

## **Is the European Future Multicultural? The Multicultural Paradigm as an Example of the Politics of Exclusion in Fatih Akin's *Head-On/Gegen die Wand*<sup>1</sup>.**

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### **Abstract**

*Fatih Akin's 2004 feature Head-On/Gegen die Wand is a perfect example of contemporary European cinema discussing the issues of migration and post-migration in the context of a multicultural reality. It is a film that portrays the problematic and complex issues and dilemmas of the Turkish-German community living in contemporary Germany. Akin, himself of Turkish-German background, captures the essence of a multicultural society in this drama filled with familial, societal and personal conflicts. The variety of personal and ethnic conflicts depicted in Akin's film accounts for its intricate picture of the paradoxical nature of the concept of multiculturalism, which while theoretically inclusive, can, de facto, be perceived as exclusive and discriminatory. This article investigates Akin's vision and interpretation of the multicultural reality of contemporary Germany in the context of the political aspects of a multicultural paradigm, namely in regard to Jürgen Habermas' ideas of an inclusive society. Expanding outwards from the German context this article shows how Akin's film offers a critique of the idea of multiculturalism, and consequently explores how this critique can be renegotiated in the context of the contemporary politics of Europe as a whole. Through the reading of Fatih Akin's Head-On/Gegen die Wand, this paper questions to what extent personal experiences of conflicting cultural paradigms can be comprehended as a portrayal of the negative aspects of the idea of a multicultural paradigm. Furthermore, it argues that the biggest weakness of the idea of multicultural reality lies in its recurrent call for normalisation and inclusive standardisation.*

Europe is multicultural. The idea of the European derives from a patchwork of cultures woven together through historical, linguistic, cultural, political and economic intertwining. Europe has never represented a solid and even paradigm that could be

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<sup>1</sup> *Head-On/Gegen die Wand*, DVD directed by Fatih Akin, Germany, 2004.

easily characterised or defined. As such, Europe needs to be understood as a process, not a definable concept. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, ‘Europe’s culture is one that knows no rest; it is a culture that feeds on questioning the order of things – and on questioning the fashion of questioning it.’<sup>2</sup> It is that changeability that accounts for the idea of Europe.

Therefore, the problem with Europe begins when one tries to define it - to put it in a framework of even provisional terms. What is European about Europe and what is the non-European against which Europe seeks to define itself? In this context, what is the position and significance of migrants and post-migrants living in Europe? One answer to this question is provided by David Morley and Kevin Robins, who argue that, in Europe, ‘National identities are being transformed into a “white continentalism”. European unity is being defined against “alien” culture and around a self-image of European superiority.’<sup>3</sup> If one accepts their argument, then European Others could be perceived as those who represent a potentially threatening “alien” culture. Here, ‘white continentalism’ signifies a new type of categorisation, which accounts for an assumed sense of pan-European superiority. Consequently, despite the condescending vision of European supremacy, the Others are nevertheless perceived as a potential threat, because they can unsettle the illusionary notion of European unity by sustaining their ‘alien’ and peculiar cultures.

As a result, the idea of multiculturalism becomes more complex. Multiculturalism needs to be understood as a concept that signifies a division between the cultures of the Others and the superior culture associated with the idea of European unity. Hence, multiculturalism generates new types of categorisation and produces new divisions and definitions, allowing for a differentiation between the ‘native’ European cultures and the ‘incoming’ cultures of the alien strangers. The Others become the representatives of the ‘multiple’: the alien and unfamiliar cultures of a multicultural society.

The process of defining Others needs to be problematised even further. While the term could, of course, refer to those living outside Europe it can also refer to those inside its boundaries. For the purpose of this article, Others will mean people of immigrant origin who decided to settle in a foreign country (which we could call an

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<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Europe. An Unfinished Adventure*, (Cambridge: polity, 2004), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> David Morley and Kevin Roberts, *Spaces of Identity. Global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries*, (Routledge: London, 2002), p. 82.

adopted homeland) and their descendants, the so-called post-migrants. It is the case that post-migrants who were born in France and Germany, for example, who have parents of immigrant origin, are often also regarded as Others. That is, even though they have lived all their lives in their parents' adopted homeland and often have no experience of living in the country of their parents' origin, they are still perceived as foreign to the country they reside in.

European cinema has recently become very vocal about issues concerning these so-called Others. European cinematic reflections on the matter of otherness include a vast number of productions, from more commercial titles like Damien O'Donnell's blockbuster melodramatic comedy *East is East* (1999), or Stephen Frears's thriller-drama *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), to more niche and less known productions, such as Kutlug Ataman's *Lola und Bilidikid* (1999), Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown/Code inconnu* (2000), or Claire Denis' *I Can't Sleep/J'ai pas sommeil* (1994)<sup>4</sup>. The number of films focusing on the themes of emerging conflicts between the social majority and the so-called Others signifies the urgency of these issues.

Arguably, the most important of these films are, the ones made by the Others themselves, as they represent their personal perspective on the matter – a perspective drawn from the experience of being the Other. Films made by Others are often categorised as examples of accented cinema, a term which Hamid Naficy uses to describe the type of cinema that relates to the issues of exile, migration and diaspora.<sup>5</sup> The films of Fatih Akin, a German filmmaker of Turkish origin, focus on the lives and experiences of Turkish migrants living in Germany. As such, Akin's films could be categorised as examples of accented cinema.<sup>6</sup>

This article will focus on Fatih Akin's 2004 feature *Head-On/Gegen die Wand*, a film that brought Akin to fame and accounted for his international recognition.<sup>7</sup> I will argue that Akin's *Head-On* offers a critique of the multicultural

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<sup>4</sup> *East is East*, DVD directed by Damien O'Donnell, UK, 1999; *Dirty Pretty Things*, DVD directed by Stephen Frears, UK, 2002; *Lola und Bilidikid*, DVD directed by Kutlug Ataman, Germany, 1999; *Code Unknown/Code inconnu*, DVD directed by Michael Haneke, France, 2000; *I Can't Sleep/J'ai pas sommeil*, DVD directed by Claire Denis, France, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema. Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Naficy, in his book on accented cinema, but also in other publications on the matter, offers a number of characteristics typical for accented cinema. Interestingly, accented cinema is itself an ambiguous term that includes a variety of contexts and configurations. For a more detailed discussion see the list of Naficy's work on accented cinema in the bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> Notably, *Head-On/Gegen die Wand* was the first German film in eighteen years to win the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival (in 2004). The film was released internationally, and apart from the

paradigm and, from the point of view of the Other, represents the potentially exclusionary character of multiculturalism. Consequently, I will investigate how Akin's film portrays the negative impact of hegemonic norms and social definitions. In this context, I will refer to Jürgen Habermas' ideas of social inclusion and discuss their possible advantageous and disadvantageous consequences.

### **The Stories of the Self-Destructive Rebellions**

Fatih Akin's *Head-On* is a fast-paced drama with elements of the black comedy and the thriller. It is a film with an extremely diverse soundtrack, mixing punk rock with exotic sounds of traditional Turkish music. The harsh editing (the film features a number of jump cuts, which disrupt the continuity of narration, forcing the spectator to pay attention to the artificial character of filmmaking) and rather gloomy-looking mise-en-scène perhaps suggest a desolate story. Not surprisingly, the film's plotline focuses on the lives of two very disturbed characters – Cahit, a German citizen of Turkish origin and Sibel, a young German woman who lives in Hamburg with her Turkish family. In a way, Cahit and Sibel represent two entirely different types of Other. Cahit hardly speaks Turkish and has no real connection with the Turkish émigré community. On the other hand, Sibel is forced to follow strict conservative Turkish – Muslim traditions. Even though she lives in Germany, her everyday life is formed by Turkish traditions and norms, imposed on her by her father and her brother.

Unable to cope with reality, Cahit and Sibel try to commit suicide and their acquaintance is a result of these attempts - they meet in a psychiatric institution. The film allows us only to speculate on the reasons for their attempted suicides. In the case of Cahit, the reason seems to be connected with his general unwillingness to live, which as the film suggests, is partially a result of the death of his German wife. In the case of Sibel, on the other hand, the suicide attempt originates from the fact that she is trapped in the paradigm dictated by her family. This familial paradigm is based on conservative traditions, from which Sibel hopes to break free. She is unable to flee the familial community, as she remains under the permanent supervision of her father and brother. Thus, Sibel's suicide attempt is an act of rebellion against the domination of her family's strictures over her individual needs. She is therefore desperate to find a prospective Turkish husband, who could allow her to live freely and experience life

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Golden Bear it received a number of other prestigious awards, such as European Film Award for the Best Film and NSFCA Award for the Best Foreign Film.

outside the paradigm imposed on her by her family. Seeing the potential for such a husband in Cahit, Sibel desperately tries to convince him to marry her. Only a few scenes later Cahit grudgingly (and clearly in spite of himself) agrees to marry Sibel in order to help her gain freedom and independence from her family.

Sibel's family forces her to follow conservative traditions, but at the same time she is strongly attracted to the world of hedonism. In order to be able to experience the world Sibel requires a husband who would allow her a freedom of choice. As Daniela Berghahn observes, 'Cahit, who is anything but a traditional Turkish man, is the ideal husband for the kind of marriage of convenience Sibel has in mind.'<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, Akin depicts how Sibel changes her life after her marriage to Cahit, visiting nightclubs, enjoying sexual encounters with strangers and purchasing numerous goods. At the same time, Sibel tries to keep up appearances, and while visiting her family she pretends to lead her life the traditional Turkish way. As a result, Sibel is torn between different paradigms. Interestingly, Sibel's attraction to the world of hedonistic indulgence is not clearly explained in the film. Moreover, *Head-On* does not focus on mainstream German society but rather on the sub-cultural milieu of Altona in Hamburg, and does not explicitly address the question of what is to be perceived as German or Western.<sup>9</sup> Sibel seems eager to experiment with what she was taught to perceive as forbidden, but the film does not explore the reasons behind this - whatever underpins Sibel's need to experience life through sexual experimentation the film does not investigate. She is simply attracted to the world of pleasure, but one that cannot be definitively labelled as the German or Western world. Her rebellion appears to be more intertwined with the need to detach from her family's way of living than with integrating into a German lifestyle.

In a way, Sibel perceives herself as the Other and wishes to become different by embracing a decadent lifestyle, which she perhaps assumes will be liberating. Sibel becomes the Other in relation to her family, because she hopes to escape the conservative paradigm and customs that they follow. As such, she experiences social otherness because of the growing conflict between what her family wants to impose on her and the sort of life she hopes to have. Cahit, on the other hand, continuously

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<sup>8</sup> Daniela Berghahn, "No Place Like Home? Or Impossible Homecomings in the Films of Fatih Akin," *New Cinemas*, 4.3 (2006), p.153

<sup>9</sup> One could argue that the film depicts a dichotomy between the German (decadent) way of living and Turkish conservative traditions. However, this view is problematised through the film's portrayal of Turkey itself, which is shown as a country of cultural clashes with a decadent and hedonist dimension of its own.

reconstructs his social otherness himself by living on the outskirts of society. His social otherness relates more to his personal inability to come to terms with the tragedy of his wife's death and the economic and social consequences of this situation (Cahit does not have a regular job and he lives in poverty).

One idea of how to allow for Others to integrate with mainstream society is provided by Jürgen Habermas who, among other thinkers, proposes a form of an ongoing integration, an inclusion of minorities into the paradigm of the majority. Habermas argues that:

The equal inclusion of *all* citizens in civil society not only calls for a political culture which prevents liberal attitudes from being confused with indifference. Inclusion can be achieved only if certain material conditions are also met: among other things, full integration in kindergartens, schools, and universities in order to offset social disadvantages; and equal access to the labour market.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the Habermasian concept of inclusion is a call for a normalisation and social standardisation. Through a process of closer integration, especially in the context of education, the Other could be re-categorised as the insider. That social protocol would allow for a closer integration with the 'host' society, furthermore, it would provide individuals such as Sibel or Cahit with a chance for educational and personal growth.

However, the idea of social inclusion of the sort proposed by Habermas also raises several questions. As Akin's film shows, a number of factors, such as family dynamics, ethical views, friendships and beliefs are as influential as educational opportunities and socio-economic factors in the process of creating one's identity. Sibel, for instance, is influenced by a number of different cultural norms; striving to keep in line with the family traditions she was taught to follow (such as the preparation of traditional Turkish food, or regular meetings with her family), she is at the same time eagerly looking for opportunities to indulge in the hedonist nightlife scene in Hamburg. Sibel stylises her flat into a copy of an IKEA catalogue and experiments with numerous lovers, however, even after marrying Cahit, she still practices certain Turkish traditions. Moreover, Sibel even forces Cahit to socialise

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<sup>10</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Europe. The Faltering Project* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 69. For further reference see also: Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998).

with other Turkish men, turning his attention to the Turkish cultural traditions, which he so desperately tried to erase from his life. In this sense, she is lost between different cultural norms and unable to find a way to combine them successfully. Sibel's attachment to these diverse cultural paradigms is beautifully portrayed in a sequence of scenes, which see her first walking on the street and shopping for vegetables. In the next scene she is seen preparing traditional Turkish food, with Turkish music playing in the background, while in an earlier scene she was flirting with a stranger in a bar.

Sibel is forced to define herself as a part of her family, but she is also forced to re-define herself within the society she is brought up in. As such, Sibel is looking for different ways to define herself, mixing divergent cultural paradigms. Sibel tries to fit in with the norms, if only to free herself from oppression. For instance, she marries Cahit – a complete stranger, simply in order to fulfil the requirements set by her parents (for Sibel's parents it is enough that Cahit is Turkish). Furthermore, she indulges in extreme sexual and hedonistic activities through experimenting with a series of lovers, while drinking and partying constantly.

Sibel experiences various influences and cultural ideas that might seem contradictory (as in the case of her willingness to have multiple sexual encounters, an idea entirely against the paradigm sustained by her family). Consequently, Sibel is caught in between divergent sets of norms. The film brilliantly captures the paradoxical nature of this identity-related dilemma. Sibel enjoys sexual encounters with absolute strangers, including a neighbour, Niko. However, when approached by Niko with a view to continuing the affair, Sibel bluntly refuses. Moreover, in her refusal she abandons her permissive and adventurous persona and aggressively threatens Niko by saying, 'Leave me alone. I am a married Turkish wife. Try anything and my husband will kill you.'<sup>11</sup> As such, she quickly switches from her identity as a liberal young woman to her identity as a Turkish wife, one which she has never seemingly wished for but which she embraces when it suits her.

Moreover, a possible integration within mainstream society through an early inclusion in the mainstream educational system, as advocated by Habermas, should surely have allowed Sibel to learn a number of skills and grow intellectually. Significantly, in a conversation with her Turkish cousin Selma, Sibel remarks upon

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<sup>11</sup> *Head-On/Gegen die Wand*, DVD, directed by Fatih Akin, Germany, 2004.

her lack of education and declares it as one of her major regrets. However, the host society still struggles with the problem of social inequalities (in terms of gender, sexuality and class) which could also potentially affect Sibel's identity and, more importantly, her position within the adopted homeland. Above all, the fact that Sibel, while living in Hamburg, remains influenced by her family and tries to fit in with the norms set by them constitutes a type of social entrapment that could not be solved by inclusion in the educational system. Sibel simply tries to live multiple lives, but this leads to tragic consequences.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, Sibel's problem relates to the complexity of the issues with which she is confronted and the diversity of the existing sets of norms and identities. Cultural difference needs to be perceived as a process; it fluctuates and is influenced by a number of factors – in the case of Sibel, we observe her in constant flux, from suicidal young woman, to obedient daughter, to unfaithful wife who loves her new husband but wishes to experience more. Sibel's chaotic behaviour and the changeability of her persona derive from her confusion in the face of divergent paradigms, or even more so from her inability to satisfy her family and herself at the same time. She seems lost and unable to combine these divergent sets of norms into a coherent whole.

Hence, Akin's film tackles the ambiguity of the category of the migrant/post-migrant Other. Significantly, Akin also shows the complexity of the Other through the portrayal of Cahit. Cahit lives outside society; he lacks a strong connection with the Turkish community. Turkish traditions and norms appear to be entirely foreign to him. At the same time, he does not live his life the "German way" either. Notably, the German way of living is not defined or exposed in *Head-On*. Akin does not focus on a typical/stereotypical German family/people and subsequently he does not provide a typical normative set of behaviours and traditions that could be perceived as German/Western. Thus, mainstream society is not truly present in the film. In this context, the Other becomes even more difficult to define (the Other cannot be defined against the mainstream, if the mainstream is not actually depicted in the film). The Other as a category becomes therefore even more ambiguous and fluid.

Cahit decides to place himself outside society altogether. He is an alcoholic who earns a living by collecting empty bottles and glasses in a nightclub, he lives in

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<sup>12</sup> At one point of the film, Cahit becomes increasingly jealous of Sibel's lovers and he accidentally kills one of them. As a result, Cahit is imprisoned and Sibel is rejected by her family.



poverty and spends most of his time drinking or doing drugs. Cahit's is a voice of despair. Cahit's response to the different sets of cultural and social norms is to live a life against all of them at the same time. Alisa Lebow argues that, '[...] the experience of Turkish communities in Germany, from which Akin originates, renders them neither identifiable as Turkish by Turks, nor German by Germans – placing them in the no man's land of cultural identification, hopelessly orientalist in the 'fatherland' and stubbornly orientalist towards the 'motherland'.<sup>13</sup> Cahit is torn between his two homelands and he is experiencing a sense of rootlessness. Unable to find a place for himself, Cahit decides to abandon society. The film problematises this interpretation of Cahit even further. Apart from his ethnic otherness, Cahit also suffers because of his inability to deal with the death of his beloved wife, which suggests that there might be a number of other problems that he finds difficult to deal with (his alcoholism, for instance). Consequently, the film portrays the complex nature of Cahit's identity, suggesting a number of issues that generate his need to escape society, and re-emphasising the intricate nature of social otherness.

Thus, the stories of Cahit and Sibel question the existing categories and emphasise the complex character of individual identities. As Daniela Berghahn rightly points out, '[...] Cahit and Sibel are deracinated, forever in some form of transit between two cultures, unable to arrive in the static idyll.'<sup>14</sup> Significantly, it is not simply the existence of the two contrasting cultures that establishes the notion of uneasiness in Cahit (or Sibel, for that matter). Akin's film underlines the fact that Cahit and Sibel cannot cope with the calls for normalisation that these various cultural paradigms demand.<sup>15</sup> Sibel and Cahit are trying to avoid categorisation, but in fact they become prisoners of a different set of norms and categories. Sibel, for instance, trying to escape familial conservatism, traps herself in a type of non-reflexive indulgence in sexual encounters and drinking, from which she finds it difficult to escape (hence her reenactment of her identity as a Turkish wife). She becomes obsessed with the hedonist way of living, hoping perhaps that it will offer her a higher

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<sup>13</sup> Alisa Lebow, "Head On," *Cineaste*, 30 (2005), p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Daniela Berghahn, "No Place Like Home? Or Impossible Homecomings in the Films of Fatih Akin," *New Cinemas*, 4.3 (2006), p. 156

<sup>15</sup> The call for normalisation offered by the German paradigm is not easily definable in relation to the film. In my view it relates to the idea of living a socially-organised life. In this context, an example of such a call for normalisation is provided by the scene in which the psychiatrist in the mental hospital meets with Cahit. By trying to cure Cahit the psychiatrist is, de facto, trying to reintegrate him into society, creating, in a way, a pressure for normalisation.

degree of freedom. In the end, she is forced to leave Germany in order to escape her identity as a promiscuous wife.

Cahit, on the other hand, is trying to avoid defining himself and that is why he is not eager to live a life according to Turkish norms and customs, neither is he willing to conform to any other social standards. This is particularly transparent in the scene in which Cahit pays a visit to Sibel's parents to make a marriage proposal. In the scene, Cahit speaks in broken Turkish and has no clue about how to behave. Cahit's friend, who is pretending to be his uncle, saves Cahit from embarrassment by constantly advising him on how to behave according to Turkish customs. The scene has an odd comical undertone and portrays Cahit as a stranger to the Turkish environment.<sup>16</sup> His inability to behave according to the prescribed customs is overlooked by Sibel's parents, but is clearly noticed by Sibel's brother, who reacts to the proposal with suspicion. Cahit is lost in this universe of Turkish customs and he is significantly older than Sibel. Nevertheless, Sibel insists on her attraction to him, which results in her parents' consent for the marriage.

The next scene features Cahit back in his flat sleeping naked on the sofa next to a coffee table filled with empty cans of beer. Sibel wakes him by repeatedly ringing the doorbell. When she finally enters the flat we watch her looking around and noticing the empty bottles and cans scattered around the apartment. Placed in the gloomy apartment and constantly drunk, Cahit symbolises those who are seldom noticed, namely those who cannot deal with the tensions between different sets of norms and who escape mainstream society and hide somewhere on its outskirts. Therefore, his presence on the screen is of extreme importance as it represents the issues concerning people who live far away from the dynamics that structure political agendas. The scene symbolically provides the marginalised with a voice. In this sense, Akin demands that the spectator experience Cahit's significance.

As Deniz Göktürk argues, 'We need voices which disrupt the common assumptions about cultural purity, which explore the potentials of hybridity, which occupy shifting positions, speak from within and without, claiming a place in the house of Europe.'<sup>17</sup> Arguably, Akin's film, by focusing on difficult and problematic

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that Cahit is so unfamiliar with Turkish customs suggests that Cahit rebels against normalisation also by refusing to conform to Turkish-conservative traditions. As such, the call for normalisation against which Cahit rebels comes from two different cultural paradigms.

<sup>17</sup> Deniz Göktürk, "Turkish delight - German fright: Migrant identities in transnational cinema." Transnational Communities Programme. Working Papers Series. Accessed: 30 April 2011

characters such as Cahit and Sibel, does expose the absurd idea of cultural purity. Indeed, Cahit and Sibel are both Turkish-German (or German-Turkish) but they are two utterly different individuals with different types of friends and completely different relations with their families. Moreover, Sibel and Cahit seem to have contrasting needs, views and ideas about life. Furthermore, the potentials of the hybridity of their identities are both positive and negative, tearing them apart and pushing them back together. As such, Akin's film problematises the existing concepts through portraying their truly diverse and ambivalent nature.

Thus, we could argue that the problem with multiculturalism begins with the definitions that it produces, precisely because the process of creating an identity through embracing a set of traditions and norms designed by the host country cannot be easily defined and categorised. Furthermore, the idea of a social inclusion of the Other derives from a Eurocentrist perspective on the matter. The notion of the Other creates a mechanism of distancing that enables the 'we' to somehow ignore and control the 'peculiarity' of the other. In other words, it is the unambiguity of the existing definitions and their simplistic character that create the damaging tendency of constant categorisation. This process of social standardisation creates a framework of hostile oppositions and calls for a binary comprehension of social reality. Interestingly, Akin's film shows the dual nature of this process. The othering is also happening within the community of the Others. For instance, the fact that Sibel has to behave like a Turkish woman and that she has to marry a Turk can be understood as an act of othering, in which the Turkish family reinforces the binary divisions, by refusing to allow Sibel to live her life the way she would want it, whether it would mean marrying a Turk, a German, or not marrying at all.

Furthermore, the process of othering allows for the construction of a certain type of separation, separation that is rooted in the invisibility of the experiences of the Others – something that Akin fights against, by exposing the lives of the underprivileged and underrepresented in *Head-On*. Akin demonstrates how separation and the invisibility of experiences can lead to frustration, desperation and possible

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<<http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/mediated.pdf>>. Göktürk returns to this subject in a number of other essays. For further reference see, for instance: Deniz Göktürk, "Beyond Paternalism: Turkish German Traffic in Cinema" in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk (London: BFI Publishing, 2002): 248-256, or "Turkish Women on German Streets: Closure and Exposure in Transnational Cinema" in *Spaces in European Cinema*, ed. Myrto Konstantarakos (Exeter: Intellect, 2000): 64-76

death. In case of Sibel, her experiences of otherness derive from the fact that her family tries to impose a conservative paradigm on her. In case of Cahit, his marginalised position is an act of ultimate rebellion and an act of despair, related to his personal drama, not only to his ethnic origins.

Sibel cannot deal with the overwhelming pressure from her family. Cahit, on the other hand, wishes to remain outside mainstream society altogether.<sup>18</sup> Their suicide attempts are, in a way, a cry for attention. Within a wider context, Akin's *Head On* can be perceived as an artist's cry for attention. The Turkish-German problem he discusses is not a Turkish-German problem per se. It is a much more complex issue that relates to the invisibility and misunderstanding of the Others, but also to the process of being influenced by various sets of norms and standards. The diversity and complexity of these conflicts consequently disrupts the vision of homogenous groups and subgroups (supposedly representative of homogenous paradigms).

Thus, Sibel and Cahit are located somewhere on the crossroads between divergent sets of standards and habits. Their hyphenated selves are central to the generational and cultural conflicts that they find themselves in. Cahit and Sibel's rebellious acts against normalisation and appropriation of the existing norms are an outcome and the reason for these conflicts. As such, it is Cahit and Sibel's perspectives and responses to these conflicts that need to be understood more clearly here. Consequently, it is their perspectives that interest Akin the most.

### **Unfulfilling Homecomings**

After few months of marriage, Cahit and Sibel develop feelings for each other, however Sibel continues to sleep around which provokes Cahit's jealousy. As a result, Cahit accidentally kills one of Sibel's lovers and gets imprisoned. Sibel flees from Germany, disowned by her family and afraid of her brother who wants to take revenge. Not knowing what else to do, Sibel decides to move to Istanbul, where she stays with her cousin Selma. After a few days of her stay in Istanbul, Sibel begins nocturnal explorations of the city and discovers its dark side. She visits perilous looking places and takes heroine. Unconscious from drinking and doing drugs, Sibel gets violently raped. This dramatic sequence is followed by an extremely violent and

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<sup>18</sup> Cahit does not want to conform to any type of standardised way of living. He appears unable to lead his life in an organised way and refuses to do so by not having a regular job and continuously living in atrocious conditions.

gloomy scene of Sibel's near-death experience. The scene shows Sibel provoking a gang of young men. When these men begin to beat her up she demands more, inciting them through offensive comments. The scene, set at night and with very limited lighting, focuses on the prolonged sequence of violence, which, even though it comes from the attackers, perhaps needs to be read as an act of self-harm. Sibel gets repeatedly hit and stabbed. Her clothes are soaked with blood; she lies on the street close to death. The scene takes violence to the extreme, signifying Sibel's most desperate scream for attention yet. Here Istanbul appears to be Sibel's space of personal torment. Escaping from Germany, Sibel gets trapped in the dark streets of Istanbul, where she experiences boundless acts of violence and humiliation. However, a moment later Sibel is miraculously rescued by a stranger. This act of rescuing constitutes the beginning of Sibel's new life.

When Cahit meets Sibel in Istanbul after his release from prison, she already has a new family and she appears to be content and at peace with herself. This new peaceful Sibel is a reliable mother and a partner to her new boyfriend. She is now the woman the old Sibel hoped never to turn into. Cahit too, changes after journeying to Turkey, his anger and violent temper wear off. After a meeting with Sibel, which turns into a night of lovemaking, Cahit travels back to his hometown, Mersin, where he too will perhaps find a new type of life for himself. Daniela Berghahn argues that, 'Sibel forsakes her sensuality and egocentric pursuit of pleasure for the kind of stable and conventional life she abhorred and Cahit is likely to do the same back in Mersin. But at the same time the mediocrity of Sibel's new life back in Turkey provides the structure and stability that will keep her alive.'<sup>19</sup> Thus, the peaceful life of convention will perhaps save the two characters from death.

Notably, their journeys back to Turkey are a strange type of homecoming: both Cahit and Sibel move to a country that they never lived in, a country that is enigmatic and foreign to them, significantly more so than Germany ever was. Nevertheless, Akin's *Head-On* suggests that it is Turkey that allows Cahit and Sibel to reinvent themselves and, perhaps, live peaceful lives. The question remains, why is Turkey easier to live in? Hamid Naficy observes that, '[d]istanced from familial and familiar structures, the exiles are in an enviable position of being able to remake themselves. If it can be constructed, identity can also be reconstructed, deconstructed

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<sup>19</sup> Daniela Berghahn, "No Place Like Home? Or Impossible Homecomings in the Films of Fatih Akin?," *New Cinemas*, 4.3 (2006), p.155

– even performed.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we could argue that once in Istanbul, Sibel and Cahit can try, and perhaps even succeed at, creating new identities for themselves. However, to what extent are these new identities a choice?

Sibel, by living a peaceful life of a mother and a partner, is assuming a certain position in society that she believes will save her from violence and other forms of danger. Nevertheless, she does that in spite of herself, adopting the type of lifestyle she was fighting against. Similarly, Cahit in his homebound journey is perhaps also seeking the possibility of constructing a new, quiet self, where rebellion would be transformed into an act of conformism. In this context, we could argue that Sibel and Cahit's pseudo-homecoming journeys signal their endeavours to escape the difficult process of struggling with a variety of norms and paradigms. Arguably, their turn towards the conformist ideals of family life, somewhere far from the country of their previous experiences (Germany) signify their departure from their will to confront the existing norms and oppose the existing order.

Conceivably, what appeals to Cahit and Sibel the most is the possibility of avoiding the painful and difficult process of living in-between divergent and complex constructs of social, familial and cultural norms. Yet, Istanbul in *Head-On* is not presented as an unproblematic and harmonious community where Cahit and Sibel could easily live their lives in peace and happiness. The film portrays Istanbul as a complex and diverse urban space, a home to a variety of lifestyles and personalities. This complex portrayal of the city indicates that the type of Turkishness represented by Sibel's traditional family is not a standardised way of being 'Turkish,' consequently emphasising the fact that each society represents a diversity of identities and ways of living. Importantly, however, Istanbul gives Cahit and Sibel a fresh start and in the case of Sibel, allows her to be away from her family and their influence. Nonetheless, the happiness that Turkey is to offer comes at a price – both Sibel and Cahit will have to conform to the existing norms and traditions and settle for a life of mediocrity.

What Akin is problematising through the plotline, which sees Cahit and Sibel migrating to Turkey, is the ambiguity and complexity of the problem of otherness and identity. At the core lie the experiences of family, cultural heritage, and social norms set by the host country. The everyday life, the different and often conflicting

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<sup>20</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema. Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

religious, ethical and social customs and habits construct a reality that is difficult to experience. Perhaps this is why Sibel and Cahit reform when they arrive in Turkey, as they are set free of the complexity of their lives in Germany. While in Turkey, both Cahit and Sibel seem very eager to move on with their lives and leave their pasts behind. Somehow they are giving up on a part of their identities (their German identities) and this new type of life will not necessarily turn out to be a happy one. The film is rather ambiguous in this sense; it does not offer any clear conclusions, leaving us to presume that life in Turkey will also be complex and difficult.

As such, Sibel and Cahit's German experiences could be perceived as a form of continuous struggle with the different sets of norms (familial, generational). Sibel, in her various experiments and experiences with divergent paradigms, is unable to decide what sort of life she would want for herself. Cahit, confused and shattered by his past experiences is unable to deal with his emotions and constantly avoids any type of normalisation. In this context, the idea of homogenous norms and standards becomes obsolete and somewhat inadequate. Cahit and Sibel do not want to conform to any type of lifestyle, because they are persistently trying to find a new type of paradigm for themselves. In the end, they escape Germany, instead of attempting to change it. Instead of fighting, they settle for the ordinary, journeying to a country that lies far away from where they fought their battles.

### **Conclusion**

The most significant problem with the multicultural paradigm is its tendency to categorise, define and organise according to set rules and norms established and sustained by the 'host' society. Consequently, multiculturalism operates through the politics of potential inclusion, which in practice means a limited tolerance towards the incoming strangers.

Multiculturalism creates a number of new definitions and expands the existing norms to include those who are joining society. These norms are precisely what works against the concept of multiculturalism, because the definitions, as inclusive as they might appear to be, create social barriers and divisions. The Others, such as Cahit and Sibel, do not need new norms and new definitions for themselves. Sibel, who has to pretend to live her life according to Turkish customs, wants to escape that role and become more German. While the film is far from defining Germanness in any normative way, Sibel, nonetheless, seems to perceive it as connected with decadent hedonism and sexual liberalism. As a consequence she tries to escape one cultural

definition by living according to a different one. Cahit tries to rebel against all possible norms hoping to abandon society altogether. The divergent versions of structured normativity that surround Cahit and Sibel only increase their frustration.

As a result, Sibel and Cahit decide to abandon their multicultural homeland – Germany. By doing so, they are, in a way, giving up on changing the social formula there. The question that we are left with is: what steps should Europe take in order to offer a positive change? What is Europe to do with its Others? This is, naturally, a question that cannot be, nor should it be, easily answered, but it is definitely a matter we should be debating. Cinema plays a crucial role in providing the excluded and the invisible with a voice they deserve and they need to have. Films such as Akin's *Head-On* raise these important issues and most significantly expose the frustration and despair of a great number of the people living in contemporary Europe. These cinematic explorations are a significant step forward, as they not only raise unpopular issues, but also reveal the great failure of the illusionary politics of inclusion.

The other important step that needs to be taken is an abandonment of the limiting and discriminatory practice of defining and normalising. Perhaps this sounds rather utopian, as some kind of definition and norm-making are unavoidable. Nevertheless, we could start with a shift in focus. As opposed to calling the Others the minorities, the migrants, or post-migrants, perhaps it would be more appropriate to merely call them Europeans. Perhaps the world of hegemonic norms can be thwarted by the joint effort of all Europeans who wish to rebel against constant categorisation.