

# THE UNCANNY HOMES OF FATİH AKIN'S *HEAD-ON*

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## Abstract

This article attempts to further the debate around the issues of Transnational Cinema by exploring Ahmet Gürata's delineation of the phases of this genre. It traces the patterns of the model, especially those clustered around the symbol "home" in *Gegen Die Wand* (*Head-On* the 2004 film by Fatih Akin, Discussions resulting from the narrative and character analysis revolve around the way the film shifts the meanings of identity, home, and belonging, and focuses on the conceptualization and visualization of diasporic "homely" spaces. The discussion of belonging includes both the notion of belonging to a home/homeland and to something that might be described as an "uncanny" experience. The article also depends on Hamid Naficy's (2001) description of Accented Cinema, and uses that model to make sense of exilic /diasporic films. Looking at diasporic places and exilic subjects that transcend the binaries of host-home or migrant-citizen, the article argues that *Head-On* calls for an alternative way of perceiving identity by narrating how different ways of being "at home" can be possible.

**Keywords:** Transnational Cinema, accented cinema, Fatih Akin, *Head-On*, home, uncanny, cultural identity, diaspora, exile.

## Fatih Akin'ın *Duvara Karşı* Filminin Tekinsiz Evleri

### Öz

Bu yazı Bağımsız Uluslararası Sinema üzerine süregiden tartışmalara Ahmet Gürata'nın bu türün dönemleri üzerine doktora dersi sırasında anlattığı kavramları kullanarak katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu yazının amacı, Gürata'nın modelini kullanarak Fatih Akin'in *Gegen Die Wand* (*Duvara Karşı*, 2004) filmindeki ev sembolünü etraflıca incelemek ve tartışmaya açmaktır. Karakter ve anlatı analizi yapan tartışma, filmin evcil ve yabancı mekanları nasıl görselleştirdiği ve kavramsallaştırdığına odaklanarak, kimlik, ev ve aidiyet kavramlarını nasıl saptırdığı üzerinde durur. Bir öze ait olma fikrini, hem bir eve/memlekete hem de bir bedene ait olmak üzerinden değerlendirerek, bu halin tekinsiz bir his yarattığı savunulmaktadır. Metin, vatandaş/göçmen, ev sahibi/konuk gibi ikili karşıtlıkların ötesine geçen diaspora deneyimi ile şekillenen mekan ve karakterlere odaklanmaktadır. Gürata'nın tartışmalarının yanısıra bu makale metodolojik olarak diasporik filmleri anlamlandırmak üzere bir model sunan Hamid Naficy'nin "Aksanlı Sinema" tanımlamasına dayanır. Bu bağlamda bu yazı *Duvara Karşı* filminin evde olmanın farklı şekillerini görselleştiren anlatısının, kimlik konusuna eleştirel bir yaklaşım getirdiğini savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Bağımsız uluslararası sinema, aksanlı sinema, Fatih Akin, *Duvara Karşı*, tekinsiz, kültürel kimlik, diaspora, sürgün.

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*Bu çalışma 8 Mayıs 2015 tarihinde sinecine dergisine ulaşılmış, 18 Kasım 2015 tarihinde kabul edilmiştir.*  
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## Introduction

Using various names, national identity, nationalism, transnationalism, internationalism and many other concepts are widely discussed in contemporary film studies. Home as a symbol of belonging, is a critical concept of Transnational Cinema. As the well known theoretician of this field Hamid Naficy states; “place is a segment of space that people imbue with special meanings and value” it may refer to “a country, a region, a town, a village, a particular street, a specific house, or a specific nook in a house”. For him “placement is tied to its opposite displacement” (Naficy, 2001, p. 152). In this sense, home is closely linked with displacement, transnational places and therefore to exilic and diasporic experience and to Transnational Cinema. In this genre, home is generally a way of questioning belonging to a nation, to an identity or even more, sometimes to a body or gender. I would like to further the debate around these issues of Transnational Cinema by including the graduate lecture notes of the *Film and Genre* Course<sup>1</sup> given by Ahmet Gürata. He focuses deeply on this genre and elaborates on three phases; (1) Cinema of Duty, (2) Hybrid Films and (3) Ethical Turn<sup>2</sup>. In particular, I will trace the pattern of this model as clustered around the symbol of “home”, in *Gegen Die Wand (Head-On)* first screened in 2004 and written and directed by German-Turkish director Fatih Akın. The discussion in this research will revolve around the way this film shifts the meanings of identity, home and belonging focusing on the conceptualization and visualization of home. The idea of belonging to an origin will be explored through the ideas of belonging to a home/homeland and to a body which I consider as an uncanny experience.

## A Brief Theoretical and Historical Framework

In 1969, the Argentinian film theorists and filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino wrote a manifesto called *Towards a Third Cinema* in which they defined a type of counter cinema practice.

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<sup>1</sup> The graduate *COMD 513 Film and Genre* course was held in Ihsan Doğramacı Bilkent University, Department of Graphic Design Fall Semester 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Gürata explained his viewpoints based on “Ethical Calculus” by Thomas Elsaesser (2008), “Turkish Delight - German Fright” by Deniz Göktürk (2001) and “Beyond The Cinema of Duty” by Sarita Malik (1996) articles.

Distinguishing itself from Hollywood (First Cinema) and European art cinema (Second Cinema) Third Cinema referred to political films, produced by Third World countries that do not have a fully developed film industry but counter the ideological filmmaking practices of First and Second Cinema. By creating a new cinematic codes and conventions and addressing issues such as class, race, religion, sex and national integrity Third Cinema has tried to politicize cinema. (Hayward, 2000, p. 389-396). For Gabriel Teshome the principle characteristic of Third Cinema “is really not so much where it is made, or even who makes it, but, rather the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays” (qtd. in Pines, 1989, p. vii). In this sense, Third Cinema is actually an international definition, which allows even a First or Second Cinema director to produce an example of Third Cinema if s/he follows the codes of this genre. In 1986, the Edinburgh International Film Festival hosted a three-day conference revisiting the idea of Third Cinema proposing that it is “far more relevant to contemporary cultural issues than any form of post-structural or any kind of post-theory” (Willemen, 1989, p. 2). In the 1990s, in the academic domain a tendency began in thinking that clusters of films as a National Cinema were similar to the categorizations of Genre or Auteur films in order to rewrite the history of cinema that has ignored many important examples of national cinema. National films began to be associated with a specific countries based on factors such as financing of the film, language spoken, nationalities of the director or the characters, the setting and the visual cultural characterizations in the film. National Cinema productions are generally defined as being against Hollywood which has a transnational reach such as; Italian Cinema, Taiwan Cinema, French Cinema and Poland Cinema to mention only a few. However, it began to be difficult to categorize the borders of the films as they may have a multinational crew and production cadre. National Cinema has a cultural specificity but in some cases it also started to gain an essentialist attitude which was greatly criticized in the 1990s by academicians such as Ernst Gellner who claimed that “it is nationalism that constructs nations and not the other way around” (qtd in. Vitali & Willemen, 2006, p. 4) and Benedict Anderson (1991) who questioned the idea of nation and nationalism in his well-known book called *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson’s conceptualization of “imagined communities” indicates that a nation is something that is socially constructed and imagined by those that perceive themselves as a part of that group. An “imagined community” differs from an actual community in that it does not entail any face-to-face interaction among the members. Media is an effective tool for creating such “imagined communities”. Thus, the ambiguity in

defining nations results the existence of films that are hard to categorize.

In the mid-1990s, National Cinema was discussed, explored and criticized through gaining an understanding Transnational Cinema, Hybrid Films, Post-Colonial Films and Cross Cultural Films. These terms were attempts to describe films that could not be categorized under the title National Cinema. Recognition of the decline of national sovereignty in a world of global existence and the impossibility of determining national cinema triggered the idea of “transnational” as a critical concept. For Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, “transnational” comprises both the globalization and the counter responses of filmmakers from colonial and Third World countries (2006, p. 1). However, again a question arises as to how to draw the borders of Transnational Cinema in relation to which films should be included which should not.

Various film theoreticians have elaborated on these issues. In 2001, in his book *An Accented Cinema: Exile and Diasporic Filmmaking*<sup>3</sup> Hamid Naficy (2001, p. 11) offered a categorization of films under “Accented Cinema” in which he includes the work of Postcolonial, Third World and displaced filmmakers since 1960s who live and work in countries other than their country of origin. The cinematic reflections of the personal experience of exile and diaspora and the knotty relation between belonging and identity were his main focus. He differentiates between three types of directors as exilic, diasporic and post-colonial/ethnic filmmakers. According to Naficy, despite those differences, there are common stylistic and thematic elements of Accented Cinema such as: narrative hybridity; the usage of accented speech, tactile optics, autobiographical inscription, time-space chronotopes<sup>4</sup>, multivocality, specific visual style of nostalgia for the homeland and having low budget production modes. These films are an aesthetic response to the experience of deterritorialization and thematically preoccupied with issues of journeying and displacement. He regards exile as an experience lived individually as a result of a voluntary or forced migration to a foreign

<sup>3</sup> For Asuman Suner (2006b, p. 363) accented cinema has shortcomings that prevents it to realize its critical potential. For her the cinematic and thematic styles associated with genre of exilic/diasporic film appears in other examples of word cinema. For a critical analysis of the concept of “accented cinema” please see her 2006 article “Outside in: ‘Accented Cinema’ At Large” and her inspiring 2006 book *Hayalet Ev: Yeni Türk Sinemasında Aidiyet, Kimlik ve Bellek*.

<sup>4</sup> Naficy (2001, p. 27), borrows Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of the chronotope (time space relation) which he uses as a tool to distinguish novel types. Naficy uses chronotopes to differentiate journeys in accented films that are “chronotopes of imagined homeland”, “home-seeking journeys” and “journeys of homelessness”.

place by leaving the hometown. So, leaving is not only a physical act, but it also includes a personal journey and displacement experienced in oneself. Similar to the conceptualization of Accented Cinema Laura Marks introduced the term “Intercultural Cinema” in her book *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (2000) in which she concentrates on films that made in the period from the 1985s to the 1995s. Marks argues that those films are preoccupied with the reconstruction of a collective memory of non-visual information such as touch, smell, taste that triggers the memory of senses. For both Naficy and Marks, the films made by exilic directors share some similarities and should be examined as a specific genre. Following their argument, this article aims to follow the path of Naficy’s model of Accented Cinema, and discuss *Head-On* that is directed by Fatih Akin who is a member of the second generation of Turkish immigrants in Germany, according to the conceptualized qualities of the genre as an example.

The first phase of Transnational Cinema called “Cinema Of Duty” refers to films made in the 1970s-1980s under the influence of Marxism. This phase has a sociological perspective and can be regarded as a member of Social Realism genre. According to the model proposed by Ahmet Gürata, the pessimist mood they possess is reflected with closed and claustrophobic spaces. Excluded characters struggle with the binary oppositions between national, ethnic, religious and gender identities. Home always signifies nostalgia for homeland and family; uniting the family against external threat. These issues are discussed through the body of the female. The second phase covering the films produced in the period from 1980 to 1990, can be regarded as “Hybrid Films” and for Gürata they are marked via keywords such as optimist, post-modernist, post-colonial. These films are of a humorous nature with space as the global city, characters are marginalized, identities are transgressed and the notion of family is also extended to include friends. A feeling of homelessness marks the films and the issues are discussed through the body of the male and sexual transgressions. The third phase of Transnational Cinema is the “Ethical Turn” that can be regarded as Post-Marxist, entailing a philosophical perspective and of a Nihilist mood. Films in the 2000s are the period of such films in which a modular narrative genre is chosen. Characters are always “on the road” and this issue is identity displacement visualized via abjection. Family is desired but it is broken, identity is displaced and home is uncanny. The issues are discussed through the bodies of both the male and the female. In this paper, I mostly refer to the third phase since in many ways *Head-On* can be considered as a relevant example.

## **Contradicting Home Representations in the Minds of Transnational Characters**

The director, Fatih Akin, has a diasporic experience of living away from his homeland as a member of the second generation of Turkish diasporic community in Germany and he has contributed to noteworthy shifts in the visual representations of migration in Europe especially in Germany. *Head-On*, described by Suner (2005, p.18) as a “hardcore love story” is a work that challenges conventional categories and explore new forms of filmmaking. In this sense, using narrow categories such as Turkish-German Cinema or Migrant Cinema for *Head-On* prove to be inadequate in explaining the complexity of the spatial and temporal relations articulated in Akin’s film. Thus, *Head-On* needs to be analyzed in a transnational framework that reflects both locality and cross-border mobility and focuses on diverse forms of belonging and being at home. As in many Turkish German Cinema productions, Akin’s film not only addresses questions on predominant issues such as the tribulations of citizenship, integration and gender inequality but also includes destabilizing presumed considerations of fixed borders and identities by mapping transnational connections and revealing shared cultural histories and codes. Visually narrating the experience of having more than one home and having two identities might lead to situations that create paradoxes and dilemmas, which reveal the constructiveness of the identity concept. The dilemmas experienced are usually reflected as the major concern of his films, and I will trace these issues in the film *Head-On* in this article.

Home as a symbol of belonging, is a critical concept of Transnational Cinema. Homeland in this genre is generally linked with notions of nostalgia in positive terms. The home that has been left is a desirable place, source of origin, linked with beauty and freedom. However, is home really a place that is always warm, safe and secure or can we describe home in negative terms? In the films regarded as being located in the early phase of Transnational Cinema (“Cinema of Duty”) the homeland is represented in an ideal manner, which creates an effect of boundlessness and timelessness. The homeland is an imagined, idealized space. In contrast, the home that the characters inhabit in the domain of host country is claustrophobic. Examples of this can be seen in *Otobüs (The Bus, 1977)* by Okan Tunç, *40m2 Almanya (Forty Square Meters of Germany, 1986)* and *Sahte Cennete Veda (Farewell to a False Paradise, 1989)* by Tevfik Başer and *Berlin in Berlin (1993)* by Sinan Çetin.





A screenshot from *Head-On*; representing the homeland in an “open chronotope”

*Head-On* also starts (and also ends) with an open chronotope that depicts Istanbul; the homeland, in a particularly utopian way (see Figure 1), in which the view of Sultan Ahmet at the background from across the Bosphorus on the shore of the Golden Horn, the flying bird and the group of Turkish musicians playing a traditional piece, is an ideal image of the homeland. For Suner this peculiar scene “seems to belong to an imaginary past - it could have come from an old album cover - and is both familiar and intimate yet distant and mysterious” (2005, p. 19). The presence of ethnic musicians sitting on a traditional carpet with the standing female singer, functions like a fetishized nostalgic yearning for the homeland as Naficy commented that; “accented films emphasize visual fetishes of homeland and the past (landscape, monuments, photographs, souvenirs, letters) as well as visual markers of difference and belonging” (Naficy, 2001, p. 24). It is also interesting that the film is interrupted five times by that group of Turkish musicians which is an emphasized way to break up the narrative. Suner (2005, p. 19) regards this interrupting framing as functioning like a Brechtian strategy and through out the film continuously remind the spectator the constructed nature of the narrative. The setup, consisting of a classic view across the Bosphorus is an idealistic view of Turkey presented like a three-dimensional post card, which can be regarded as a visual fetish of the homeland. However, I wonder if this repetition, besides creating a self-conscious interruption, really works to trigger nostalgia for homeland, or is it a way to question the longing for the home or the constructed nature of such an image? For the first generation of immigrants to Germany “home”

has something similar to the souvenir characteristic of a postcard, it serves like a core of memories, part of a keepsake that can be viewed again and again along with imagined desires. In this contemporary era, the homeland is not as far away as it seemed to be for the first generation that migrated to Germany. Spaces have shrunk and communicating with and transportation to the homeland is much easier. This could result a shift in the image of home.

For the first generation of Turkish migrants to Germany their experience to the novel and unknown traditions was marked with solitude, loneliness, anxiety and claustrophobia whether they migrated by force or choice. For them home is what they left behind and what they miss unconditionally. However, the second and later generations that are born in Germany and maybe never having been to Turkey have a different perception towards their homeland in which, they may not have any real, hands-on memories at all. They are the members of diasporic communities dwelling in a western society and they mostly locate themselves both with their origins and host societies. They also feel that they are a member of their host society. Their issues do not come from a desire for the homeland or problems with the host land but originate from the paradoxes of having two identities. In this sense, it appears that a shift has occurred in the perception of the homeland, which can be traced in the examples of Transnational Cinema in the 2000s. It is possible to pinpoint this shift by looking at the homes represented in *Head-On*, which can be categorized in two ways. First comprises the Host land meaning the spaces in which the characters live (Germany) and second, the Homeland consisting of the spaces that the characters visit (Turkey). In the film the first realm includes; (a) the family home of Sibel (played by Sibel Kekili); containing a hysterical mother, a religious father and a violent brother figure, (b) the apartment inhabited by Cahit (played by Birol Ünel); which is excessively dirty, untidy and overcrowded before he meets Sibel (see Figure 2) and (c) Cahit and Sibel's home after they marry: somehow an imitated ideal space yet, its constructedness is obvious.

The second realm includes; (a) home of Selma (played by Meltem Cumbul); like a pastiche of a modern home, (b) home of Sibel after her last marriage and (c) the Grand London Hotel where Sibel and Cahit meet. It is interesting that the depiction of the homeland in Turkey is no longer the representation of an imaginary sincere and secure place but somewhere where things are both wrong and somehow uncomfortable. In the Istanbul homes of both Sibel and Selma, nothing nostalgic, nothing tactile can be found.





A screenshot from *Head-On*; Cahit's dark, claustrophobic apartment as an example of a "closed chronotope"

The usage of third space chronotope can be seen in the spaces shown in the scenes shot in the airport, bus station or Cahit's hotel in Istanbul. Such anonymous spaces remind us that a journey can be seen as an example of third space chronotope, which signals the sense of in-betweenness as if connoting the duality the characters experience. Cahit's "homelessness" in Turkey, in his homeland, is expressed in an ironic way with his stay in the "Büyük Londra Oteli" (Grand London Hotel). Although this hotel has a name referring to another cosmopolitan city, it is special in itself because of the historical building, the rooms and the design. In contrast with the home of Sibel and Selma, this hotel presents many objects and settings that create a feeling of nostalgia and tactility. A hotel as an anonymous place can be considered as a good way to perpetuate the idea of home by presenting a contrast to it. In his hometown, Cahit stays in a hotel, which has no claim to represent something homely. This is the place where the separated couple Cahit and Sibel can unite again (maybe for the last time) without having the conditions of a home but they find comfort in this transitory, in-between, anonymous space of a hotel room.

To sum up, among the key concepts, that are used to identify the different phases of transnational cinema, the usage of "home" has changed over the years. In the 1970s and 1980s nostalgia for homeland existed. The films of the 1980s and 1990s are marked with homelessness. Within Transnational Cinema in the 2000s, home is questioned as in the example of Akin's *Head-On*. Home is a place in which characters are feeling at home but out of place. This kind of representation is different from that which is defined in the examples of "Cinema of Duty" as a yearning longing nostalgia for the home. In this sense, the following discussion revolves around the ability of *Head-On* to shift the meanings of identity and belonging focusing

on the conceptualization and visualization of home, which entails the duality of at home but out of place. This raises the following questions: Can there be something wrong with the image of home? Maybe there is a lack of sincerity or discomforting feeling. Is home really the location for the origin? Can there be something uncanny in the idea of origin?

### **At Home out of Place; There is Something Uncanny**

For Nikos Papastergiadis (1996, p. 3) home is not a historical place but a symbolic concept where one feels a sense of belonging, he writes: “the space of house may be defined by its material structures whereas the home is divided by symbolic boundaries (...) Home is more of a symbolic space than a physical place”. It is a comforting space one invests value and feels safe. Yet, his description points out that home should be considered with boundaries, which divides inside (familiar, safe and sheltered) from outside (threatening and foreign). He (1998, p. 3) complicates the idea of home by asking, “what happens when our sense of home is filled with trauma?” For him, the real concern is not the vulnerability of home against outside dangers as home can be rebuilt after it has been attacked from the outside. For him (1998, p.3) what is more alarming is the “pernicious, tempting idea that home is safe from within.” Following Papastergiadis’s arguments I would like to further the discussion by asking can “home”; the yearned, nostalgic and authentic comforting place/origin be uncanny at all? According to Sigmund Freud’s article “Uncanny” (1958) the concept refers to all the things from which arise disturbance, threat, trouble, anxiety and fear. For Freud people’s first reaction to the realm of uncanny is the belief that what frightens one is something alien, strange, something coming from outside. However, Freud revealed that the situation of uncanny is more than this and he conceptualized uncanny based on the epistemology of the German word *Heimlich*, which corresponds to homely in English. The word is interesting in the sense that its direct antonym is *Unheimlich* (unhomely). Thus, in these two forms the word contains the familiar and congenial at the same time the secret and concealed. Based on this curious linguistic situation he develops a conceptualization of the uncanny. In this sense, referring to the characterization of “home” both by Papastergiadis and by Gürata in the Ethical Turn phase of Transnational Cinema as “At Home out of Place”, a similar tension and linguistic situation can be seen that has echoes of the definition of Freud’s uncanny. Home is place of safety and familiarity. It is the symbol of the safe space where the nucleus of the family unites against the external treat as in the first phase (Cinema of Duty) of Transnational Cinema. However, feeling “out of place” in the safety of one’s own home is something contradictory. It is similar to find something *Unheimlich* (unhomely) in *Heim-*

*lich* (homely).

In the film *Head-On* the characters are always engaged in a kind of mental journey as an expression of feeling “out of place in their own home”. They continually feel disturbed, not at peace in both in their hometowns and homes. In *Head-On* the reason for the problem, the cause of uncanny<sup>5</sup>, is the idea of home, which haunts the minds of the characters. The reason Sibel leaves Germany is to escape the unbearable memories of her lost love, Cahit, who is in jail and to escape from her family (generally considered as homely), who would kill her (a threat coming from the familiar) preserve their honor and good name. Sibel’s journey from Germany to Turkey can be considered as an outward journey of escape and home seeking (as an idealized home idea, going back to the roots, which has been established in the minds of immigrants). In Istanbul, she seeks that idealized home however, once in Turkey she feels lost, limp and insecure; estranged from the contemporary Turkish culture that is contrasting her traditional family back in Hamburg. In a letter she writes to Cahit, she notes: “Istanbul is an energetic city full of life. I feel that I am the only lifeless thing in this city.” Once again, this duality can be clearly seen. Although she is in Turkey, in her hometown home does not feel at home at all. She reacts against her situation by leaving Selma’s home and career oriented life and move to a place inhabited by a Junkie. This is certainly not a space that Sibel associates with the homely; in contrast, it is daring, insecure and totally strange and dark. Nevertheless, such a place is not uncanny as it is space that is unfamiliar in an unfamiliar place; it does not entail any duality, therefore more comforting than “home”. Sibel’s change of location can be regarded as an escape from her own disturbed haunted mind. In this sense, she experiences something more than a “journey of quest, homelessness and lostness” (Naficy 2001, p. 33) but a kind of journey in which there is the domination of the feeling homeless at home.

In the case of Cahit; although when he moves between nations and lands what he experiences is mostly characterized as a mental journey, which can be considered as the reasons for the change in his character. Cahit is never forced to leave Germany or change his character; however, we observe a radical alteration in him. On one hand Cahit’s journey to Mersin, can be regarded as a homecoming to his family and homeland, on the other hand,

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to stress that I am not trying to trace visual elements of the uncanny in the way it is associated with the genre of Gothic film where it is generally symbolized by a haunted house.

as leaving home since he has left Germany where he has spent all of his life. This paradoxical situation occurs because of the dual identity of immigrants. Taking in account that the definition of origins shifts meaning and Cahit feels like a stranger not only in Turkey but also in Germany. This reveals the slippery definition of identity, belonging and home, which are in relation to this discussion somehow uncanny. So, pointing on oscillations among different cultural codes using the symbol of “home” that is uncanny, the film questions the perception of an authentic and fixed idea of home that is to say cultural identity by representing out of place characters, narrating conflicts among traditions and using accented languages.

### **Home as a Body and the Uncanny Desire to Leave the Home: Suicide**



A screenshot from *Head-On*; suicide; an uncanny desire to leave home

According to Freud, the feeling of dread arises because the uncanny is also familiar or homely. Uncanny has associations with words such as; novel, unfamiliar, hidden, strange and dangerous. In relation to this, when “self” is considered, the opposite of these words comes to mind, for example; familiar, the congenial, and the known. Briefly, it can be said that the most familiar thing a person can ever encounter is actually nothing but him/herself. Is it possible to ask whether a person can feel uncanny towards him/herself? The extreme uncanny feeling would occur when the most familiar one, which is the “self” becomes unfamiliar all of a sudden. As Freud stated “the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed” (1958; p. 155) then can somebody feel uncanny towards the most familiar one who is their own self? It is not expected that a person has secrets that even they does not know. However, the presence of unconscious is the proof that one can have secrets from oneself. The presence of

unconscious makes the most familiar the most unfamiliar and this appears to be similar to Freud's definition of uncanny? The situation of "Finding yourself by Losing yourself" is the phrase (coined by Gürata) that defines the characters of *Head-On* as an example of the phase of *Ethical Turn*. This phrase also plays with words via involving contradictory meanings likewise the epistemology of uncanny. According to this understanding finding is only possible by losing, and what is attempted to be found through this loss is the self, which can sometimes be uncanny and finds its link in *Head-On* via the theme of suicide. If the repressed feeling of death occurs to an extreme extent, than a person can experience a threat that emanates from within themselves. So, can someone be a danger to him/herself therefore, afraid of his/her own self, and feel uncanny towards themselves? I think the answer can be yes, if we focus on the subject of suicide then the threat of suicide can come from the most familiar, from ones own self. This could be considered as the most uncanny situation, from which nobody can hide. In this sense, self-destruction containing the uncanny has a contradiction in itself like the word *Heimlich*, which consists of both the familiar (the positive) and the unfamiliar (the negative) and similarly self-destruction includes both the prey and predator when we assume that the prey is the self. The person is at the same time the origin of the dreadful feeling, and the one who is afraid. The dread lies in the fact that the enemy is not a stranger but oneself and that s/he cannot escape from him/herself. This is the self as uncanny.

The film not only narrates the journey of Sibel and Cahit between Germany and Turkey but also the mental journey of the characters and their desire to leave their body by committing suicide (see Figures 3). This plot is an example of characters trying to find themselves by losing themselves. Not only a homeland or a place-space but also the body can be considered as home. Considering the uncanny home proposed by Freud in *Head-On* both the main characters by committing a suicide, in order to escape the coercive side of life and their suffering. Cahit could not put an end to the memories of his deceased wife, and Sibel was unable to cope with the pressure of her family and patriarchy. Their desire to escape from their home/body results in failure, which presents the characters with the possibility of "finding" themselves.

In *Head-On* the questions of "where is the home?" and "where subjects belongs" is always in an ambiguity. Home in all senses and meanings, is a place that creates uncanny situations. Throughout the film, there is not a time in which a constant understanding of home is established. The meaning of home is always shifting and always redefined.



Such a multiple representation of home invites the audience to reevaluate the coercive side of home and the precondition that home is always safe and furthermore complicates the idea of belonging. Although it creates an unpleasant feeling of *uncanniness*, not having a fixed meaning and a fixed identity can be regarded as emancipatory. This perspective proposed by such as Stuart Hall is discussed in the following section as a concluding note.

### **Conclusion: Borderline Places, Borderline Characters**



A screenshot from *Head-On*; showing Sibel at the borderline that connotes the state of being in-between, at the limbo

In this article, my aim is to focus on the changing representation of home and the exilic experience of the characters within the phases of Transnational Cinema. The films of 2000s are marked with in-between characters, ambiguous spaces and uncanny homes, which problematize the tricky and difficult idea of belonging. Stuart Hall, the Jamaican cultural theorist and sociologist, presents a non-essentialist understanding of identity in his famous article “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1994) in which he problematizes the conventional idea of a fixed truth that assumes a natural bond between the subjects and their cultural identities. He claims that all these assumptions of truth are actually social constructs. What cultural identity presupposes is the idea of belonging. Although there is no natural bond between the person and his/her language or land, there is a tendency to naturalize this bond. To challenge this supposed bond between the subjects and their cultural identities Hall points to the diasporic experience, which prompts the questioning of the internalized bond between the cultural identity and the subject. In this sense, *Head-On* can be an example of a film that challenges the traditional understanding of belonging to an identity. In *Head-On*, the character’s identity is always in a process of alteration; either as a bodily change or a psychic-mental change. Hall defines identity



as “not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture” (1994, p. 395) but as “a matter of becoming as well as of being” (1994, p. 394). Similar to this definition, in *Head-On* identity is questioned and always displayed in a process of becoming. Also the radical change in Cahit’s character from the “man who drinks” to a “man of conscience” is a comment on the performative side of identity. Such radical changes in the characters complicate the idea of a true identity. *Head-On* makes one realize that some certain ideas which we have internalized as the features of identity that we tend to perceive as natural, is actually nothing more than a fabrication. In addition, the constant alteration in the film can be read as a comment on the enabling side of the exilic experience in the case of both changing countries and changing mentalities. In an unfamiliar space (in the case of Cahit and Sibel being in Turkey) the subjects are forced to remake their identities, which both reveal the construct of identity and show the enabling side of exile; the chance to redefine the identity by deconstructing and reconstructing it. In a similar way Suner (2005, p. 21) also argues that the film presents the main characters feeling equally “not” at home in either in Germany (grown up in Hamburg) and in Turkey (grown up with Turkish parents), but taking advantage of having access to both Turkish and German cultural heritages. For Suner, (2005, p. 21) the film does not narrates this shuttle as a difficulty of non-belonging or exile as an experience of homelessness and loss, but rather as an opportunity of constructing multiple belongings. In this sense, Hall’s definition of cultural identity as “not an essence but a *positioning*” via defining identity as “a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process (...)” (Hall, 1994, p. 392) and characterizing cultural identity as “a matter of becoming” which “undergo constant transformation” (Hall, 1994, p. 394) can be a liberating aspect of Hall’s argument. In this sense *Head-On* can be regarded as presenting a possible political opening since it offers ways of thinking beyond the divisions supposedly inscribed in the cultural and national forms of belonging and filmmaking. *Head-On* calls for an alternative way of perceiving identity by narrating how different senses and ways of being at home can be possible examples of becoming.

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