink (Akin, 1:09:11). He disowns her because her husband's actions have shamed the family. It is notable that, if Sibel's father knew she had again attempted suicide, he would have another reason to feel dishonored and possibly would have had to disown her anyway. As Yilmaz watches his crying parents fight over the photos, which his mother does not want burned, the music takes on a heady bass beat that suggests something drastic is about to happen and the viewer can see the wheels turning in Yilmaz's head. In the next shot, Sibel walks down a street, disheveled and covered in blood stains. She stops and sees Yilmaz getting out of his car, and immediately runs from her brother, who attempts to chase her (Akin, 1:09:54). Sibel's fear of her brother at this juncture is not irrational, from either a Turkish or a Turkish-German perspective, because honor killings are at home in either instance.

According to Dicle Koğacioğlu:

An honor crime is commonly defined as the murder of a woman by members of her family who do not approve of her sexual behavior.

...Various actors, including the media, political parties, activist circles of various sorts, state institutions, and international bodies of governance see honor crimes as primarily caused by tradition, alternately called 'codes of honor,' or more broadly, 'culture. (Koğacioğlu 118-119)

Honor killings are common in Turkey, but they are also common in Germany because of the large Turkish population there. An article in the German newspaper Spiegel cited 40 documented honor killings in Germany between 1996 and 2005 (Biehl 2). Because Sibel is married to a murderer and his actions have shamed the family, Yilmaz could kill Sibel to bring honor back to their family. This idea, which is seen as stereotypically Turkish within German society, is so powerful that even Sibel, who sees herself as more German than Turkish, cannot escape from its reality. Although Cahit is not visible during this part of the film, his involvement is implied because his actions have affected his wife's future. Although this says nothing to his relationships to the Turkish and German societies he is a part of it, it shows how strong the influence of the Turkish community can be within the greater German community. In essence, the Turkish cultural identity seems to have won out over the German cultural identity at the end of this scene. Akin uses this small victory to show how the German and Turkish sides of Sibel and Cahit are constantly at war, and that neither side will ultimately win. There may be small victories, but there is always something stopping the protagonists from adhering completely to one identity or the other.

## Conclusion

In "Head On," Fatih Akin uses Sibel and Cahit to show the relationship between what it means to be Turkish and what it means to be German within the Turkish-German realm. He shows this through the complex relationship between two constantly battling identity communities that situate the protagonists on the outside of either

identity's community. According to Randall Halle, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, "there is a routine of travel and contact that is not a matter of being in-between. Here, in Akin's work, it appears as a new order of cultural and geographic mobility. The characters have a strong foundation of existence in both places" (167-168). Halle is saying that there is no one Turkish identity or German identity for Sibel and Cahit, but that they are simply Turkish German. Akin's film is then an expression of what it means to be Turkish German; his characters are not in between the two cultures, but they are on the outside of both—holding on to a new conglomerate cultural identity. Halle also sees this identity in terms of conglomeration, saying:

The film is ultimately about the overcoming of alterity and the expansion of culture. Cahit and Sibel's status as outsiders actually follows a path of humanization and not "ethnoization." The problems they confront are not tied back to their being Turkish as such. ...the conflicts they experience, furthermore, do not derive from their relationship with Germany. (167)

While this may again suggest that Cahit and Sibel are between cultures, Halle is actually saying the problems they encounter are a result of being members of a new culture that is currently acceptable to neither Turkish nor German culture because it is so uncanny to both of them.

The implications of this new conglomerate culture are, within Akin's filmic context, fleshed out as problematic for all characters involved. Sibel and Cahit can never

be truly happy together because they are both outsiders and must learn to deal with the problems the world sets before them. They cannot live without these problems because they are the first members of the new culture, which must be persecuted and tried before it can gain acceptance by the parent cultures. Akin masterfully shows this new cultural identity as an outsider identity that grows and changes throughout the course of the film, suggesting similar growth and change for real Germans of Turkish descent. By choosing two protagonists who are already outsiders because of their mental instabilities, Akin layers the film with metaphors for and symbolism of boundaries and overlapping identity that cannot be ignored.

“Head On,” the “Life” film in Akin’s *Life, Death and the Devil* trilogy, illustrates how living can be difficult for second- and third-generation Germans of Turkish descent as these Turkish Germans are automatically thrust into an outsider category because of their uniqueness. According to Petra Fachinger, a professor at Queen’s University, “All four of Akin’s feature films are about growing. ‘Not coming of age,’ as Akin explains, ‘but the quest for living, where are we going’” (255). In light of this quote, Akin truly is showing the evolution of cultural identity for young Turkish Germans in “Head On,” using the film to illustrate that even though this cultural identity is currently an outsider, there is hope for it in the future to exist within the mainstream.

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