# A CRITICAL STUDY / BİR ANALİZ :

# FATİH AKIN'S GEGEN DIE WAND (2004): ETHNICITY AS PERFORMANCE

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#### ÖZET

Bir Fatih Akın filmi olan *Duvara Karşı* (2004), Almanya'daki azınlık söylemi bağlamında kültürel sınırlar, etnik özellikler, ulusal kimlikler, cinsellik ve toplumsal cinsiyet üzerine sorular ortaya atan çok katmanlı bir filmdir. Almanya'da yaşayan iki Türk'ün acıklı aşk öyküsü tematik açıdan filmi kendi türünde farklı kılar, çünkü Akın, yerinden yurdundan kopup Almanya'ya gelmiş, çift taraflı baskı altında ezilen ve sömürülen sessiz Türk işçisi betimlemesi yerine, uluslararası mekanlarda serbestçe dolaşan, iki dilli ve iki kültürlü Türk-Alman karakterler yaratarak kültürel hibriditenin tadını çıkarır. Bu bağlamda film göçmen/diaspora/aksanlı/azınlık/uluslarüstü sinema türünün özelliklerini taşır. Bu makale, Fatih Akın'ın hibriditenin çelişkili doğasını, azınlık kimliğinin çift taraflı deneyimlerini yakın insan ilişkilerini öne çıkararak filminde nasıl ele aldığını tartışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fatih Akın, Uluslarüstü sinema, azınlık söylemi, kültürel hibridite

#### ABSTRACT

Fatih Akm's film *Gegen die Wand /Head-On* (2004) is a multi-layered visual narrative that poses questions about the notions of cultural boundaries, borders, ethnic specificity, national identities, and the issues of sexuality and gender relations within the context of minority discourse. The tragic love story of two Turkish immigrants makes the film thematically revolutionary, because, instead of dealing with the voiceless Turkish subaltern, who is gendered, displaced, and crushed by double oppression, Akm seems to be enjoying the "pleasures of hybridity" and exhibiting, in transnational spaces, the everyday reality of bilingual Turkish-German characters with dual cultural backgrounds. In this context, the film is usually discussed within the genre conventions of migrant/diasporic/accented/minority/transnational cinema. This essay discusses how Akm represents the ambiguity and the fragmented nature of hybridity and the interstitial experience of minority identities by foregrounding intimate relationships.

Keywords: Fatih Akın, Transnational cinema, minority discourse, cultural hybridity

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#### GEGEN DIE WAND: SYNOPSIS

Cahit Tomruk (Birol Ünel) is a German Turk who has given up on life after the death of his wife, Katarina. One night, he intentionally crashes into a wall and hardly survives. He is taken to a psychiatric clinic and there he meets Sibel (Sibel Kekilli), another German Turk who has attempted suicide. She asks Cahit to carry out a formality marriage with her so that she can free herself from the strict rules of her conservative family. Cahit, who has severely rejected the idea at first, has to agree to take his part in Sibel's plan. They get married and start living as roommates as they have already planned, but they eventually fall in love with each other. Cahit, in jealousy, accidentally kills one of Sibel's lovers and is sent to prison. While he is in prison, Sibel goes to Istanbul, gets married and has a daughter. When Cahit is released, he finds her in Istanbul, and asks her to start a new life with him in Mersin (his home town). Sibel agrees but never shows up.

#### INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the interest in films reflecting the diasporic/migrant/interstitial experience, or the experiences of people crossing borders and boundaries, has grown remarkably, and such films have been described by critics as "postcolonial hybrid films" or "transnational cinema". Turkish-German director Fatih Akın's film, *Head On*, is usually discussed within this context, and is highly appreciated by critics and scholars primarily because it is not another manifestation of a nationalist, culturalist, or racist discourse. The film was awarded the Deutscher Filmpreis for the best film in 2004, and in the same year, it also received the Golden Bear, as well as the European Film Award.

Gegen die Wand is a multi-layered visual narrative that on the one hand presents the tragic love story of two Turkish immigrants, and on the other, poses interesting questions about the notion of cultural and national identities, dynamics of assimilation and resistance, and the issues of sexuality and gender

relations within the context of minority discourse in the postwall Germany. William Safran, in his article, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Retum", defines diasporas as the expatriate minority communities (1) that are placed not in the "center" but in "peripheral" places; (2) that have memories and myths about their original homeland; (3) that feel alienated and marginalized in the host country; (4) that constantly dream about returning to the homeland; (5) that constantly support the homeland, and (6) whose collective identity is defined by continuing relationship with the homeland (Safran, 1994: 83-84). These are the main features of diasporic experience, and in terms of that definition, the Turkish community depicted in Fatih Akın's film Gegen Die Wand (2004)/Head-On can legitimately be called Turkish diaspora. Homi Bhabha, in The Location of Culture, designates diasporic space as the liminal space, the third space, or "the interstitial mode between fixed identifications" that "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994: 2). To be interstitial, in Bhabha's terms, means to be located at the intersection of the national and the transnational, to be here in the host country and to be simultaneously there in the homeland. In Gegen die Wand, representation of the Turkish cultural identity moves away from the "fixed essences" to the process of "becoming". In this context, the interstitial mode is an important ingredient of the process of becoming as it signifies the notions of hybridization, fragmentation, marginality, in-betweenness, and "various modes of transnational otherness" (Naficy, 2001: 271) observed in both the cinematography and the main characters of the film.

This essay discusses how Akın represents the ambiguity and the fragmented nature of hybridity and the interstitial experience of minority identities by foregrounding intimate personal relationships. While doing this, I will show how parody and irony, particularly in the treatment of issues of ethnicity and sexuality, are intrinsically vowen into the film's texture as indispensible

components of its mise-en-scene. However, it should also be noted that the film never tends to present German and Turkish cultures in the context of center versus margin relationships. Therefore, throughout the essay references to the views propounded by postcolonial theorists do not always mean to define the Turkish-German relationship as an example of the colonized-colonizer relationship in the form of a subordinate and a dominant culture, but mostly to show how ironically Fatih Akın twists the roles of the colonizer and the colonized.

# FROM THE "CİNEMA OF DUTY" TO THE "PLEASURES OF HYBRİDİTY"

In contrast to Akın's film, if we examine the films of both German and Turkish directors, made before the 1990s, instead of the representation of interstitial experience, what we observe is the confrontation of Turkish or German stereotypes manifested in cultural extremes, or tragic stories of socially, politically, and emotionally oppressed and frustrated migrant workers. Rainer Werner Fassbinder is the first German director in the late sixties and early seventies to take on the cinematic representation of the first migrant workers in Germany. *Katzelmacher* (1969), and *Fear Eats Soul* (1973) under the working title of *All Turks are Called Ali* (though there is no Turk in the film) are the first films that deal with the subject of foreign workers in Germany. In these films, Fassbinder concentrates on the themes of exclusion, and alienation of the "guest" workers in a foreign culture that welcomes them not as people but as a labour force only.

Sander-Brahms's *Shirin's Wedding* (1975) is another film made by a German director about the same issue. When Shirin is forced to an arranged marriage in her Anatolian village, she leaves Turkey to look for her fiancé Mahmut in Cologne, but as she is unable to work without a residence permit and so on, she ends up on the streets as a prostitute, and is killed by her pimp in the end. Shirin can be seen as the embodiment of Turkish minority women who were

caught in the crossfire between the patriarchal dynamics of Turkish culture on the one hand, and modern German culture on the other.

Hark Bohm's *Yasemin* (1988) is another film, that has also been referred to as "Romeo and Juliet in Hamburg" as it depicts the tragic love story between a Turkish girl, Yasemin and a German boy, Jan. Yasemin, too, is caught up between double pressures from both cultures, and divided between loyalties to both cultures. However, in the end, Yasemin runs away with Jan on the backscat of his motorbike.

Tevfik Başer's 40 Square Meters of Germany (1987) is the first film made in Germany by a Turk about a Turkish issue. Dursun moves from his village in Turkey to a big city in Germany, finds a job there, and never lets his young wife, Turna, go out of their apartment in order to protect her from the 'evils' of Western society. Being deprived of the life outside, denied her very human needs for communication and social contact, Turna (crane) is imprisoned by her husband in their 40 square metres apartment.

One day Dursun has an epileptic fit and dies. Turna, sitting for a very long time in front of the dead body, which ironically blocks her exit, eventually pushes it aside, and leaves the apartment. Although the film gives a realistic picture of a first generation Turkish worker's daily life and problems in Germany, like its predecessors, it cannot go beyond presenting ethnic and gender stereotypes. In his second film, *Farewell to A False Paradise* (1988), Başer deals with the types of imprisonment in the tragic story of Elif, a Turkish worker's wife, who finds freedom in a German prison where she is sent for killing her husband.

In the films of both German and Turkish directors of this phase, the setting is usually the Turkish ghetto in a big city, a symbolic prison in which Turkish men are depicted as representatives of one of teh two extremes: as potential criminals, or as voiceless subalterns suffering under the capitalist exploitation of the center versus margin relationship. In these films, Turkish women also

play their parts as passive, mute figures, sexually and emotionally oppressed by the patriarchal authorities of both sides, but emancipated and given love at the end by a German man. In other words, the dominant image of the Turk presented in most of the films made before the nineties is the marginal, the peripheral, the gendered victim, or the underdeveloped other, who rejects any type of communication with the main culture, and who willingly imprisons himself/herself behind personal, national, and religious walls.

### Identity as Performance

In the 1990s, however, we can say with Stuart Hall that cultural identity "undergoes constant transformation; it cannot be eternally fixed in some essentialised past, but it is subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power; (...) in this sense, [it] is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' (Hall, 1994: 394), and "it is always constituted within representation" (392). Sinan Çetin's *Berlin in Berlin* (1993) is the first Turkish film that lightheartedly presents a confrontation of Turkish and German stereotypes. The film questions the dynamics of ethnicity and the issues of gender and sexuality within the more entertaining and easygoing resources of the comedy genre.

Angelica Fenner points to Çetin's technical subtlety in dealing with the issues of ethnicity and gender, and states that "these complexly imbricated tensions in Çetin's film become particularly explicit in moments of excessive filmic spectacle, where the viewer is made to experience the dual pleasures of resistance and acquiescence to dominant ideologies" (Fenner, 2000:115). In Deniz Gökturk's terms, Çetin's film "offers a bizarre and entertaining view of intercultural encounters and ironically subverts some of the established stereotypes and models" (Göktürk, 2006: 11). In other words, *Berlin in Berlin* is the first film that deviates from the conventions of "the cinema of duty" and experiments with new ways of expressing "the pleasures of hybridity". These terms are used by Sarita Malik in her article "Beyond 'The Cinema of Duty'?

The Pleasures of Hybridity: Black British Films of the 1980s and 1990s". "The einema of duty" for Malik, deals with social issues in content and in technique, and it is a realistic documentary of the migrants'slice of life stories. Like the films made by Turkish and German directors in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, it "positions its subjects in relation to social crisis, and attempts to articulate 'problems' and 'solutions to problems' within a framework of centre and margin, white and non-white communities" (Malik, 1996: 203-204). In "the pleasures of hybridity", however, Malik points to a shift from "inbetweenness" to "diasporic experiences that are not limited to victimhood and struggle" (212).

However, according to the observations of cultural theorists, minority identities, in the process of becoming new subjects, develop various modes of resistance. Homi Bhabha calls it "mimicry" and explains it as the "partial" or "incomplete" presence (86). Mimicry repeats rather than represents, and in that very act of repetition, originality is lost, because "the observer becomes the observed and partial representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from esence" (89). What is left, according to Bhabha, is the mimic-man, neither-nor man, "a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (86). Lacan, in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis sees mimicry as a technique of "camouflage", not "a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camoullage practised in human warfare" (quoted in Bhabha 85). As an English missionary educationist wrote in 1819, mimicry creates "(...) a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (87). Robert Young, too, in Colonial Desire, calls mimic men an "uncertain patch of identities" or "polymorphously perverse peoples who are white but not quite". Franz Fanon's mimic men are black skins/white masks. Another postcolonial critic Elleke Boehmer delines

mimicry as "subversion by imitation", and explains it in the context of postcolonial literature:

As the phrase suggests, subversion by imitation is reflected mainly in the unspoken and the understated within texts. It emerges in ironies, double meanings, unlikely juxtapositions and disjunctures. (Boehmer, 1995: 175)

Having explained the concept of mimicry, we can move on to analyse the film and observe how Akın's leading characters experience the ambiguous nature of hybridity and mimicry by mimicking both Germanness and Turkishness. Cahit is a suicidal tramp, a loser who has been abandoned by his wife, Katharina, and indulges a self-destructive life in the red district of Hamburg. He is genetically Turkish but speaks little Turkish, and the word "Mersin", his home town in Turkey, is the only "thing" he knows about Turkey. In other words, he is Turkish in blood, but German in taste, opinions, and morals. He does not feel comfortable with the Turkish way of life "with its occupational homogeneity and strictly segregated gender roles, with male group ties and the 'mateship' code of loyalty predominant in both work and leisure (drinking, gambling, sport)" (Featherstone, 2003: 344). We can see this in a compulsory family visit scene where Cahit has to play a card game reluctantly with other male members of the family. However, he does not feel comfortable with the German way of life, either. He is a mimic-man, a neithernor man in the sense of Bhabha's formulation. When the film opens, having quarrelled over his own sexuality with a German man at a bar, he drives head on into a wall, and ends up in a psychiatric clinic where he meets Sibel.

Like Cahit, Sibel has tried to kill herself (by slashing her wrists) to escape from the pressures of her family. Unlike the previous representations of the Turkish woman as a passive and mute figure, Sibel is a speaking character, who is struggling to keep the control of her life in her own hands. She says, "I want to live. I want to dance. I want to make love, but not with only one man".

However, as Petra Fachinger points out, the lifestyle she wants to maintain clashes "with the patriarchal norms imposed" on her by her family (Fachinger, 2007: 255). Ironically enough, Akın deviates from a cliché presentation of the oriental woman's veiled body, presented in most of the postcolonial texts and films, as a forbidden or hidden space that constantly awakens the male colonizer's curiosity. Sibel never hides her body and soul from the masculine gaze behind a veil. In fact, she willingly exhibits her body as a site of resistance against the patriarchal authorities of both cultures. She defies her family's authority when she proudly exhibits her nose that was broken by her brother when he saw her together with a man.

In fact, her family, too, poses a remarkable contrast with the representation of the stereotypically patriarchal Turkish family of the previous Turkish-German films made in the 1980s. However, as James Clifford states in his article "Diasporas", life for diasporic women is "doubly painful", because "on the one hand, maintaining connections with homelands, with kinship networks, and with religious and cultural traditions may renew patriarchal structures; on the other, new roles and demands, new political spaces are opened by diaspora interactions" (Clifford, 1994: 313), and thus the diaspora women might have "painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds", and end up in performative strategies, like mimicry, doubling, or camouflage. Sibel is a mimic-woman, only an incomplete copy of the original (Cahit's bed partner Maren) as she fails to benefit from and to bring harmoniously together the values of her dual cultures. Cahit's life intersects with Sibel's when she tries to persuade him to make a fake marriage with her. She thinks that only a fake marriage can free her from the family control, and Cahit is a perfect choice for her as he is German in taste, in morals, and in intellect; and he will be an acceptable suitor for the family as he is of Turkish origin. The scene where Cahit visits Sibel's parents to ask to marry their daughter is the best example of Akin's ironic presentation of mimicry as well as ethnicity as performance, because Cahit,

who is supposed to know but does not know the Turkish traditional cultural expectations of a family, mimics Turkishness, the identity he is supposed to inhabit.

They get married and share Cahit's flat. Now, Sibel enjoys her social, economic, and sexual freedom by hanging around the discoes and having one night affairs, of course, without calculating their possible consequences. Like Cahit, she has a bed partner: Niko. She wears a heavy make-up on her face, and ornaments her body with tatoos and piercing. When the camera, in those scenes, cuts from the medium shots of Sibel's face and body to the medium shots of Cahit's bed-partner Maren's face and body, we realize that their make-up and body piercing are identical, but Sibel's face and body is "like camouflage, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically" (Bhabha 1994: 90).

Akin's presentation of love and sexuality in the film is shaped by two notions: the patriarchal enforcements of the Turkish and German cultures, and the unique nature and dynamics of the liminal space. Therefore, it would be right to consider the themes of love and sexuality in the film in the context of postcolonial criticism. For example, Akin problematizes the Niko-Sibel relationship as a center versus margin, or the colonizer versus the colonized relationship, in which Niko's desire to see or desire to know the margin/the colonized ends up in desire to possess it. When Sibel does not let Niko colonize her body, he, with the mixed feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and anger, insults the desired object's husband with ethnic slurs: "Reichen 50 Euro für'n Arschfick. Im Jargon heisst das doch griechisch! Haha, die Türkin wird griechisch gelickt!" Right here, at the climactic point, Cahit, in jealousy, kills Niko by accident, during this quarrel about Sibel's sexuality, and he ends up in prison.

However, Niko's hypocrisy not only causes the end of his own life but it also ruins the lives of Cahit and Sibel. In other words, no matter how the colonizer is defeated, the colonized is harmed, too. On the other hand, in the representation of an emancipated Turkish immigrant woman whose sexual freedom is threatened by a German man, Akın ironically reverses a cliché that was repeatedly dealt with by the previous directors: a Turkish immigrant woman emancipated by a German man.

Hence, it can be articulated that in the context of intimate relationships Akın presents the double standards and hypocrisy of both cultures about sexuality and poses a many-sided critique of masculine attitudes in patriarchal systems. Women in the film are categorized and defined by the male members of both cultures either as a sister, wife, and mother, or as a bitch. Women, like every woman in a patriarchal system, "function in a symbolic exchange which cements the relationships between men" (Gilbert, 2004: 1649). Sibel first regulates the relationship between Cahit and her brother; later on, she becomes the center of Cahit-Niko antagonism. What is more, their female body is "marked for consumption within imperialism's particular brand of patriarchy" (1649). In colonial representation, it is even worse. The body of the female other is there to be described, possessed, and used by the colonial male subject.

In the meantime, Sibel leaves Germany for Turkey in order not to be killed by her brother, because she has betrayed her husband, and this is a matter of family honour for her brother. Akin twists the course of the plot right here, and structures it in such a way that all cinematic elements - setting, character, events - get reversed, and the second half of the film takes place in Istanbul. However, it is not a glorious homecoming that a diaspora person always dreams of for Sibel, as it is not her "home" anymore. She is the outsider, the peripheric figure, the alien, the other. She is "at the rim of the metropolitan world" (Hall, 1994: 397), and she suffers. She is a different person with her very short hair, pale face, and masculine dressing style. She looks very different from the women of the homeland, and she is always asked the same question: "Are you a foreigner"? She initiates exactly the same way of life

(self-imprisonment) that Cahit was leading in Hamburg in the first half of the film. This is, in fact, a reminiscience of the earlier diaspora films that deal with the perception of the hostland as a prison, but here, Akın replaces the hostland with the homeland. In a letter Sibel writes to Cahit, she says, "It is not only you who are in prison, I feel in prison here, too". This feeling of imprisonment both at the beginning and in the second half of the film is visually complemented by closed shot composition, tight framing, and a dark lighting scheme to produce a gloomy and claustrophobic diegesis. She spends time on the back streets of Taksim, becomes a drug addict, she is abused and raped by a drug dealer, beaten almost to death by tramps, but she starts a new life with a taxi driver who rescues her from death. In the last episode of the film, we see a very different Sibel, who is leading a decent life as a mother, with her lover and daughter. Akin uses the journey as a metaphor of psychological and spiritual transformation. Sibel's external journey to Turkey, that began as escape, leads initially to a wandering life and homelessness, but it is finally transformed into a journey of identity and homefounding. Like Sibel, when he is released, Cahit also comes to Turkey, and reaches "his true self" here, deciding to live in his home town, Mersin. They plan to go to Mersin together, but when Sibel is packing, the domestic atmosphere of her home, of her daughter's cheerful voice stops her.

Cinematographically, in *Gegen die Wand*, the concepts of mimicry and interstitial experience are created by a fragmented and episodic narrative technique that is frequently interrupted by Brechtian alienation effects in the form of ironic ruptures and disjunctures, by music, asynchronous filmic sound, and diegetic contrasts. For example, the film has an interesting establishing shot by which the narrative is frequently interrupted. It is a musical performance of a band that plays a song of classical Turkish music in front of a Bosphorus view with the magnificient Sulcymaniye Mosque in the background. This (establishing) shot has a double function. On the one hand, it

functions as the director's visual punctuation marks in the form of comma, colon, fullstop, exclamation or question mark, bridging or breaking the sequences, or abruptly interrupting the narrative to make an ironic comment or a critical juxtaposition of the home and the host culture. A striking example is the scene on a city bus where Sibel first tries to persuade Cahit to a fake marriage. They speak in German, but the Turkish bus driver who overhears this dialogue, stops the bus as soon as he realizes that they are Turkish, and forces them to get off, saying in Turkish that he will never let such an immoral thing happen in "his" bus. They have to get off, and while Cahit is looking behind the bus in amazement, the scene is interrupted by the establishing shot, that reinforces the irony in the victory of the Turkish driver. Irony lies in the manners of the Turkish driver, once a voiceless subaltern, now someone who has the courage and the self-confidence to insist on his own cultural values. Besides, the irony in this scene points out to a cultural division not between the members of two different cultures but between the members of the same culture.

On the other hand, by fetishizing the homeland, the establishing shot exhibits the director's dialogue with the homeland in the form of nostalgia. According to Hamid Naficy, in his book, An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking, diasporic films "emphasize visual fetishes of homeland and the past (landscape, monuments, photographs, souvenirs, letters) as well as visual markers of difference and belonging (posture, look, style of dress and behaviour), they equally stress the oral, the vocal, and the musical – that is, accents, intonations, voices, music and songs, which also demarcate individual and collective identities" (Naficy, 2001: 24-25). For example, in the scene where Sibel cooks a traditional Turkish meal (dolma) for Cahit, the close-up shots to the meal are accompanied by Turkish music, and the whole scene, together with a bottle of rakt on the dinner table, both fetishize the homeland and reveal the director's nostalgia for it. In fact, Akın uses both Turkish and

German cultural elements, mostly in the form of music to set the third space, or the interstitial space in the film.

## CONCLUSION

Within the history of the representation of Turkish migrants in cinema, we have witnessed various phases in which Turkish identities are taken on and treated in the context of cultural polarities of Turkishness and Germanness, and therefore, presented in two extremes: either as voiceless subalterns or potential criminals threatening the welfare of the mainstream culture. In Gegen die Wand, Fatih Akın does not try to recover the past by filling the social, political, and emotional gaps in the experiences of the Turkish migrants in Germany. He does not try to insert an artificial coherence into the fragmented Turkish experience there. What he does is to represent the recent Turkish experience in Germany by resisting cultural stereotypes and dismantling the binaries, but emphasizing cultural impurity and diversity, hybridity, and discontinuity. As Petra Fachinger states, Akın "offers a complex representation of things Turkish in Germany by demonstrating that there are more than two different value systems, one Turkish and one German, set against each other" (Fachinger, 2007: 260). Hence, in the characters of Sibel and Cahit he offers a presentation of the everyday reality of the New Germans, who can speak both languages but who feel uncomfortable in both cultures. In other words, he demonstrates that the Turkish experience in Germany is "in the process of becoming", in Stuart Hall's terms, that is "subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power" and "it belongs to the future as much as to the past" (394).

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