

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

UP AGAINST THE WALL OF THE SIGNIFIER: *GEGEN DIE WAND*

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Turkish-German director Fatih Akin's award winning masterpiece *Gegen die Wand* (Berlin Film Festival Top Prize 2004, European Film Award, 2004) is described as "an assault to the senses," "an energetic blast of extreme situations," a film that "resists to the easy assimilation of existing cultural stereotypes," "not so easy to pin down" and "disturbing."¹ Despite its distressing images and painful story however, the Berlin jury praised the film for its successful portrayal of the difficulties of immigrant life. Interestingly enough, this difficulty did not involve any manifest

¹ The quotes are respectively from the following reviews on the internet: Marcy Dermansky in *World Film* (<http://worldfilm.about.com/od/germanfilms/fr/headon.htm>); Wendy Mitchell in *IndieWire* www.indiewire.com/people/people_050119akin.html and Asuman Suner in *Sight and Sound*, March 2005 (<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/203/>). The reviewer in the *New York Times* described it as a love story that "cuts and bleeds and even kills." (http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v_id=303200) and the one in the *Guardian* talked of "uncomfortable viewing ... (in) ... a dislocated cinematic universe." (http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Guardian_review/0,4267,1416759,00.html) A few others have gone much further in describing the film's disturbing nature. Aidan Elliot in *Film Exposed* describes it as giving "no alleviation from the depressive onslaught of squalor and suffering" (<http://www.filmexposed.co.uk/?file=review&id=183>), whereas in *Kamera*, Elke de Wit emphasised the film's magic spell: "even if you want to look away when the violence is too much, you won't be able to" (http://www.kamera.co.uk/reviews_extra/gegen_die_wand.php). And a viewer described the characters as "abrasive and shocking in their violent urge for self-destruction."

instance of racism in the film. *Gegen die Wand* is a tragic love story between two young Turkish immigrants in Germany.

Culture of Pluralism, or Questions of Reading

Since both the director and his two protagonists are second generation Turkish immigrants in Germany, the film's ethnic and cultural status is inevitably part of its viewing and reading. But just how such a reading is made is of course a political stake. For instance, while describing the film as "resistant to the easy assimilation of existing cultural stereotypes" and "not so easy to pin down", the Turkish film critic Asuman Suner also argues for a principle of reading based on a concept of cultural identity. According to her, *Gegen die Wand*

... shuttles between cultural codes. Having grown up in Germany with Turkish parents, the protagonists seem to feel equally (not) at home in either culture, quoting freely from both their Turkish and German cultural heritages. Yet the film presents this not as a problem of non-belonging but rather as an opportunity to construct multiple belongings. Instead of portraying the experience of exile in terms of homelessness and loss, *Head-On* emphasizes its enabling side, what Edward Said called the 'plurality of vision' it offers.²

If the protagonists are freely quoting, happily multiple and multiply enabled, what is, in Suner's own words, "disturbing" about the film and why and how is it, again in her words, "not so easy to pin down"? Although Suner writes that the film's cultural pluralism is what resists the cultural stereotypes, she does not show *how* this is achieved by the film's particular narrative strategy or construction. Cultural pluralism in itself is not a guarantee for deconstructing and unmasking stereotypes, as multiculturalist representations themselves are highly stereotyped in the media and film industries. Suner follows this identitarian aspect of the film further and she offers, from the position of a native Turkish critic, a cultural translation for the readers of the British film journal *Sight and Sound* by explaining what this kind of love is called in Turkish culture: "kara sevda", a dark passion. Her evidence is the passing of the words "kara sevda" in the background music of a particular scene. Dark passion or "kara sevda" is a lyrical theme abundantly found in classical Ottoman as well as Anatolian folk poetry. Yet such themes are not strange to the British or German poetic traditions either—even though love is not the

² Suner, "Dark Passion."

exclusive topic of European lyrical poetry. Although the protagonists are migrants, there is not much in the film that requires a culture-specific reading, and it can well be read as a tragic love story. What is affected in Suner's "cultural" reading is the production of the contemporary British or European reader *vis-à-vis* its non-European "Other", a gesture that in fact undermines her own intended relativist pluralism. This nativist cultural translation enables the critic to place the film in a sub-genre called "hardcore love story" and thus cushion the shock of it. The pluralist rhetoric thus reproduces the supposedly universal classification system of a "common" cultural stock of knowledge.

If the theme of love in *Gegen die Wand* were defined as lyrical following the figure of "dark passion", it would have been appropriate to refer to Walter Benjamin's classic essay on Baudelaire. In this essay, Benjamin (1968) begins by focusing on Baudelaire's problem, i.e. the difficulty of writing lyrical poetry in a modern age. Since a major feature of modernity is perception by shock, Baudelaire's question was "how lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience for which the shock has become the norm."³ Benjamin shows that, as the function of consciousness was protection against stimuli rather than reception of memory traces, Baudelaire's unique literary solution was a defensive use by preparing the consciousness to register the shock so that it would have a less traumatic effect. In a seminal reading of this classic essay together with Benjamin's theory of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Samuel Weber (1996) offered a novel interpretation of the concepts of aura and shock in Benjamin's work. What is interesting from my point of view is the conclusion he infers from this reading: according to Weber, Benjamin's well-known interpretation of Baudelaire's "*Un Passante*" as "love not so much at first sight as at last" referred to a project of temporalising and narrativising the disruptive force of an encounter which comes as a shock.⁴

Does *Gegen die Wand* produce a similar narrative solution? This is a difficult question to answer. If the film is perceived as a disturbing assault to the senses, this is surely because it wants to bring up something *against* their regular, normal employment. Yet it also knows that it has to tell a story.⁵ As shocking and disparaging as the experience of the immigrant

³ Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 162.

⁴ Weber, "Mass Mediauras, or: Art, Aura and Media in the work of Walter Benjamin," in his *Mass Mediauras: Form Technics Media*, 76-107.

⁵ We learn from the director that he is inspired by his own encounter of a young Turkish immigrant woman who approached her with a marriage proposal some years ago. The story of young immigrant women under patriarchal communalist oppression was already there. But it would be a reductive reading and a betrayal to

working class is, *Gegen die Wand*'s Sibel and Cahit, both diagnosed as self-destructive, meet at the mental clinic after failed suicide attempts. She is trying to break the chains of a strong patriarchal communal ethics, he the alienating bonds of migrant work in modern capitalism. They are both up against the wall of the signifier. But they are also different. Sibel is struggling for her freedom from patriarchal oppression of her migrant family. She wants, in her own words, "to live her youth" as a free individual. Engaging, as a last resort, what Michel de Certeau would call a "tactical" behaviour, she uses the strategic institution of marriage to get her freedom and asks Cahit to marry her to be able to live away from her father and brother. Since, in de Certeau's words (1988), "the space of the tactic is the space of the other", she "play(s) on and with a terrain imposed on her and organised by the law of a foreign power ... a maneuver within the enemy's field of vision."⁶ Cahit is a punk, marginal, "déclassé" alcoholic who lives with the memory of her dead lover. He first refuses her offer and then accepts it out of sympathy for her. As the story unfolds and they really fall in love with each other, he will be the one who tragically acts out the hegemonic institution's patriarchal signifier of masculinity. How to talk of their impossible love without resorting to the identitarian rhetoric and homogenising force of the culture of pluralism?

The film brings up difficult issues of racism and sexism as well as their entanglement in a subtle way, but it seems these questions can only be brought up once a certain *metropolitan investment of desire* is taken for granted. This is an investment into *individual freedom* that can only be instigated under particular social, historical and class conditions. As a young woman, Sibel's struggle for her freedom from patriarchal oppression is inscribed on the register of individual freedom, and it is also already a struggle with a well-established, *upwardly mobile* migrant family which holds on to their traditional origin. Cahit is a downwardly mobile, self-consciously marginalised punk who collects empty beer cans in the cultural centre. Sibel finds a job as hair-dresser. They are certainly not well-off, but their class position is left *unmarked* by the narrative. While this implies the difficulty of representing the complex class and power dynamics of the "Third World" migrants in metropolitan countries, it also reinforces the individualistic inscription of their desires. Hence the class dimension is present by its absence in the narrative. Further, as the narrative engages the second generation migrants who were either born in Germany or came as a child and raised in Germany, and as the second part

the film's radical feminist line of flight to see the experience that it is at pains to articulate as a mere criticism of traditionalism.

⁶ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 57.

of the story is in Turkey, the aspect of *globality* is already at stake. This globality involves the question of how the second generation migrants are positioned *vis-à-vis* their country of origin. As a consequence, we cannot limit our reading of *Gegen die Wand* to a tragic story of racist or sexist bigotry, but we have to enlarge our perspective of reading so as to include the politicoeconomic registers of class and globality.

I will go back to these observations, but I want to add to them an initial *methodological* point. Somewhat similar to Benjamin's above problematic (as read by Weber), I suggest that we read *Gegen die Wand* in terms of a tension between an immense force of deterritorialisation, a line of flight on the one hand, and the necessity to put this force of freedom into form, that is to say, to compose that which is incessantly decomposing its own composition, on the other. I am also reminded here of Raymond Williams's singular emphasis on the tension between "social forms" and "immediate and actual significance of being" or what he calls, in a more theoretical fashion, "structures of feeling."⁷ Williams's threefold distinction, in *Marxism and Literature* between the dominant, residual and emergent forms is certainly relevant as well.⁸ The one that concerns me most here is the concept of *emergence*. Williams carefully underlines the difficulty with this concept as one of distinguishing between the merely new and the substantially alternative or oppositional. As the structural possibility of hegemonic absorption and co-optation (by, for instance, existing forms of narrative, traditions or institutions) introduces a moving threshold of undecidability to the concept of emergence, Williams feels the need to supplement his framework, towards the end of his chapter, with a new concept, "pre-emergence," which he defines as the "active and pressing but not yet fully articulated, rather than the evident emergence which could be more confidently named."⁹ To re-formulate the above question, is it possible to read *Gegen die Wand* against the background of a tension between the socialising and politicising force of the narrative and what Raymond Williams has called "pre-emergence" which I suggest that we take as the "before" of a fully formed subject and narrative? An initial difficulty is that Williams's argument is governed by a certain notion of *lived presence*, and by implication his reference to the futurity of practice takes the risk of seeing the future in terms of presence as well. Such a view would get dangerously close to a teleological conception. Of course, Williams's manifest aim is to draw the attention to the processual nature of emergence in order to avoid teleology, yet his commitment to the

⁷ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128-135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 121-127.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

phenomenological category of lived presence tends to overlook the necessarily problematic nature of emergence, that is the historical fact that it is indistinguishable from a situation of crisis and is (in)determined by a constitutive undecidability. A possible objection to my line of thinking might be that, by emphasising crisis and undecidability, the analysis might get locked in negative terms. But, on the contrary, such undecidability must be seen as the irreducibility of time to presence, to the empty time of progress, hence constitutive and productive and as a minimal requirement against a teleological shift. Taking a further step against the grain of the concept of pre-emergence which *might* also have a teleological resonance, I would like to argue that the problem here is how to keep the “pre-” (or “not-yet”) in emergence as a way of resisting co-optation rather than a mere absence in, or immaturity of, practical consciousness. In what follows I will offer a psychoanalytically-inspired reading that emphasizes a singular image in the film. This is an image which breaks with the narrative and temporal unity without necessarily putting it in crisis.

Toward a “New” New German Cinema, or How to Destroy

Before moving on to my reading of the film, I would like to make another detour and take the risk of describing Akm’s work as the “New” New German Cinema in tribute to what I would like to call his masters, the great directors and artists of the New German Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s—an artistic movement which offered a social criticism of the so-called postwar German miracle, the new Germany, especially in the films of its most important member Rainer Werner Fassbinder.¹⁰ I also describe his characters, Sibel and Cahit, as the “New” New Germans, just as Fassbinder’s Maria Braun was the new German. Fassbinder’s

¹⁰ No one was frustrated more than Fassbinder with the postwar reconstruction of Germany. Was Fassbinder himself not a New German, this successful entrepreneur in the cultural sector, a child of postwar Germany, famous with his heavy work habit (the pride of Germany in the business-as-usual of the Goethe Institute)? A new beginning was possible and indeed necessary after the tragic experience of Nazism. But without a critical questioning and analysis of the Nazi experience, the project of reconstruction turned out to be a delicately repressive one which depended on a disciplinary paradigm of work and productivity. This is perhaps why, while in the beginning Fassbinder questioned the postwar Germany, he gradually turned to the questioning of the Nazi Germany and its process of emergence (especially in his masterpiece *Berliner Alexanderplatz*) as the denied prehistory of the so-called German Miracle.

unforgettable character was a product of the postwar, post-Nazi liberal-social democratic alignment which was seen as responsible for the German miracle. Sibel and Cahit are the children of the immigrant workers whose productive work remained unreadable under the regime of the New German. They have now emerged into the social and cultural stage as the new young Germans under culturalist/racist/sexist oppression.¹¹ I have already referred to the individualistic pre-inscription of this emergence. But this is also a situation of crisis. These people, born into a world divided between the strong communal code of the immigrant working class—a class, we must not forget, subjected to the strict conditions of a separatist state policy for almost 50 years now—and the deterritorialising forces of the most advanced sectors of the society, carry the immense force of a future to come; a force whose movement is as undecidable as their insecure socio-economic condition and unstable lives. This is why we find their speed unbearable, their energy fascinating, and shocking when they turn it against themselves, not simply because they are desparate from oppression and alienation, but rather because the energy they carry *exceeds* them. Being one of them, the director Fatih Akin wants to narrativise their crisis. Are freedom and love possible at all? Produced in particular historical and social conditions, we should regard this as a real, affirmative question that *Gegen die Wand* is at pains to answer. This question is posed at the cutting edge of experience, of living life to the full. This is why, despite that Sibel and Cahit are produced by particular historical circumstances and contradictions, they are not simply socially representative types. They are rather atypical and singular individuals living at the edge of their historically determined situation. As Williams too carefully notes:

What they [modes of domination] exclude may often be seen as the personal or the private, or as the natural or even the metaphysical. Indeed it is usually in one or the other of these terms that the excluded area is expressed, since what the dominant has effectively seized is indeed the ruling definition of the social.¹²

¹¹ The expression “young upwardly mobile” here should not be taken as a simple synonym for “yuppie”. I am referring to the fact that migrants are by definition upwardly mobile, especially the young second generation migrants such as Sibel and Cahit. Their condition of poverty should not be confused by the larger historical framework in which they are placed.

¹² Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 125.

Once we read the mode of domination or the ruling definition of the social as *individualism*, then we have a chance to see a potential *gap* between this dominant individualist mode or definition and the singularity of these migrant individuals' experience. Such a gap is always lost in the ruse of the narrative, whether the narrative is considered as the narrative of history or of the film. The atypicality or singularity of protagonists is precisely what gives them such a great power of expressing the subjective crisis of the second generation migrant under racist/sexist oppression. This crisis is not a merely negative moment then, even though the narrative constitutes them as *victims*. How to think, for instance, Sibel's suicidal tendency? Is it an effect of oppression, an expression of her desperation in patriarchal iron cage? That she is under severe oppression and that she has a strong suicidal tendency, a working of what Freud would call death drive, are certain.¹³ But then what to do with her powerful resistance to victimisation? Especially in his later elaborations on the death drive, Freud insisted on the fusion of the death drive with the libidinal, sexual drive.¹⁴ This kind of approach gives a different place to death: it is not simply the opposite of libidinal drive; life itself is seen as a negotiation between these two drives by Freud. We are thus encouraged to see the drives as characterised by a fundamental undecidability.¹⁵ Following this line of thinking, the desire that singularises Sibel and Cahit can be read as the oldest one: a desire for immediacy, experience or event, a desire for the immediacy of living, which can easily turn into its opposite, dying. This desire is also destructive then. But what is destruction? It is now time to give an ear to a master of it, the old New German, Fassbinder: "... destruction is not the opposite of that which exists. Destruction is when this concept no longer exists, and no longer has any significance, because it has a reality permitting it to disappear. What people will then experience, that will be exciting".¹⁶

Is this a question that appears with every emergent social force in history? Surely the "New" New Germans cannot give Fassbinder's

¹³ Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", *Standard Edition*, Vol. XVIII (1920-1922).

¹⁴ Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism" *Standard Edition*, Vol. XIX (1923-1925).

¹⁵ This must also be seen in terms of Freud's more general observation on the structural ambivalence that characterises the process of identification. See "The Ego and the Id", *Standard Edition*, Vol. XIX (1923-1925).

¹⁶ R. W. Fassbinder in interview with Brigitte Landes and Horst Laube, *Theaterbuch 1*, eds. Brigitte Landes and Horst Laube, Munich 1978, quoted in *Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, Goethe Institute (no date).

answer, but they can perhaps learn from him a lesson of destruction for themselves. My purpose here is not to deny these people's cultural position but to refuse unquestioned assumptions of cultural identity which take the risk of conceiving the question in terms of a conflict (or co-operation) of cultures. I suggest that we take extreme precautions with such commonplace culturalism, whether it depends on essentialist notions of pure identity or those that *replace* it with theoretically and politically more advisable notions of hybridity, "in-between"ness or "multiple belongings." The place itself remains unquestioned in such a replacement, but the question is not to conquer or appropriate the place so much as to *displace* it.¹⁷ The potential, productive gap or opening I have mentioned above is thus culturally named and located as a hybrid place or hybrid subject. While continuing to see the migrant as victim, this line of thinking believes it transcends victimisation by the concept of cultural hybridity. The result is often a capture of emergence as the "new" by culture industry: the ethnic music or cinema. If the emergence is thus co-opted by the existing forms, can we talk of "*pre-emergence*" in terms of the gap or opening between the singularity of experience and the dominant culture of individualism? If we were to re-think Fassbinder's formulation in the context of pre-emergence, the question of destruction becomes a question of shaking established patterns as well as established oppositions and creating a movement in the sense of artistic movement as well as in the everyday and philosophical sense of creating an event or an effect, of displacing things so that a new question is formed. Such displacement implies a relationship to the other.

Racism, Sexism and Globality

Therefore, although I insist on calling them "New New Germans", I would also like to argue that the displacement in question is not a merely internal affair of German society. The New New Germans find the force of their deterritorialising energy in their singular position as migrants, as *subjects who are already produced in relationship to another place*, and not merely as victims of racism and sexism in metropolis. This global production is an essential part of their story. If the bitter experience of Sibel and Cahit is the ethico-political question of love and freedom, it is

¹⁷ Paradoxical as it may be, in the notion of hybridity, it is always the concept of displacement which is *replaced* with that of an essentialist notion of pure identity. The new humanism (call it "postmodernism") is based on the notion of a displaced (split, hybrid) human subject (no longer an essentialist one).

inevitably tied up with the relation to this other place. Precisely because their desire and their crisis is *metropolitan*, i.e. already inscribed, among other things, by the unequal relationship between where they live and where they are from, one cannot take their cultural status or identity as given. *They are not simply other*, and they do *not simply represent some other place*. In their production, the country of origin is placed as other. How does this other place appear in the film?

Conceived within its own narrative limits, *Gegen die Wand* offers a delicate treatment of issues of sexism and racism. Its criticism of patriarchal/sexist oppression within the racially oppressed migrant community carefully avoids the stereotyping which has become common in recent migrant cinema. The same must be said for its approach to racism. The story is woven so complexly that sexist and racist signifiers become inseparable in a single operation of the symbolic. The knot of the story is tied at the moment when, in order to get rid of her harassing ex-lover, Sibel tells him that, if her Turkish husband hears about him, he will be dead. This is no more than another tactical move on her part. But it seems that there is something unequal to the intelligence of the oppressed in the order of the signifier. In a tragi-comic turn of events, almost as if Cahit heard this as an order, he accidentally kills the humiliated ex-lover when insulted by him. The signifier reveals itself as the destiny of the migrants and catches them in its web.

Gegen die Wand thus shows how the new forces of deterritorialisation represented by the second generation migrants is blocked by a regime of cultural signifier which crushes their desire. The tragic aspect of the story lies in the impossibility of solving the problem, of breaking through the wall of the signifier. The impossible solution that keeps coming back in Akin's films is returning to Turkey (as we also know from *Kurz und Schmerzlos*). It comes as a spontaneous solution of his protagonists, no doubt tied to a fantasy (which is a fantasy of going home, of having his or her own small business there, but we also know that this is also often strangely mixed with a middle class German fantasy of having a small place on the Mediterranean coast).¹⁸ This is a major way in which the country of origin as other appears: as a refuge from the oppressive structures of metropolitan life. Interestingly we are made to feel that it is not a solution as it only reproduces the economy of sacrifice. Both Gabriel in *Kurz und Schmerzlos* and Sibel in *Gegen die Wand* have to give up their

¹⁸ The largest touristic towns on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey are now full of German permanent residents, who bought houses and significant number of whom are retired people.

loves. How this impossibility is articulated is the ethical and political enigma of Akm's film.

A Haunting Scene

I have argued that *Gegen die Wand* is torn between the desire for experience and event and the imperative of narrativisation which is also an imperative of solution—a solution or resolution that has to be ideological, if we follow the best of what we have learned from critical film studies. If the film cannot resolve its contradictions, does this mean that it resists to an ideological “happy end” typical of culture industry? There are various ways of ending a story. We must perhaps ask: what is it that stands in the place of a resolution? If we are eventually told that love is impossible under present circumstances, how does the film make note of this impossibility?

Although returning home does not seem to be a solution or resolution, still maybe the story would like to reconcile its explosive contradictions in a single image. In his effort of narrativisation, Akm resorts to a well-known device used in Ancient Greek tragedy: the story is divided into five sections by a single image: the scene of a Turkish *saz* band (a classical music band) and a singer performing classical Turkish music on the shore of the Istanbul straits. The scene can be read as a *nostalgic* postmodern pastiche or quotation which gives the story its cultural pluralism and hybrid style. Indeed such a reading would be compatible with the director's stated intention. When asked about this image, Akm gives the following account of it:

That's like a Brechtian element. As a young scriptwriter I like to try things out, so with this story it was not fitting into a threeact dramaturgy. It's too complicated or too different. I read a lot about theater and I discovered Brecht, and also classical Greek tragedy, and they are built on five structural acts. I wanted to work with that, and to really show the audience when a new act is beginning. One of the basic ideas for the mood of the film was the idea that western punk music is really connected—in the lyrics for example—into classical Turkish music. Both are about how you can love somebody so much you go insane, you feel so much passion that you want to hurt yourself. Even with Depeche Mode or Nick Cave or Iggy Pop, I discovered a connection to the eastern world, so I wanted to bring that to the film. Also it was a way to break the Western, realistic look of

the film with a kitschy postcard element. But those elements are connected to each other, and that's me.¹⁹

Akm's Brechtian claim is an overstatement, as we hardly find Brechtian aspects in his film: these musical interludes do not intend to allow the audience to reflect critically on what they had just seen and or prevent feelings of empathy or undo the illusion of reality. Akm emphasises hybridity by connecting "Western punk music" and "Eastern music" as well as "Western realistic look" and "kitschy postcard element". What is certain is that all these mixed ideas and borrowings allowed the director to find a way out of his difficulty with "a story (that) was not fitting into a three-act dramaturgy", a story that was "too complicated, too different". This is where we have the conflictual, difficult problematic of emergence between the force of deterritorialisation (desire for experience and event) and the narrative imperative. The formal structure of Greek tragedy allows Akm to divide his story into separate acts, and to *frame* them by a separate image. His description of the image as a "kitschy postcard element" emphasises its otherness: its sentimental vulgarity, its arrival from another place. This "other" place is the Istanbul straits, a place already coded as a place of *passage* between separate worlds in popular culture as well as ancient mythology. As the most recent Western tourist attraction, Istanbul's popular image is that of a hybrid city *bridging* the continents and cultures of Europe and Asia. In ancient mythology, there is also an ethical implication: Zeus transforms his young lover, Io, into a heifer to protect her from the wrath of his wife; before arriving finally at the river Nile, Io crosses the Bosphorus, giving it the name "boos-foros", "cow-ford".²⁰ Istanbul is then the place that allows the passage to the one on the run and in pain (Io is followed by a gadfly sent by Zeus's wife, giving her a lot of pain by its stings).

Are we then in the presence of a metaphor of bridge crossing the two shores of this Turkish-German drama? Perhaps we may begin by comparing this image with the image of Istanbul in Akm's later

¹⁹ "Going to Extremes: Fatih Akin on His Turkish-German Love Story 'Head-On'" *indieWIRE*, Jan 19, 2005.

http://worldfilm.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ&sdn=worldfilm&zu=h ttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.indiewire.com%2Fpeople%2Fpeople_050119akin.html

²⁰ Last but not least, in an unpublished work titled "Deconstructing Nation: Orhan Pamuk's Archive Fever" Trevor Hope offers a fascinating reading of Orhan Pamuk's articulation of the myth of Istanbul as an idea of "multicultural nation" in his *Black Book*. My sincere thanks to my dear colleague for letting me read and cite his unpublished paper.

documentary *Crossing the Bridge*. In full consistency with the popular myth of Istanbul, this documentary about the musical scene of Istanbul *crosses the bridge* and brings the two sides together by making the appreciative German, the well-known avant-garde musician Alexander Hacke of *Einstürzende Neubaten* come to Istanbul and present a joyful, hybrid, dynamic Turkish musical culture to the “world.” Contrary to this commonplace orientalism of the documentary *Crossing the Bridge*, the bridge is *not yet* crossed in *Gegen die Wand*.

If the bridge is not crossed, then we may want to raise a different question: does everything work here according to the classical model of communication, a sender sending a message, for instance a postcard, to a receiver who receives it? Although we identify the place as the Istanbul straits, perhaps there is a sense in which we can not quite say where the postcard is sent from or where the music comes from. Rather they are simply *received*. The other place, the other shore from which this postcard is sent remains other to the one who receives it. As the image does not simply frame but also *dis-frames* the narrative, reception is not only sonorous but also interruptive and repetitive. In other words, behind its apparent totalising and framing functionality, this is indeed a *haunting* scene, especially with its ghostly look. As with all haunting, that which returns is disturbing. Perhaps this haunting image of the Turkish *saz* band is already an effort of trying to locate something that is not necessarily in the order of visibility or specularity. As all the songs repeat a particular musical genre (called “Balkan ballads” in classical Turkish music, which already signifies a sense of otherness, reinforced by the Roman, gypsy members of the band), it can perhaps be thought as a *haunting melody*, like a tune getting stuck in our head, in the well-known description of the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik in his work (1960) with the same title.²¹

One must approach this line of interpretation carefully. Akm’s well-known love of music is certainly part of what we are dealing with here (his powerful use of music, in especially the first half of the film with its incredible rhythm and flow, is highly praised by critics), but there is no easy reading of it. Depending on the use of music, *Gegen die Wand* might be placed in the genre of melodrama, according to which the repressed feelings are expressed by the use of music. Among all arts, music is usually regarded as the most non-representational and closest to the will (famously by Schopenhauer and to a certain degree by Nietzsche, as well as by Theodor Reik himself).²² According to this line of thinking, music

²¹ Reik, *The Haunting Melody*.

²² Aracagok, “Noise on Noise,” *Parallax*, 99-112

can express the immediate quality of feelings or affective states. The concept of melodrama as a genre shares this old metaphysical belief. When this reading is followed, it will be said that the film's particular problematic, i.e. a tension between the desire for experience and immediacy and the effort of putting such decomposing force in narrative form is resolved by the use of music. That which is expressed by music is precisely what exceeds the narrative (words and images as mediation) while remaining within its limits by being expressed by music. Does this reading not forget that music is no less composed than words or images? In fact, such a "melodramatic" reading will have to locate and identify when and where a certain feeling is expressed by a certain kind of tune or melody. Contrary to this conventional reading, we will have to argue that, when seen as a discontinuous, interruptive and haunting sign, this particular scene points to that which cannot be accessed, theorised or narrativised.²³ We have to give a singular place to this haunting scene of music then. Sung in the mother tongue, sent from the shores of the mother country, it nevertheless remains enigmatic. As it is related with loss and mourning, and as it is haunting, it must perhaps be seen as a *cryptic* figure rather than just a nostalgic postcard. By the haunting and cryptic nature of the scene then, I am referring to a certain force of otherness that does not only inscribe or pre-inscribe it, but also decomposes such inscription while hiding itself by means of it. There is, in other words, a sense in which the scene both points to and displaces something that is not in the order of visibility.²⁴

²³ Lacoue-Labarthe, "Echo of the Subject" in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk, 139-207. According to him, projects of theorising a musical unconscious such as Reik's resulted mostly in a specularisation or specular reduction. Through a close reading of Theodor Reik's fascinating work, Lacoue-Labarthe shows that what is at stake in this specular reduction is not simply a repression of music. Rather it is a question of *rhythm*, which is not necessarily musical and which is not accessible.

²⁴ I use the concept of crypt here in the sense articulated by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok: *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*. They make an important distinction between "introjection" and "incorporation", which does not exist in Freud's writings. The subject is produced (if ever) as a response given to a constitutive rupture or discontinuity. While introjection refers to a successful articulation of the lost object of desire in speech, incorporation is failing to do so. The latter is a swallowing of words as opposed to their articulation and results in the formation of a crypt or "broken symbol" in the unconscious. Incorporation refers to the material aspect of words, their chains of sounds that have relationships among themselves other than meaning (hence we might talk of a musicality of language in a sense close to what

Desire and Narrative

The status of this haunting thus remains problematic. On the one hand, it should no doubt be regarded as pointing to something which the film is trying to catch, to pin down, to see and to hear; that is, it is already a metonym for the force of deterritorialisation, for the desire for immediacy; on the other hand, it displaces this pre-emergent force and tends to stabilize it in a narcissistic and fetishistic narrative mode.

On the one hand, the excess of haunting is resistive: no signifier, culturalist, sexist or racist, can subjugate it to its order, it will keep returning and haunting. It is what generates Sibel and Cahit's line of flight. What returns here is therefore not simply the image of home, or the mother's voice or mother tongue. If it is a mother tongue, it is one which no mother has yet spoken, or the mother tongue as *always other than itself*. It does not offer itself to specularly or audibility. The uncanniest of all images and voices in the movie, taking us to the furthest shores and edges of metaphor and articulation, it *points to* the buried home of language as a translation made from another, unknown language. This other language is what provides "translatability", to employ Walter Benjamin's concept, and what produces the languages that we speak and use, their translations to each other, but there is no translation to it.²⁵ It is the power of encrypting, becoming-language of language rather than its implicit knowable rules or structure.

On the other hand, *Gegen die Wand* re-codes this cryptic power of untranslatability in terms of a *translatable* mother tongue and a mother country as *refuge* from oppression. It is impossible not to read the image as referring to a certain myth of Istanbul and of Turkish culture as bridge between Europe and Asia. The bridge is surely not crossed, but *the passage itself is localised and named*, it is what encloses and frames the narrative (hence it is clear that it can and will be crossed). The passage from pathos to ethos is shortcircuited in a mythification of the passage. If the narrative gaze humanly, ethically understands Sibel's decision but keeps the *tragic* point for itself in unquestioned narrative mastery, it has already lost the productive, moving gap between the dominant mode of

Roland Barthes called the "grain of the voice"). While introjection is the acceptance of the event of loss, incorporation is maintaining the lost other by disguising such maintenance, i.e. *maintaining the other in the form of a crypt*. Nonetheless the distinction should be considered as a relative and moving one rather than a foundational distinction between normal vs excessive response.

²⁵ Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 69-82.

individualism and the singularity of second-generation migrant experience. This gap is the ethico-political opening of what Williams called “pre-emergence”. It is sublated and fetishised in a visibility provided by the scene in which the haunting melody can only be *heard* as a displacement of the mother(’s) (culture’s) voice. A powerful ideological text might re-work itself there: the only way out of sexist oppression is stabilised, institutionalised psycho-sexual coding guaranteed by family (Sibel’s tactical choice turns out to be her destiny). Further, already positioned as other in the global production of the migrant, the country of origin or the “mother country” (as in the familiar Turkish idiom) provides a shelter for Sibel in the form of a protective and loving male husband and a secure and peaceful family life. This is morally justified by locating a last voice, a pure and innocent one: as Sibel is preparing her suitcase to leave with Cahit, she hears the voice of her daughter talking with her father and changes her decision. The logic of sacrifice is accepted and lamented here rather than being put in question.

A Lesson of Culture

While it can touch the otherness of the second generation migrant’s experience, in the final analysis *Gegen die Wand* remains confined within the limits of an individualistic and narcissistic coding. Its single perspective on the migrant as victim fails to narrate the migrant’s social production in terms of complex dynamics of class and globality as well as race, gender and sexuality. Although the film is disturbing, this is so only on a *visible* level, e.g. the scenes of Sibel’s suicide attempts. It does not constitute a challenge to the pre-established notions of migrancy, love or freedom. It powerfully records the second-generation migrant’s immense force of deterritorialisation, but the task of destruction remains incomplete. And, while it laments the loss of her voice, this tragic emphasis only returns it to the oldest narrative conventions. It is this return or re-coding which makes *Gegen die Wand* easy to appropriate by the culture of pluralism in the popular language of shocking, disturbing and extreme. The question that remains is that of creating a form that will enable the New New German to narrate her singular experience—a form that will interrupt her global production rather than justify it.

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