

**The Third Space of Fatih Akin's Cinema**  
**A comparative analysis of cultural hybridity in**

*Kurz und Schmerzlos, Im Juli and Auf der anderen Seite.*

**By Marissa Munderloh, University of St Andrews**

*Abstract:*

*This article focuses on the construction and representation of cultural hybridity in the feature length films of German-Turkish filmmaker Fatih Akin. Specifically *Kurz und Schmerzlos* (1998), *Im Juli* (2000) and *Auf der anderen Seite* (2007) have been selected as hybrid representations in German cinema for this examination. The theoretical approach to this analysis is based on the post-colonial concept of the "third space" with influences from queer studies' thoughts on performance. Performances will be measured against ethnonorms; norms that construct individual national societies, which lose their structure and authority when hybridized. The majority of ethnonormative performances is observable in the filmic characters while Akin's blending of cinematic elements enhances the hybridity produced on screen, thereby also challenging national images and stereotypes. The outcome of this analysis, therefore, aims at demonstrating how hybridity on screen has the ability to weaken, to deconstruct and to parody national (and cinematic) representations of supposedly unique and homogeneous cultures.*

A study of contemporary German cinema is unimaginable without including the German-Turkish screenwriter, director and producer Fatih Akin. Born and raised in Hamburg-Altona, Akin's filmic stories are mostly set in his northern German hometown, cinematically envisioned as a multicultural hot spot. Aside from the plurality of cultures which form the content of his films, Akin takes the multiculturalism with which he represents Germany one step further: he transcends it into a state of hybridity - a phenomenon that is the focus of attention in this analysis.

With the emergence of cultural studies, the term 'hybridity' has become re-appropriated within post-colonial theory to describe the process and result of the blending of (colonial and colonised) cultures. However, according to post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha hybridity

does not merely signify a fusing of cultural elements. He rather sees hybridity as the emergence of cultures, whereby cultural elements are continually transformed or translated through unconstrained intercultural encounters. In order to detect and theorise the productions of hybridity in Akin's films, albeit not in a non-colonial context,<sup>1</sup> Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' will be applied to this analysis.

Bhabha defines the third space as being 'the non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures [...] where negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences'.<sup>2</sup> These spaces - not necessarily physical as such - seem to challenge the national image of having a homogeneous cultural past and historical identity that is supposed to be 'kept alive' through people's performances of national traditions.<sup>3</sup> Such an analysis of hybridity as a third space becomes relevant when dealing with contemporary constructions of national identity specifically within Germany and its urban environments, which have become a magnet for a majority of immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup>

While some critics argue that Bhabha's general argument is an 'adversarial definition'<sup>5</sup> meaning that hybridity can only be measured against what is not hybrid, the overall concept of cultural exchanges within third spaces still has the potential to weaken existing forms of cultural representation, authority and hierarchy. This is exactly what Fatih Akin does via film, his specialised work of art.

As such, hybridity in art becomes an interesting focal point, since according to Nikos Papastergiadis

---

<sup>1</sup> The nations and cultures of Germany's former colonies are not subject to Akin's depiction of hybridity in present day Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 312.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 54

<sup>4</sup> (Akin's main characters are of Albanian, Serbian, Turkish and Greek descent). 'Germany: People – Ethnic Groups', Central Intelligence Agency, 2 June 2010. Accessed: 17 June 2010

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gm.html>>

<sup>5</sup> Antony Easthope, 'Bhabha, Hybridity, Identity', *Textual Practice*, (12) 2, (1998), 341-348 (p. 342).

[the hybrid artists'] practice and status question the dominant assumption on the relationship between traditional authenticity and contemporary culture and test the limits of artistic agency and institutional structures. From these new cultural practices in contemporary art there is a possibility to explore more broadly the impact of hybridity on the social and political landscape of modernity.<sup>6</sup>

Since Akin cinematically presents the traditional authenticities and contemporary cultures as nationally distinguishable, the term 'national hybridity' seems adequate to simplify his filmic mixture of national cultures, traditions and identities.

In order to detect such hybrid creations, their hybrid essences will be contrasted to the fixed norms existent in the national society in which they have emerged. Hence, hybridity may be even labelled as 'anti-normative' referring to the rejection of social norms that are produced, repeated, and ultimately standardised within a culture. Queer theory, for instance, 'often defines itself through claims of resistance and, in particular, of resistance to "the norm," the "normal," or "heteronormativity"'.<sup>7</sup> Whereas queer theory is primarily concerned with normativity in relation to gender, the normativity disrupted by national hybridity relates to its national culture, or national ethnicity, which I will call ethnonormativity.

The prefix ethno, deriving from the Greek word 'ethnos' and the root of the term 'ethnicity', is defined in the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology as a 'shared historical, linguistic, religious, and cultural identity of a social community, group, nation, or race'.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the concept of ethnonormativity serves to explain how the state of hybridity located in between the norms established in separate national groups is performed differently from the national normativity from which it has evolved. The core feature of the examination will assist to describe how Akin's characters in the films *Kurz und Schmerzlos* [Short Sharp Shock] (1998), *Im Juli* [In July] (2000) and *Auf der anderen Seite* [The Edge of Heaven] (2007) perform and do not

---

<sup>6</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and Ambivalence: Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture,' *Theory Culture Society*, 22 (2005), 39-64 (p. 40).

<sup>7</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen, 'Queer Is? Queer Does?: Normativity and Resistance,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 4 (1998), 511-36 (p. 512).

<sup>8</sup> 'ethnic adj.' *A Dictionary of Psychology*. Andrew M. Colman (ed). (Oxford University Press, 2009). Oxford Reference Online. University of St Andrews. Accessed: 25 June 2010 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t87.e2885>>

perform cultural hybridity along normative guidelines and how they produce new norms in a third space.

This is mostly visible in the friendship of Costa (Adam Bousdoukos), Bobby (Aleksander Janovic) and Gabriel (Mehmet Kurtulus) of Akin's first feature length film *Kurz und Schmerzlos*. Set in Hamburg's districts of Altona and St. Pauli, the gangsteresque narrative tells the story of three friends, one of whom is of Greek, the other of Serbian and the third of Turkish descent (as are the respective actors). Situated in a German cultural realm, the construction of the three men's friendship transcends the political and economic conflicts between Turkey, Greece and Serbia,<sup>9</sup> erasing the nationally stereotypical disassociation with each other. Their main language of communication is German, albeit with occasional code-switching into their mother tongue, marked by a strong Hamburg dialect and lexicon uniting them as Hamburg locales with a bond that seems tighter than their immigrant nationalities. This is also visible in the more serious development of Bobby's and the Albanian 'mafia boss' Muhamer's business relationship. Gabriel, taken by surprise by this 'international' collaboration even asks Bobby in disbelief: 'Du willst als Serbe bei den Albanern einsteigen?' (You being Serbian are willing to do business with the Albanians?). Bobby's matter-of-fact answer: 'Das nennt man heutzutage "multikulti"!' (Nowadays this is called "multi-culti"!) exemplifies how within this multicultural urban space national prejudices become meaningless. Ironically, almost 12 years after the film's release Chancellor Merkel declared in 2010 that the concept of 'multikulti' applied to German society had failed. According to German newspaper *Die Welt*, CSU leader and governor of Bavaria Horst Seehofer also stated that 'Wir als Union treten für die deutsche Leitkultur und gegen Multikulti ein. Multikulti ist tot.'<sup>10</sup> (We, as a union, are campaigning for German culture and against multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is dead.) Yet, with 'multikulti' seemingly being very much alive in *Kurz und Schmerzlos*, this productive approach and positive interpretation in the film allows for friendships and business opportunities to be formed. Viewed as a cultural paradigm for the construction of third spaces, the multi-cultural relationships indeed constitute the 'discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning of symbols of culture have no

---

<sup>9</sup> Turkey and Greece continue to have complex maritime, air, and territorial disputes in the Aegean Sea, as well as disputes over the status of north Cyprus.

<sup>10</sup> 'Kanzlerin Merkel Erklärt Multikulti Für Gescheitert'. WELT ONLINE. 16 Oct. 2010. Accessed: 17 February 2012  
<<http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article10337575/Kanzlerin-Merkel-erklaert-Multikulti-fuer-gescheitert.html>>.

primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.'<sup>11</sup>

Yet, just as Gabriel judged his best friend's decision based on national prejudices, so do all characters treat each other's performance as pertaining solely to the nationality of their immigrant background - despite the transformed relationships in the third space of Hamburg. For instance, when Bobby betrays Costa by 100 DM after they had made a deal, Costa expresses his frustration by saying 'Yugo-Betrugo, Alter', alluding to a connection between the former 'Yugo'-slavia and fraud (Betrug). Reversely, Bobby also stereotypes Greeks as 'die Griechen, die riechen' (the Greek reek) in a conversation with Costa. Both statements reveal Bobby's and Costa's German identity through characterising each other by choosing German rhymes originating from a German point-of-view.

In a later conversation with Gabriel, Bobby also tries to perform according to Turkish ethnonormative standards and ironically appropriates the Turkish word '*moruk*' in his appeal to Gabriel: '*Moruk* (...) heute fängt wieder alles an. *Moruk*, jetzt erst recht'.<sup>12</sup> *Moruk* can be understood as the equivalent to the German term 'Alter',<sup>13</sup> literally "old man", heard repeatedly in the three friends' dialogues. While either wanting to relate to Gabriel's Turkishness, or attempting to "other" Gabriel as being a foreigner, Bobby's heavy German pronunciation of the Turkish term ironically fits Gabriel's performance as a German-Turk either way, for Gabriel is indeed a *moruk*: An "old Turk" expressed through his German environment of Altona.

Even so, Gabriel's German-Turkishness is respected and shared with other German-Turks, such as with Nejo (Fatih Akin), whom Bobby, Costa and Gabriel meet on a nocturnal stroll down Altona's streets. Following the shared greeting traditions of Southern and Eastern European cultures, all men greet each other with a kiss on each cheek<sup>14</sup> instead of a handshake.<sup>15</sup> Bobby and Costa hybridise their Mediterranean/Middle Eastern greeting

---

<sup>11</sup> Bhabha, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> 'Moruk, today is the beginning again. Moruk, now more than ever.'

<sup>13</sup> The German expression "Alter" can be compared with the terms "dude" or "man".

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Fernandez, 'Cross-Cultural Ethnology of Greeting Observances: From Hands-Free to Hug-Full', *Legacy*, 8 (2009), 80-87 (p. 82).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84 – This is presented in a hip-hop club scene, where Gabriel extends his hand to Sven, conforming to German cultural norms. However, nowadays (13 years later) it has become more

behaviour by exchanging words in German. Nejo and Gabriel, however, stress their shared and respected Turkish identity by exchanging words in Turkish, cinematically emphasised by the zooming camera framing them in a medium close-up shot.

Such hybrid greeting conventions also appear in Akin's film *Auf der anderen Seite*. When Nejat (Baki Davrak), a German professor of Turkish descent, arrives home after work he greets his father Ali (Tuncil Kurtiz) with a kiss on the cheek hybridising his Turkish performance by adding 'Hey Papa' in German. While the evening unfolds, most conversation between father and son alternates between Turkish and German. Ali's and Nejat's relationship can distantly be compared to that of Gabriel and his father in *Kurz und Schmerzlos*. Raised in Germany, both sons have become culturally different than their emigrated Turkish fathers.

Gabriel, however, also shares his hybrid identity with his sister Ceyda (Idil Üner). During a heated discussion with Ceyda held in German and accentuated through close-up shot/reverse shots of their faces, Gabriel reminds his sister of her privileged German lifestyle as a Turkish female who is allowed to go out at night: 'Welche andere Türkin kann das, he? Zeig' mir die!' (Which other Turkish girl can do that, huh? Show me!). Gabriel also reminds Ceyda that he had respected her cross-ethnic relationship to Costa and had concealed it from their parents. Ceyda had previously ended her relationship with Costa, due to his unreliability and anti-normative, criminal behaviour. Costa's long hair may serve to visualise his 'anti-normativity' based on studies, which have shown that in contemporary Western society men who let their hair grow are often associated with being rebellious, positioned outside of society and social control.<sup>16</sup> Yet, in the narrative his long hair also makes him resemble Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> Symbolically alluding to the Greek Orthodox Church as an identity marker for Greek nationality, Bobby at one point tells Costa: 'You look like Jesus, Alter.'<sup>18</sup>

---

common for females and males to greet each other with a kiss on each cheek, as well as a brief hug between males.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Synott, 'Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 38 (1987), 381-413 (p. 382).

<sup>17</sup> cf. Fatih Akin, 'Audio Commentary', *Kurz und Schmerzlos*. Dir. Fatih Akin. WÜSTE – Filmproduktion, 1998. DVD.

<sup>18</sup> Bobby ironically ignores the fact that Serbia's national religion is also Orthodox and is never presented in connection towards it throughout the entire film.

Returning to Gabriel's relationship to Ceyda it should also be noted that Gabriel disapproves of Ceyda's new German boyfriend, Sven (Marc Hosemann). Gabriel even forbids Ceyda to kiss Sven in Altona (he stresses that any other district would have been fine), for this had caused a physical confrontation between him, Gabriel, Bobby and an infuriated Costa. This situation proves yet again that despite their immigrant background, Bobby, Gabriel and Costa understand their home territory to be Altona, which they are prepared to defend at any time and against whichever person who does not abide by this space's norms.

While Sven rarely appears on screen, he does fulfil the role of the stereotypical German: he is tall and blond, has a very Germanic name and above all, does not seem to be talkative. His first appearance on screen does not even entail any dialogue. To complete the image, Sven drives a bright yellow Renault 4, a parody on the old-fashioned student car once popular in the 1970s and 80s - it even has a yellow rubber duck dangling from the rear-view mirror. Needless to say, Sven does not have the liveliness and emotionality marked by Bobby, Costa and Gabriel's personalities, which are presumably formed through their cultural hybridness. Yet, despite his boring appearance, Sven's monocultural background does seem to be able to provide Ceyda with the emotional and social stability that Costa undoubtedly lacks.

Generally Akin seems to like portraying male German characters as rather quiet, intellectual and therefore distanced from (street) reality. In *Im Juli*, for instance, the main character Daniel (Moritz Bleibtreu) is a high school physics teacher. Daniel's cinematic introduction is solely located in his academic lifestyle, portrayed as a well-groomed young man who wears his shirts tucked into his trousers. The bespectacled teacher lives a life isolated from the multiculturalism inherent in his hometown or in his classroom, which is filled with students of visibly different ethnicities.

Similarly, the only male German character in *Auf der anderen Seite* is Markus Obermüller (Lars Rudolph), the owner of a German bookshop in Istanbul. The blond-haired middle-aged man is furthermore cast with a highly effeminate voice and body language. His German space is embedded in Johann Sebastian Bach's minuet played on a harpsichord and guitar, making the Western classical sound in this space accentuate the German bookshop, a cultural sphere foreign to the Turkish streets that surround it.

When Nejat enters the shops, he is greeted by Markus in German accompanied by a firm handshake, abiding by the shared cultural greeting norms existent in this German space. Markus also offers Nejat a çai, a cup of Turkish tea, calling his shop assistant (in Turkish) to prepare it. Even though this sequence depicts Markus performing Turkish ethnonormativity, Markus tells Nejat that he is selling his store in order to ‘return home’. Markus’ deep affiliation towards Germany has made him incapable of becoming hybrid and culturally flexible. For Nejat, however, the soon-to-be abandoned store forms the perfect space to express his innate identity. In Markus’ words: ‘Ein türkischer Germanistikprofessor aus Deutschland landet in einer deutschen Buchhandlung in der Türkei. Das passt doch!’ (A Turkish German professor from Germany ends up in a German bookstore in Turkey).

Nejat forms an interesting character situated in between his superficial Turkish performance and his internal close affinity for German culture and literature. Nejat’s first appearance on screen places him at a petrol station in Turkey’s rural Black Sea region. During this initial scene, Nejat perfectly performs Turkish normativity by interacting in fluent Turkish with the employees. However, Nejat does not recognise the music playing inside the station’s store. Taking the attendant by surprise, he explains to Nejat that it is a song by the once regionally popular artist Kâzım Koyuncu. This situation undoubtedly hints at Nejat’s outsider status in Turkey, specifically in the Black Sea region, despite his father’s local roots. A cut from the Turkish petrol station not only relocates Nejat sitting on a train in Germany but also reveals his more intimate connection to the German cultural environment. The only cinematic element that remains of Nejat’s previous appearance is the employment of the same non-diegetic music – the sound of a Middle Eastern fiddle in Koyuncu’s song.<sup>19</sup>

On the train, Nejat’s profile is captured as a reflection in the window as he reads a newspaper through his black-rimmed glasses – the same symbol that characterised Daniel as an academic in *Im Juli*. Nejat’s calm character undoubtedly resembles that of Daniel at the beginning of the film and the German character of Sven in *Kurz und Schmerzlos*. Nejat’s affiliation with the German language and hence culture becomes more pronounced when he actually performs his academic identity on screen. As a German assistant professor and lecturer, Nejat indirectly

---

<sup>19</sup> The piece “Ben Seni Sevdugumi” is played and sung by Turkish interpreters Kâzım Koyuncu and Seval Sam.



maintains the national traditions and national imagery of Germany. In a scene portraying Nejat speaking in an auditorium, Akin chooses to fill the content of Nejat's lecture with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the stereotypical symbol and personification of German intellectual thought, literature and identity. Moreover, Nejat quotes Goethe's words of rejection towards revolution, in a rather shy, monotonous and passive presentation. One might say that his words reflect Germany's distant, estranged and out-dated view on national revolutionary uprising in stark contrast to Ayten's (Nurgül Yeşilçay) politically radical behaviour in Turkey. Nejat, living as a Turk in Germany does not share the temperament, anger, or revolutionary spirit felt by Ayten living as a Kurd and political activist in Turkey. Yet even Ayten's rage seems to have exhausted itself when fleeing to Germany, underlined by her snooze in the auditorium during Nejat's lecture on Goethe's thoughts about revolution.

This German academic side of Nejat is furthermore an indirect reason why he relocates to Istanbul. Apart from assuming ownership of a German bookstore, Nejat's primary aim in Istanbul is to finance the studies of Ayten. In doing so, Nejat justifies his decision to support a Kurdish woman by explaining to Turkish lawyers that 'knowledge and education are human rights' – an attitude that reveals a distance to the nationalistic Turkish normative thought.<sup>20</sup> Hence, while Nejat is perfectly capable of performing his Turkish identity as evidenced by his name, Nejat Aksu, his fluency in Turkish and repeated performance of and passion for drinking çai, his negotiation of a German-Turkish identity allows him to deconstruct the limits of a Turkish nationalist claim of the supposed 'contamination of national purity' produced by the (nationless) ethnic Kurds in Turkey.

By the end of the film, Nejat reveals to the viewer another element that constructs his hybrid identity: religion. During the Muslim holiday of *Eid al-Adha*, a fast sequence of medium shots portrays the audio-speakers of Istanbul's minarets calling the men to prayer. Standing at the window of Nejat's flat, he and Susanne (Hanna Schygulla), the mother of Ayten's German girlfriend, observe the men walking to prayer. Physically and spatially already secluded from his fellow countrymen, Nejat starts recounting the sacrificial story of Eid al-Adha in German. This evidently distances him from the men's performance of Muslim Turkish normativity

---

<sup>20</sup> The ideological agenda of the nation-states that are home to Kurds proposes eliminating their ethnic identity in order to homogenise their state. For more information, see Bilgin Ayata and Deniz Yüksek, 'A Belated Awakening: National and International Responses to the Internal Displacement of Kurds in Turkey,' *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 32 (Istanbul: Homer Academic Publishing House, 2005), 5-12.

while putting himself in the position of the Other, the German. Susanne responds to Nejat by saying that the same story exists in German culture, ('diese Geschichte gibt's bei uns auch'). This statement evidences a culturally shared religious and moral point of view, equalling Islam and Christianity whilst also attenuating the intensely radicalised post-9/11 notions on Islam from a Western perspective, and vice versa. For Nejat, the sacrificial story triggers the motivation to connect with his father who had been imprisoned in Germany and deported back to Turkey. Therefore, on a more personal level, the Muslim text also connects Nejat to the Turkishness personified by his father.

The narrative ends with Nejat driving to his father's Black Sea village of Trabzon, whereby the driving-scene, as well as the stop at the petrol station reiterate the film's beginning. The framing of the story with Nejat's road trip symbolises Nejat's mobility and flexibility and to an extent his homelessness, as well. Detached from a full national home and identity, Nejat constantly seems to be re-locating and re-inventing his identity while simultaneously retaining its German aspect. Like a cultural chameleon, Nejat opens up a third space via his inner German identity and interest, which he can disguise through his outer ability to perform Turkishness. Conversely, he disguises his Turkishness in Germany by being a German assistant professor who teaches and hence perpetuates the German culture and history.

*Kurz und Schmerzlos* manifests a comparable ending in that Gabriel seeks to return to his Turkish roots, with the only difference that he has never been to Turkey. After Costa and Bobby are shot dead by Muhamer, Gabriel loses the hybrid comfort zone, the third space, produced by Bobby and Costa in Hamburg. Consequently, Gabriel decides to purchase a one-way ticket to Turkey while also starting to pray with his father at home and in the mosque.

This is an interesting development for Gabriel, for at the beginning of the film Gabriel dissociates himself from his ethnic religion to the extent that he accepts a handcrafted Buddhist Phurba dagger for his personal protection.<sup>21</sup> Created by his sister Ceyda and her best friend Alice (Regula Grauwiller), the pendant will, according to the two women, protect Gabriel from all evil demons until he reaches enlightenment. The presentation of this gift is

---

<sup>21</sup> The phurba dagger is a triple sided Tibetan ritual dagger used in Buddhist ceremonies to exorcise demons or as a spiritual nail to pin down the distractions of greed, desire and envy with its three sides.

accentuated by a close-up shot of the box, emphasising the moment Gabriel accepts the Buddhist symbol. While Turkish male identity, according to Roy Jerome, ‘continues to be interwoven with Islamic notions of patriarchal honour’<sup>22</sup> in Turkish society, Gabriel’s hybridity opens up the spiritual space of Turkish ethnonormativity allowing entrance by other faiths, beliefs and symbolisms.

Associated with this hybrid religious realm is the jewellery shop Kismet (Destiny) owned by Ceyda and Alice. As previously exemplified, the two friends craft spiritual objects, talismans and pendants without belonging to the ethnicity or faith from which the items and their purposes derive. The two women re-appropriate and translate these objects from their original context into new cultural and personal meaning. This cultural translation can be compared to Bhabha’s analysis of Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, in which the author translates the meaning of the Koran as a text, rather than as the text understood within the Muslim community.<sup>23</sup> This shift in context not only displaces the point-of-view of the holy text from a universal to a particular context but moves it from a spiritual into a secular realm.

A similar development can be evidenced in the symbol of the sun. In *Im Juli* the Mayan sun becomes detached from its original meaning to serve the personal purposes of Juli (Christiane Paul). Juli, which is the German word for the month associated most with summer in the Northern hemisphere, sells Daniel a supposedly ancient Mayan sun ring on a hot summer’s day. Cinematically emphasising the power and influence it will have on Daniel’s fate, the ring becomes illuminated in an extreme close-up shot. In Mayan culture, the sun proved to be an important measurement tool of time.<sup>24</sup> However, in the filmic narrative Juli alters the symbolism of the sun to signify luck and love – a plausible explanation for Daniel who, believing in Juli’s culturally translated words, purchases the ring. Yet, that same evening Daniel is misled by the symbol of the sun on the shirt of a German-Turkish woman, Melek (Idil Üner). Thinking that he has found the love of his life, Daniel sets forth to trace Melek’s flight to Istanbul by car, coincidentally picking up Juli on the way.

---

<sup>22</sup> Roy Jerome, *Conceptions of Postwar German Masculinity*, (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 2001), p. 290.

<sup>23</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, (USA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 150.

<sup>24</sup> See Susan Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya: astronomy in art, folklore, and calendars*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), pp. 21-24.

Whilst traversing these hybridised national spaces, recounted as a flashback narration from Daniel's point-of-view, his identity also hybridises through his constant negotiation of cultural differences. His inner development can be witnessed through observing the growing distance from the German ethnonormative realm, the 'non-hybridity' which Daniel was once comfortable. From the moment Daniel steps outside his national territory, his behaviour as well as his physical performance become what he considered anti-normative in the past. During his first stop in Austria, Daniel engages in a fight in which he loses his glasses, his physical stigma and stereotypical expression of Western academia. Upon arriving in Hungary Daniel further needs to dispose of his water-damaged wristwatch. After losing his objectification of time, Daniel seems to be forced to read time 'the Mayan way' - following the route of the sun. However, Daniel's temporal re-orientation is disrupted by Luna (Branka Katić), the personification of the moon and the antithesis of the sun.

Luna's cinematic introduction marks a sudden turn in the narrative. Whilst Daniel is walking on a dirt road lost in Hungary, a military jeep enters the frame, stopping beside him. From a point-of-view shot, Daniel opens the vehicle door and is immediately confronted, even dominated by Luna as she peers down at him from her high driver's seat with a chained Godzilla figure resting on the dashboard. Although Daniel hitches a ride with Luna he is confused about her identity. The viewer alone is informed of Luna's national origin through a close-up shot of a YU sticker on the back of her automobile signifying Yugoslavia with a red EX spray-painted above. The only brief element of national identity Luna reveals to Daniel is her mother tongue, or so it seems, when she offers him a cigarette in Serbian. Daniel, at this point, has already chosen to communicate solely in English, disassociating himself from his native language that has become useless in this international environment. Only the non-diegetic soundtrack cinematically places this scene in its Hungarian realm as it is embedded in a musical score produced by the Budapest musician Korai Öröm.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, Luna fulfils the role of the seductive sirens in the Homeric tradition of Ulysses that distract him from his quest to return home,<sup>26</sup> a role that adds to the hybridisation of *Im Juli* as it has been influenced by Greek mythology.

---

<sup>25</sup> The musical piece is the first track from Budapest musician Korai Öröm's album "1997". See 'Track 1/1997', *Im Juli*, Columbia (Sony BMG), 2000. CD.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Fatih Akin, 'Audio Commentary', *Im Juli*. Dir. Fatih Akin. WÜSTE – Filmproduktion, 2000. DVD.

Yet this does not form the only cinematic hybridisation *Im Juli* has to offer. Apart from the presentation and performances of the filmic characters hybridity is also fabricated through the art and manipulative power of film itself. Akin hybridizes the national and urban landscapes which his characters traverse thereby proving the erroneous nature of stereotypes. During Daniel's and Juli's road trip, for instance, Akin utilises intertextual and intercultural elements to portray the different nations Juli and Daniel traverse on screen. If, according to Bhabha 'the nation reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation, an ethnography of its own claim to being the norm of social contemporaneity'<sup>27</sup> then Akin indeed rejects a unique norm and vision of territorial boundaries with his ambivalent and vacillating cinematic national representations.

As the first location to be introduced on screen, Akin presents the Bulgarian landscape (filmed in Turkey) in a Hollywood western style intending to confuse the viewer with this unexpected genre convention.<sup>28</sup> The audio-visual appearance of the Eastern European country mimics the vast and deserted landscape associated with the US-American west. The sound bridge of whistling wind links the black screen with the orange print movie title to the establishing shot: a long paved road in between sun-lit yellow fields. Barely visible, a black Mercedes appears in the distance, driving towards the camera. The image is aurally accompanied by a guitar, the musical personification of the approaching lonesome cowboy Isa (Mehmet Kurtulus), the driver of the black Mercedes.

Akin employs a more subtle influence of yet another art convention to depict the rural farm scenery on the outskirts of Budapest. The glossy film quality and stark colouring of the mise-en-scène alter the rural Hungarian reality to look like an artificially enhanced image which was inspired by the cartoon drawings of the Belgian comic books *Les Aventures de Tintin*. What is interesting here is that *Les Aventures de Tintin*<sup>29</sup> have been deemed offensive in recent years, due to the supposed racist depiction of 'non-Europeans' or Jews in the comic strips. Indeed, a study on stigmas and prejudices in Tintin reveal that

---

<sup>27</sup> Bhabha, p. 214.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Akin, 'Audio Commentary', *Im Juli*.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

these books may have passed on negative stereotypes to young readers. However, artistic work must be analysed as a whole. Stereotyping is commonplace in Tintin — the baddies are extremely evil, the goodies (except for Pablo in *The Broken Ear* and *Pícaros*) are almost perfect, and Scottish policemen in *The Black Isle* are prototypically British.<sup>30</sup>

It therefore seems fitting that Akin has taken these comic books and ridiculed their stereotypical representation of reality by re-appropriating the style (and the national stereotypes, albeit in a different context) himself.

Yet not all national representations can intentionally be traced to other cultural texts. Interpreted as an homage to the 1969 Hollywood Western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*,<sup>31</sup> the photomontage reflecting Daniel's and Juli's trip through Romania was rather a creative solution to the filming ban the crew had received. Nevertheless, the montage does artistically enhance and hybridise the visual representation of Romania, especially with the additional sound track of a love song sung in Spanish.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from the hybridisation of entire nations and cities, Akin also accentuates the liminal spaces in between them, as well. No border in Akin's film is fixed or solid, but permeable and traversable. On Daniel's way to Budapest, the shots of bridges frame his entrance into and exit from the city. Indeed, the two cities Akin chooses as anchors during Daniel's road trip, Budapest and Istanbul, are marked by their connecting bridges over substantial bodies of water that link the east with the west: Buda and Pest and the latter even Europe and Asia. These urban architectural contact zones seem to be a metaphorical image of hybridity, following Bhabha's quote of philosopher Etienne Balibar: 'Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks. ... The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses.'<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Juan Medrano, Pablo Malo, Jose J. Uriarte, and Ana Pia Lopez, 'Stigma and Prejudice in Tintin', *British Medical Journal*, (339) 7735, (London: 2009), 1406 – 1407 (p. 1407).

<sup>31</sup> The photo-montage is interpreted as such in Rob Burns, 'On the Streets and on the Road: identity in transit in Turkish–German travelogues on screen', *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 7 (2009), 11-26 (p. 23), as well as mentioned by Akin himself in the audio commentary of *Im Juli*.

<sup>32</sup> The song "El amor se demora" is performed by Polvorosa, a German-based musical group with a Chilean lead singer and songwriter.

<sup>33</sup> Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 56 cited in Bhabha, p. 7.

When Daniel reaches the Hungarian-Romanian border Akin also ironises the supposed authority and stability of national frontiers. Performing as the heavily accented English-speaking Romanian border officer (Fatih Akin), Akin does not allow Daniel to cross the border since ‘no passport, no Romania’. Although Daniel does not have any identification on him anymore, he is eventually allowed to enter the country after a mock wedding ceremony with Juli who had coincidentally exited the border toilet on the Romanian side.

The last attempt to traverse the border to Turkey proves to be the manifestation of Daniel’s hybridisation. At the supposed Bulgarian-Turkish border river Daniel has the idea of ‘flying’ over the body of water with all the momentum the engine of his and Juli’s stolen blue Dacia can provide. Yet Daniel’s failure to calculate the necessary speed needed to reach the other side of the river, which he had previously neatly marked out as a diagram in the dirt, allegorically alludes to his change.

Daniel has become an emotionally ridden, physically combative, car stealing and cigarette smoking cosmopolitan. His ethnonormative attitudes seem to have been altered through the international, cultural influences and experiences that have led to a deconstruction of the fixed ethnonormative behaviour once existing in Daniel’s mind. The traversal of countries and cultures (even Bavaria seems like a foreign country in the eyes of the Hamburger) has forced him to detach himself from his glasses - his rational lenses, his German perspective - as well as from his watch, his guide to a structured lifestyle and, of course, to punctuality. Detached from German ethnonormativity, the hybridity evolving from Daniel’s road trip proves to be an asset towards a broader cultural understanding and fuller life for Daniel. Here, Akin shows that ethnonormative Germans, such as his sterile portrayal of Sven in *Kurz und Schmerzlos*, do have the potential to hybridise.

Within this character-based hybridity, Akin presents and simultaneously dismantles the homogeneous and stereotypical nation-states, which also evidences the flexibility and interchangeability of national identities. In Romania, the characters at a petrol station are all played by Hungarian actors who, according to Akin, spoke poor Romanian that nevertheless passed as authentic in the ears of the Other.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Austria was filmed in Germany, Romania in Hungary and Bulgaria in Turkey, making the territorial landscapes fuse over the political borders of the state. By representing these spaces as national realities on screen,

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Akin, ‘Audio Commentary’, *Im Juli*.

Akin's use of hybridity indeed ironically and critically challenges the supposedly unifying and homogenous nation-states that Bhabha so critically addresses.

In *Auf der anderen Seite* Akin focuses on a closer and more serious picture of Turkey and Germany, the home of many characters with hybrid identities. The narrative is not set in a chronological order but rather as simultaneously occurring occasions across Turkey and Germany. The film tells the tragic story of six main characters who seek a new life across the borders of both countries. The hybridity in *Auf der anderen Seite* therefore arises in two nations, Germany and Turkey, and mainly in the three cities of Bremen, Hamburg and Istanbul. Once again, Akin portrays the national and urban borders as permeable and easily accessible. Ayten, for instance, illegally enters Germany with a false passport. Throughout the narrative, the characters are constantly on the move, travelling between locations via airplane, train, boat, bus or car, repeatedly emphasised by having the vehicles of transportation as establishing and bridging shots in between scenes.

The first city to be introduced on screen is Bremen, home to 84,000 immigrants<sup>35</sup> located in the northwest of Germany. Akin introduces it by providing national as well as urban symbols in the fast sequence of establishing shots. One includes the famous animal statue of the Brothers Grimm tale 'The Four Town Musicians of Bremen' whose motto 'you can always find something better than death' eerily alludes to the characters' hopeful journey to a new city, a new country even, in order to escape their desolate fates at home – the same motive that appears in *Kurz und Schmerzlos* when Gabriel purchases a one-way-ticket to Turkey, seeking a new life far away from the tragedy left behind in Hamburg. As Akin says himself:

The characters in my films do not in fact hail from Turkey. They come from Germany. Turkey is something foreign to them...And what they have in common is that they are engaged in a quest. The quest for a better life [...] it is left open whether they do find a better life or not.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> 'Ausländische Bevölkerung nach Ländern'. Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 31 December 2006. Accessed: 1 August 2010

<[http://www.bpb.de/wissen/1R6EXS,0,0,Ausl%E4ndische\\_Bev%C3%B6lkerung\\_nach\\_L%C3%A4ndern.html](http://www.bpb.de/wissen/1R6EXS,0,0,Ausl%E4ndische_Bev%C3%B6lkerung_nach_L%C3%A4ndern.html)>.

<sup>36</sup> Fatih Akin, 'Ich bin wirklich davon ausgegangen: Ok, das könnte mein letzter Film sein...', artechock, 11 March (2004) cited in Burns, p. 16.

<[http://www.arteschock.de/film/text/interview/a/akin\\_2004.htm](http://www.arteschock.de/film/text/interview/a/akin_2004.htm)>



The rather dark, gangsteresque narrative of *Kurz und Schmerzlos* that drives Gabriel's tragic fate is further enhanced by the cinematically manufactured film-noir atmosphere of Hamburg. As a hybrid construct, Hamburg in *Kurz und Schmerzlos* is influenced by Martin Scorsese's depiction of New York City in his gangster film *Mean Streets* (1973). As Akin says himself: 'The movie that opened my eyes as to how films can be made was *Mean Streets* - without *Mean Streets*, no *Kurz und Schmerzlos*.'<sup>37</sup> In Hamburg, however, the Italian-American gangsters of *Mean Streets* have been transformed into German-Serbians and German-Albanians. The mafia aspect of *Kurz und Schmerzlos* is represented solely in the character of Muhamer, a strip club owner which according to him is 'a highly recognised job' in the red-light district of St. Pauli ('hier auf'm Kiez'). Muhamer therefore situates his status, respectability and, ultimately, his existence in this district of Hamburg. The hybrid identity construction of Akin's characters therefore seems to avoid the normativity established in the sense of a national belonging through an urban affiliation. Choosing an urban territory as an identity marker also means avoiding the need to conform to a hyphenated identity between nations. Even Fatih Akin describes himself as being 'Altonese',<sup>38</sup> utilising his Hamburg district's name to form an identity.

In conclusion, it can be said that the expressions of hybridity in Akin's three feature-length films reveal many interesting observations. On a filmic level, Akin's actors create third spaces and negotiate their hybrid identity in useful and playful ways that stage the growing national mobility and flexibility of identity in a catching and entertaining form. *Kurz und Schmerzlos* portrays interethnic relationships as third spaces due to their constellation within German territory. The hybridity of the characters has the potential to reveal and deconstruct ethnonorms while also combining or re-appropriating them to fit their needs. Together with *Im Juli*, the cultural translation of symbols creates new signs in contemporary Western society. The road movie made out of many genre styles furthermore hybridises the cinematic content and image in an intertextual manner on screen. At the same time the story proves that intercultural influences can change a person's worldview for the better and make Daniel (and the viewer) see past the 'truth' that ethnonorms claim to own. *Auf der anderen Seite*, in the

---

<sup>37</sup> Akin on 21 May 2005, cited in Margret Mackuth, *Es geht um Freiheit - Interkulturelle Motive in den Spielfilmen Fatih Akins*, (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Karl Müller, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Denk Ich an Deutschland - Wir haben vergessen zurückzukehren*. Dir. Fatih Akin. Perf. Fatih Akin. megaherz gmbh, 2001. Videocassette.

end, informs the viewer of how an ethnic Turk has found his identity in a German intellectual environment.

On a linguistic level, hybridity is performed via code-switching and translation, where the words and sentences of the actors take on different meanings or a different sign in the bilingual third space it produces. All characters with a hybrid identity are portrayed as at least bilingual, if not multilingual (Luna). Nevertheless, bilingualism is not necessarily a manifestation of bi-culturality, while bi-culturality does not need to involve bilingualism. This can be seen in the hybrid greeting traditions that do not involve two spoken languages but access to both cultures. Similarly, Daniel does not feel hybrid due to his linguistic knowledge of English and nor does Markus Obermüller whilst speaking Turkish in Istanbul.

The character of Nejat poses a very interesting question in relation to cultural hybridity and as a producer of third spaces. One might ask what happens when a culturally hybrid person attempts to spread the cultural feeling of national belonging and uniqueness of a national culture. Nejat Aksu, an ethnic Turk, reverses the German vision of having a bloodline based Volk which keeps national traditions alive. Simultaneously, he also challenges the third space as a result of cultural hybridity since Nejat clearly re-generates a feeling for German identity by spreading knowledge on German national history and literature in Germany and in Turkey. This dichotomy is probably what Akin wants to express and even emphasise as a hybrid artist, namely

a common goal of challenging the national myths of place and belonging, a rejection of the binary between purity and mixture, and the incorporation of the political right to both mobility and attachment into a series of cultural and aesthetic propositions.<sup>39</sup>

Akin's cinema not only offers a chance to re-imagine the sense of (national) community<sup>40</sup> but also the idea of having a unique and pure national film culture. Akin's depiction of Germany and Germans as culturally hybrid can be said to portray the national reality of 'the nation split

---

<sup>39</sup> Papastergiadis, 'Hybridity and Ambivalence: Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture', p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> Burns, p. 25.

within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population'<sup>41</sup> that becomes 'a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference.'<sup>42</sup>

The question remains whether hybrid subjects of a heterogeneous community will still choose to abide by the homogeneous cultural past of a nation and thus adapt, assimilate and reduce their innate hybridity to a mono-cultural setting, or whether they will become stronger so as to be able to iterate their own hybrid norms that have established themselves as a mixture from other ethnic norms, thereby perpetuating the constant cultural clashes and exchanges that have been enduring and defining our environment for over centuries and millennia.

Akin, in my opinion, is definitely part of the latter option whose films have been mobilising a contemporary image of Germany within the international realm: the image of German cultural hybridity.

---

<sup>41</sup> Bhabha, p. 212.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.