

Fatih Akin`s Cinema and Cityscape: A Comparison Between Hamburg and Istanbul Through His Films¹**Fatih Akın Sineması ve Kent-Mekani: Akın'ın Filmleri Üzerinden Hamburg ve İstanbul Karşılaştırması****Sertaç Timur Demir²****ABSTRACT**

Fatih Akin and his films may be interesting for sociologists and political scientists, but not for philosophers and psychologists, because he is interested in social reality and norms rather than individual differences. Moreover, his films may be of interest to those who focus on architecture and spatiality. For this reason, in this paper, I compare between urban experiences of Hamburg and Istanbul by using his three important films: Head on (2004), Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul (2005), and Soul Kitchen (2009). These films are not only films of Fatih Akin, but also of Hamburg and Istanbul themselves.

Keywords: Fatih Akin, Hamburg, Istanbul, Urban experience, Social life.

ÖZ

Fatih Akın ve sineması filozoflar ve psikologlar için değil sosyologlar ve siyaset bilimciler için de ilginç olabilir. Çünkü o bireysel farklılıklardan ziyade toplumsal gerçeklik ve normlarla ilgilenmektedir. Ayrıca, onun filmleri mimari ve mekansallığa odaklananları da ilgilendirebilir. Bu sebeple, bu çalışmada, Fatih Akın'ın üç önemli filmini kullanarak Hamburg ve İstanbul'daki kentsel deneyimi karşılaştırmaktayım. Bu filmler Duvara Karşı (2004), İstanbul Hatırası: Köprüyü Geçmek (2005) ve Aşka Ruhunu Kat (2009) filmleridir. Bu filmler yalnızca Fatih Akın'ın değil; Hamburg ve İstanbul'un kendi filmleridir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fatih Akın, Hamburg, İstanbul, Kentsel Deneyim, Sosyal yaşam.

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INTRODUCTION

Who is Fatih Akin: A Brief Biography and Filmography

He was born in Hamburg in 1973 in Germany and is of Turkish parentage. He started to show an interest in cinema. He was a strict follower of films which were produced in the technique of VHS (Video Home System). When he was 21, he decided to study visual communications at Hamburg's College of Fine Arts. Interestingly, his cinema career started as an actor, as 'Doppelter Einsatz', a character in a TV serial. Although he was earning money by standing in front of the camera, his dream was to be a director. To that end, he made his first short film called 'Du Bist Es' (You are the One, 1995). This film was awarded at the Hamburg International Short Film Festival. He was both director of and actor in his second short film 'Getürkt' (Weed, 1996). These films encouraged him to make a real film, in other words, that early film-making experience can be defined as his apprenticeship or novitiate period. His first full length film, 'Kurz und Schmerzlos' (Short Sharp Shock), was made in 1998 and Fatih Akin was deemed worthy of the best director award at the Adolf Grimme Awards in Germany. In the meantime he completed his education in 2000. Moreover, he made 'Im July' (In July). This romantic comedy is a road film between Turkey and Germany. More obviously, Fatih Akin focused on some issues such as immigration, borders, placelessness and identity for the first time, through this film, that was also awarded even in Norway. 'I Think about Germany – We forgot to Go Back' (2001) was his first documentary film.

After that, he made 'Solino' (2002), that won a best scenario prize, in 2002 in which an Italian family was put under the microscope. Film authorities have accepted that he is one of the most gifted directors of his generation, in other words, he attained maturity in his film-making. In 2004, he made one of his best films. It is 'Gegen die Wand' (Head On). Fatih Akin defined the film of the year as a "story he had to squeeze out like a pimple after years of festering" (Jump Cut, 2004). Head On is a significant film in terms of the cityscapes of Hamburg and Istanbul; similarly, Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul (2005), a documentary film, has importance by reason of creating an unusual cinematic city. The film offers a great opportunity to observe the conflicts and contrasts of Istanbul through its sounds. In addition to that, sounds or music themselves may be useful to gain insight into the spatiality of the city. For this reason, the documentary film plays a crucial part in this work. He made his 'Kebab Connection' (2004) between Head On and Crossing the Bridge. Fatih Akin reached a peak with his 'Auf der Anderen Seite' (The Edge of Heaven, 2007). The film won the best screenplay award at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. Fatih Akin was one of ten directors involved in the 'New York I Love You' (2008) film project. While New York City was mostly represented as the city of love by other directors, Fatih Akin reflected on New York as the city of disappointment. Finally, Fatih Akin captured Hamburg through his last film Soul Kitchen (2009). Food, music and the city come together in this unpretentious film.

Fatih Akin: His Film Understanding

As Fatih Akin, originally Turkish, lives in one of the cosmopolitan centres of European geography, his films have intercultural variety and multi-linguistic cinematography. It is inevitable that Fatih Akin builds visible bridges between different cultural heritages and experiences. A place (restaurant, hotel, pub, etc) can be shared by Greek, Turkish, German and Albanian in his films. Moreover, they keep their authenticity and intimacy.

One of the most remarkable features of his films is a sense of humour. He solves all the formidable problems of film characters through a naive realism. These characters are not figments of the imagination, quite the reverse, they are real; moreover, episodes in his films are based on experience that can easily be observed. The only difference between real life and his films is in the interpretation of reality. More obviously, Fatih Akin finds something to laugh about and to make

audiences laugh, even at critical moments. Similarly, he can show some tragic details, even in funny events or nonsense dialogues. Fatih Akin struggles against established powers: war, fanaticism, violence, deaf stereotypes, blind traditions, racist ideologies and sanctimony; on the other hand, he sublimates sincere religiousness and pacifist values.

Other typical parameters of his films are music, food, the city and rhythm. He writes his scenarios by listening to music. He claims that music, which is one of the essential determining factors in his films, writes his films' scenarios. Food is also important for him. Food that is a culture itself represents various tastes and experience. In his films - especially in *Kebab Connection* (2004) and *Soul Kitchen* (2009) - food has major importance; it is as if it is a main character of those films. *Kebab* refers to a Turkish food and *Soul Kitchen* is a restaurant. Fatih Akin makes his final decisions about camera angle and movement, decor, seating plan, casting, etc. after he examines filmic places. Music and place are conscious and envisioned but not coincidental preferences in Fatih Akin's films. For that reason music editors and location managers in his films have wide areas of responsibility.

Comparisons: Hamburg and Istanbul through the Projector

As Ozturk (2008: 21) mentions, film art creates a window, which opens onto the world, for the sake of modern individuals who struggle with social problems. Film is an art that is able to reproduce facts by expanding the sense of time and place. For this reason, films that focus on the city expose not the city itself, but its reflection, presentation and interpretation. Accordingly, the camera, just like a concave or a convex mirror, may form and deform the urban area, images and experience. This shows that film is a phenomenological art; furthermore, the city is full of subjective phenomena. For this reason, thinkers from different academic disciplines contextualise the city. The common point amongst them is the idea that "the city is not the product of planners and architects" (Borden et al., 2000). It can also be accepted as an image, form or representation. There is a formative influence of films on the city.

The 'formative' tendency refers to the filmmakers' concern with giving structure, narrative, and order to images and sounds so as to fashion a cultural product, a composition, a work of 'art'. All films, of course, involve some degree of this formative process. Without this exertion and imposition of the 'artistic will' films would not exist. But, Kracauer argues, this should not detract from what is most important: film and photography's inherent 'realist tendency'. This refers to the camera's unprecedented and unrivalled capacity for capturing the 'real', for revealing and recording 'physical reality', which Kracauer aptly terms 'camera reality.'" (Gilloch, 2007: 126-127).

Camera reality is able to offer a vision of cities that people never saw. Especially, Istanbul and Hamburg are in that category, because these two cities have filmic perspective and perception in Fatih Akin's films, even if they are not as popular as Paris, New York or London. Particularly Istanbul is one of the exotic stations, not only for Fatih Akin, but also for other filmmakers, because, as Ozturk (2008: 4) defines, Istanbul through films is a subject of endless desires. "An unorganized society is different from a disorganized society" (Smith, 1980: 11). In this sense, Istanbul is a disorganized city while Hamburg is an unorganized city in his films. Hamburg is the city of randomness, while Istanbul is the city of chaos. Liberty can be obtained by forcing moral limits on Hamburg, and by committing crime and violence in Istanbul. The power is an invisible potential in Hamburg; on the other hand, power is an influence that can easily be seen around every corner of Istanbul streets. There are some regions for immigrants in Hamburg; however, Istanbul has a region that consists of immigrants. In other words, nobody is a permanent owner of the city. It is like concentration camps that have high culture and musical diversity.

There is a definite and great distance between Hamburg city centre and the suburbs. But, spatial boundaries are much more tangled and permeable in

comparison with Hamburg. Two close but different streets in Istanbul may represent two different lifestyles and value systems; for this reason, thousands of streets refer to thousands of cultures in Istanbul. "Throughout the twentieth century, the forces of modern capitalism, social revolutions, imperial conflagrations, colonial upheavals, and Nature itself have built, destroyed, and rebuilt the urban landscape" (Siegel, 2003: 143). Siegel may be right; nevertheless, the change in Istanbul is as a result of the conflict between the Ottoman Empire that ended in 1922 and the Turkish Republic that was established in 1923. Hamburg experienced the Second World War. As a result of the war, Hamburg has been destroyed and reconstructed. Fatih Akin emphasises the situation. He describes Hamburg as if it is a city that has no architectural identity or tradition.

Hamburg is known and promoted as a tourist city in contrast with the orientation produced by Fatih Akin. For instance, some of the most typical features of Hamburg are its bridges, ports, river and canals. However, Hamburg in his films is figured as a wholly territorial city. Soon, Fatih Akin's Hamburg is a completely different Hamburg in contrast with the Hamburg described by tourist agents. Istanbul is portrayed as quite a settled city in terms of architecture. Istanbul has more than one architectural identity, even though it is chaotic and disorganized. Each sound, life philosophy, belief system and tradition designs a different Istanbul so that they can adapt to the city.

According to Aymaz (2008: 351), Istanbul in the world of films was one parts of a myth that gathers around history, culture, geography and oriental images. Istanbul was a bridge between different cultures; moreover, it was a capital of empires. However this perception has changed in recent years. As Aymaz (ibid.: 352) states, although Istanbul is still a fascinating spectacle, it is in a spiritual crisis. There is something of the atmosphere of Dickens and Dostoyevsky in front of the 1001 Arabian nights' decor. This is the *new* Istanbul in films. Istanbul is a paradise that is devastated. It seems like a dark pothole.

Clark (1996: 1) may be right: "The world has become an urban place", but, some urban places are like places outside the world in Istanbul. Paradoxically, the distance between a family that lives on the poverty line and a family that has limitless luxury can be less than a hundred meters in Istanbul. Temporality is, just like spatiality, also chaotic, both in Istanbul and in Hamburg. Time in these cities is based on momentary feelings. Everybody has a plan, but the plan is managed in accordance with momentary reactions rather than conscious calculations. This aspect is opposite to Le Corbusier's observation: "the city is profoundly rooted in the realms of calculations" (Le Corbusier, 1929: 53 cited in Donald, 1999: 54), because of the fact that Istanbul and Hamburg are without calculations.

Istanbul was the most popular city once upon a time. In due course people imitate the city which they live; moreover, the city implicitly takes the shape of experiences of people. "Cities are civilization and the study of cities involves the study of humankind" (LeGates, 1996: 18). The interrelation between individuals and the city is too problematic in Istanbul. Namely, people in Istanbul are seen as tasteless. The appearance verifies Baudrillard (1993: 73), "It is true in a sense that nothing really disgusts us anymore. In our eclectic culture, which embraces the debris of all others in a promiscuous confusion, nothing is unacceptable". Istanbul can be perceived as a beautiful city within a panoramic shot; however, it is almost awful looking in close up. Nevertheless, as Sauvaget (2008: 442) mentions, what makes the city remarkable is not aesthetics, but its marginalities, distance, conflict, anomy and misery. Sibel (in Head on, 2004) , Hacke (in Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul, 2005), and Zinos (in Soul Kitchen, 2009) look for the chaos.

The Marmara Sea in Istanbul is a transition area for ships, because the Bosphorus is an important link between Russia and the Mediterranean. The sea is also used for both human transportation and shipping. The River Elbe undertakes a similar mission in Hamburg. A canal that opens onto the high seas has been used for the purpose of shipping. Water (sea, Bosphorus, fountains, etc.) symbolises

aesthetics and pleasure in Istanbul while it refers to commerce and wealth in Hamburg. The sea is the past and the memory of Istanbul, but it is a future hope for Hamburg. Nonetheless, keep in mind that water is one of the determining factors of these cities in terms of tourism, culture, history and urban experience.

Cultural variety is too limited in Hamburg; furthermore, the only difference is between Germany's immigrants. Especially, the Turkish community constitutes one of the fundamental elements of the immigrant population in Hamburg. The population live in a suburban area. The city centre is mainly a German populated area. Contrarily, in Istanbul, there is a multicultural background that consists of Turks, Kurdish, Rums (Greek of Turkish nationality), Circassians, Armenians, Romanies, etc. They are inseparable parts of Istanbul, in parallel with the historical background and cultural heritage of the city. The situation has effects on the music and food culture of Istanbul. As Istanbul is geographically (and culturally) between the West and the East, its food culture is wide ranging while the food menus are more monotypical in Hamburg's restaurants. Similarly, Istanbul offers many more options and features than Hamburg in terms of music variety as well. It can be claimed that the music tradition and culture in Istanbul involve the sounds of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Persia, Central Asia, the Middle East, the Mediterranean countries, Europe and America. In addition to this, the sounds bear the traces of the monotheistic religions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

Another dimension of the variety in Istanbul concerns animals. Namely, Istanbul is freer than Hamburg for animals. It can be observed in this film that Istanbul is a city that belongs to seagulls and cats. Also, dogs and even sheep live in Istanbul freely. However, as far as is seen in the film, Hamburg is not a suitable city from the viewpoint of animal welfare. It is hard to claim that people are not as free as animals in Istanbul or that there is an extreme form of freedom. People are on a knife-edge and the state is a passive power in the city. On the other hand, rules of the state and norms of the German society can be easily felt in Hamburg. In Istanbul, people struggle for life by themselves. Apparently, in the film, there is no cooperative soul in Eastern culture. But, love is stronger; what is more, lovers are more faithful in Istanbul; whereas Hamburg is a city of passionate and fragile love.

EPILOGUE

Briefly, Fatih Akin zooms in on the cities through these films. His formative tendency reveals itself, especially in his film scenarios and music editing style. According to Fatih Akin, the city is an audio-visual space that is unceasingly reconstructed by means of stories and sounds of the city. But, the stories can merely be revealed through films, rather than photography, because "photography freezes the past moment; film shows life itself in passing" (Gilloch, 2007: 118). Stories of the city, however, refer to passing time and to moving space. Images that are produced within the camera are reality and life itself, and are ultimately nested within each other because of or thanks to film productions. Even beauty criteria concerning the city are continuously reshaped or (re)determined by them. Film production and art, it seems to me, carry the relationship between gaze and things into an ontological discussion area. As Adorno and Horkheimer (2002: 119) summarize outstandingly: "beauty is whatever the camera reproduces ... What is offered is not Italy but evidence that it exists".

What Fatih Akin shows through his films is that there is more than one representation of Istanbul and Hamburg. Although "urban places have many similarities of physical appearance, economic structure and social organisation and are beset by the same problems of employment, housing, transport and environmental quality" (Clark, 1996: 2), Fatih Akin proves that there are substantial differences between Hamburg and Istanbul in terms of urban experience, stories, reactions, relaxation and entertainment style, leisure activities and interpersonal and intrapersonal communication forms. Finally, this totality of

difference reveals itself even in places where architectural designs resemble each other.

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