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Drew Nelson

*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

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“Crossing borders: Fatih Akin’s Transnational Purpose”

Drew Nelson

Mentor: Dr. Nadja Kramer, Modern Languages

### Crossing borders: Fatih Akin's Transnational Purpose

The concept of a transnational cinema is still very young, open to interpretation and analyses of its nature and purpose. At its root meaning, we find national cinema, marked by a region's filmic devices that portray its underpinning culture, values, belief systems – in general, what makes its citizens who they are. But how do we classify “transnational” using our own familiar national terms? In Fatih Akin's world, where love, class and family struggles blister and heal by way of his emotive Turkish-German storytelling (*Head-On*, *The Edge of Heaven*), there are multiple ways as boundaries have become “transnational” by the nature in which they are transcended figuratively, physically and socio-economically. These “border crossings” tailor a new and certain hybridity and mobility within his characters by blurring their cultural norms and are often justified as a precondition to Akin's films (e.g. contemporary audiences have since grasped and accepted the concept of homosexuality more readily than prior generations). Akin's social arenas (the generational gap, sexual deviancy, promiscuity, alcoholism, drug abuse, political violence) are his vehicles utilized en route to the bigger picture – that transnational cinema allows the power to encompass human desire, triumph and suffering under one classifying umbrella, not to relegate them to one region in strict accordance with their culture. Akin recognizes this “universality of mobility and diversity” and its impact on self-identification, regardless of where one comes from (Göktürk, 249). Indeed, his characters' national identities become skewed and reborn as an entirely new identity as the films progress. It's precisely this ploy that attempts to disrupt the status quo<sup>1</sup>, which occurs as a result of the clash between past and present

<sup>1</sup>In Akin's films, men in the family patriarchy mark women as pieces of property; the family honor is passed down through the male line. If Akin's women impugn the family honor, they are disowned, as Sibel is in *Head-On*.

generations. Akin wants us to see that the entanglement of human difference and intolerance, although still very much alive today, is slowly coming undone.

To understand how these borders are crossed in Akin's films, we must first understand his characters' national categorizations. The actors involved in these films are much like their on-screen personas, in terms of geographical and cultural origin. Karin Lornsen identifies these characters as the German-German (G-G), the German-Turkish (G-T), the Turkish-German (T-G) and the Turkish-Turkish (T-T) (Lornsen, 19). The first letter in each set indicates the characters' national origins, with the second letter representing each of their prospective switches to another culture, whether it is a geographic, geopolitical or other shift in ideology. If the two letters are the same, it can mean there's no shift at all; other times the hyphen alone signifies some kind of transformation (i.e. In *TEOH*, Lotte's sexuality defies boundaries.)

The G-G signifies that of the first generation, post-WWII German – a traditionalist by nature whose stereotype revolves around deeply rooted religious, social and cultural beliefs. These facets continued to drive their morality in the years following the Third Reich's demise. The G-G is best personified through Hanna Schygulla, who plays the benevolent German mother, Susanne, in *TEOH*. She is also G-G because she's the first generation's offspring, having grown up in such a traditional and conservative bourgeois environment.

Perhaps the most encompassing category includes G-T and T-G – the “hybrid” characters that Lornsen claims “opposes conventions of either/or choices as well as a simple intermediate position” and does “justice to the different shades of cultural expression” (17). Indeed, these groups do not appear to desire identification with any one

culture or nationality; rather, they crave relief from those identities altogether and set out to reinforce the idea of personifying this newfound hybridity. These are characters like Sibel and Cahit in *Head-On* and Ayten, Lotte, Nejat and Yeter in *TEOH*. Akin uses them to emphasize the group's crucial attribute: to be, is to be mobile. While assuming multiple cultural identities is sought in some form for many walks of life, certain corners of our society still attempt to reject and dismiss these ideologies in favor of tradition, not dissimilar to contemporary forms of discrimination.

This leads us to the T-Ts, staunch cornerstones in the matters of family honor and tradition, and best exemplified by *Head-On*'s Serif and Yilmaz and *TEOH*'s Ali. This group represents the cultural opposition to the G-G (although both groups are similar in the manner in which they emphasize the steadfast family unit). The conflicts in each film arise when both group's offspring, the G-Ts, attempt to identify themselves on a transnational scale. The clash amongst all three groups leaves behind the image of what Göktürk calls "paternalist sub-national culture" in favor of one that breaks into "transnational spheres in which global diasporas are attracting increasing interest" (253).

The manner of discourse in Akin's chronology (from *Head-On* to *TEOH*) follows a discernible albeit predictable pattern toward his ultimate filmic goals. In *Head-On*, the two T-G protagonists Sibel and Cahit attempt to kick-start their lives after attempting suicide. They are "born-again," new to the world away from their Turkish heritage, which they have consciously rejected. Sibel longs to identify as a free German woman, unbound from the clutches of her oppressive, patriarchal T-T family, even though she knows she cannot break her mother's heart by completely severing family ties (Sibel: I want to live, Cahit. I want to live and to dance and to fuck. And not just with one guy.

Get it? (0:13:46)). Cahit also seeks freedom from his own Turkish practices, evident in the scene in which he addresses Turkish men and their frequent presence in local brothels (Cahit: Why don't you fuck your own wives? (0:47:25)). What ultimately brings them together, however, is not a shared hatred of their backgrounds; it's that they desire the basic right to choose their social and cultural identities. This is one of Akin's devices that proves what Kathleen Newman identifies as crucial to transnational cinema: "Borders are seen to have been always permeable, societies always hybrid" (4). In other words, Akin's migrants need not be classified by where they are from, but where they want to go.

Sibel's Turkish borders are prescribed by her family, thus her ticket to roam freely is to marry Cahit, since her family would subsequently accept his Turkish roots.

However, this is a shaky situation when Cahit and Serif ask Sibel's father for a marriage blessing (Yilmaz: Your Turkish sucks. What did you do with it? Cahit: Threw it away! (0:22:27)). Ironically in this scene, he speaks the truth. That Cahit's Turkish is mediocre at best and his German has since been his principle language (not to mention flecks of English near the end) is filmic evidence that he has already crossed into a transnational identity.

To further illustrate his characters' need to break out of their molds, Akin's varying theme of "home" give it relevance to his characters wherever they decide to identify it, especially in series with their figurative, and real, deaths. In *Head-On*, Sibel returns to Turkey and encounters the doldrums lifestyle she tried initially to evade. Her job as a hotel housekeeper is part of the daily bore – much unlike her emancipated lifestyle back in Germany. It does not help that her attempts to reintegrate into her familiar nighttime club scenery only yields to her rape and a near-death conflict with a

group of Turkish men, which stands as her own climactic, figurative death. But after Cahit is released from jail for accidentally killing one of Sibel's lovers (his own figurative death), he discovers her whereabouts and ultimately asks her and her young daughter to live with him in his hometown of Mersin, Turkey. Having been too late, however, Cahit discovers she will not go. She chooses to live with - and for - her daughter in Istanbul, likely in order to steer her upbringing clear of her own.

Initially Sibel and Cahit seek freedom outside the boundaries of their Turkish identities. But having experienced this freedom, coupled with the "deaths" of their former lifestyles and passage of time, they are drawn back home. *TEOH* too displays the endpoint of Lotte's and Yeter's journeys as departing coffins bound for their home countries. Akin demands not that we abandon our definite origins completely, but that we see the opportunity beyond them, which is precisely his case-in-point: at very least, the *possibility* of belonging transnationally is a reality.

If *Head-On* shows first-generation T-Ts living up to their unflinching rigidity, opting for complacency rather than compassion, the next part of the pattern lies with *TEOH*, which hints at Akin's desired disruption of the first generation's status quo. Whereas *Head-On* confirms the existence and the struggles of the hybrid groups, *TEOH* already adopts these identities as standard and aims to imagine what it is like on the brink of their integration and acceptance in society (hence the title, which translated in German is "Auf der Anderen Seite" or, "On the other side" – a reference to an existence on alternative planes of sexuality, language and political activism). For instance, the reason Akin condemns Yeter and Lotte to die is because one is a prostitute and the other is a homosexual aiding an outsider; death is essentially a form of payment for their "altered

ways” under his vision of the status quo, which gives active embodiment to his message. In other words, both characters are mobile and therefore are free to pursue what they will. But their price for exalting these beliefs in their respective contemporary cultures is death because we, as a people, have yet to completely destroy the intolerance we impose upon those who wish to be as such.

But the pattern does not stop there. In one of Akin’s consciously overt attempts at blurring generational differences, he casts the quintessential, multilingual G-G actress Hanna Schygulla as Susanne<sup>2</sup>. Susanne, in fact, appears to represent a connective instrument used to fuse her post-WWII German ideology with contemporary agency for change – a character not seen in *Head-On*. She is an interesting supplement to Akin’s message because she explicitly represents Akin’s transnational agenda – that a character can possess and stand by preconceived notions but still have the agency to alter those beliefs and expectations. Her traits exhibit those associated with both the first and second-generation G-G, thereby effectively breaking down the isolation between the two. For instance, before Lotte is killed, she is wary of the “outsider” Ayten, whom Lotte invites to stay in their home (Susanne: Very generous of you, letting a stranger come and stay with us. Lotte: We have to help her, Mama. Susanne: You don’t even know her. Lotte: That’s so German, Mama (0:53:34)). Observing Lotte’s love for Ayten, as well as her unyielding humanitarianism, is exactly Susanne’s catalyst, causing her to reflect on her own wild, unbinding youth, (Susanne: I hitchhiked to India. It was the thing to do then (01:31:34)). Thus, her passage into the new world is complete: Susanne transcends her preconceived notions about outsiders to help Ayten find her mother, Yeter, and to gain asylum.

<sup>2</sup>Schygulla’s screen credits are notoriously linked to New German Cinema director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who utilized her portrayal of strong German women in response to the artistic stagnation of post-war Germany.



Akin's films feed directly into this *New New German Cinema*, one in which German-born directors with varied national roots lay bare this possible fusion where German (and Turkish) society challenges its own status quos and perpetuates the message of a singular transnational identity. Mette Hjort refers to this as "epiphanic transnationalism" in which "the emphasis is on the cinematic articulation of those elements of deep national belonging that overlap with aspects of other national identities to produce something resembling deep transnational belonging" (16). Essentially, what we encounter is a clash between young, political rebel Ayten, whose primal focus is to live free from oppressing governance, and old, politically comfortable Susanne, whose allegiance to the European Union remains intact – merely pieces of their respective "deep national belonging." However, after Lotte dies, each realizes the commonality of love is fundamentally more binding of a contract than belief in any sort of government, which produces precisely the "deep transnational belonging" Hjort mandates.

*TEOH* is flooded with epiphanic transnationalism, the idea of which "is to bring shared culture that may not actually be fully or focally recognized as such into public awareness, to make it salient and thus a more significant dimension of citizens' self-understandings" (Hjort, 16). After Ali kills Yeter, T-G Nejat, having realized the poor educational opportunities in Turkey, seeks out the T-G Ayten for two reasons: first, to inform her of her mother's untimely death, and second, to finance her studies in Germany – a feat that became Yeter's motivation to work as a prostitute. (Nejat: Knowledge and education are human rights (0:32:31)). Even though they never get the chance to meet, Nejat is driven to find the wistful Ayten by his hope that all should be granted an education if they desire – exactly the shared national culture Hjort highlights. Nejat's

status throughout the film further strengthens this tie between cultures (a Turkish professor of German literature, teaching in Germany and operating a German bookstore in Turkey is an incredibly overt identity, not to mention it hits the proverbial nail on the head regarding Akin's goal of transnational belonging.)

To further prove this ideology isn't a mere fluke, Akin wraps up *TEOH* with the most poignant event of all: the melding of national, first-generation ideologies into "affinitive transnationalism," in the case of Nejat and Susanne (Hjort, 17). Typically, this mode is understood "in terms of ethnicity, partially overlapping or mutually intelligible languages, and a history of interaction giving rise to shared core values, common practices, and comparable institutions." However, it "can also arise in connection with shared problems or commitments in a punctual now, or with the discovery of features of other national contexts that are deemed to be potentially relevant to key problems experienced within a home context" Nejat and Susanne each stand as people who lost somebody, whether it was Ali (who never returns to the waiting Nejat at the film's end) or Lotte – their shared problem. They also exhibit a shared commitment – to find and help Ayten. That each adopts and accepts these paths as a sort of divine, combined calling – "affinitive transnationalism" – makes for significant evidence that Akin backs up his bold, optimistic projections for the transnational movement he perpetuates.

Such projections are not the rampant death, suffering and intolerance we are privy to in these films – they are simply the status quo evident in all of our nationalities, all of our cultures and all of our firm beliefs. *Head-On* and *TEOH* are but Akin's booming megaphone, as if he's perched high atop Germany and Turkey relaying his hypothesis through the device. I can practically see Akin saying, "We can co-exist! We all belong

together, no matter our backgrounds. We are connected by the most basic filaments of human emotion, yet we choose not to acknowledge it in fear of a people who are different! Rise up and break down these corrupt thoughts and locked borders! Now is the time!”

If film truly belongs, in essence, to everyone, it was the ideal medium to deliver Akin’s permeating ideology to what Newman calls “audiences outside the United States,” who “are understood to have long had access to at least more than one national cinematic tradition, if not several, and their viewing practices are understood to be active engagement, not to be passive reception” (4). Still, it is the warm reception with all people across all nations that earned him a pioneering spot at the helm of the transnational beast. And for all of our sakes, I believe it is here to stay.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND MENTOR

Drew Nelson graduated with a bachelor's degree in mass communications from Minnesota State University – Mankato in December 2009, where he studied journalism and film and wrote for the campus publication, *The Reporter*, for four years. During his college career, he was a tutor in the Center for Academic Success, a web intern at the Village Voice-operated, alt-weekly publication *City Pages* in Minneapolis, a search-engine optimization writer for Rasmussen College, and an active community service member and officer at Sigma Nu Fraternity. In the fall of 2009, he was awarded first place in the entertainment category for the Minnesota Newspaper Association's "Better Newspaper Contest." In July 2008, he founded Cut 'N' Dry Painting, LLC., in Mankato and presently serves the community and surrounding area. He resides in Maple Grove, MN.

Nadja Kramer started working as an Assistant Professor of German in August 2006. She has studied German literature, culture and German studies, as well as American studies at the universities of Frankfurt and SUNY Buffalo, and received her doctorate from Indiana University, Bloomington. Before coming to Minnesota State Mankato, she was a professor at Carleton College for several years. She is very interested in German studies, minority and popular culture, and issues of race and identity in Germany with a focus on memorialization and representation of historic trauma. She is also interested in film studies, urban studies and the practice of place.