

# No place like home? Or impossible homecomings in the films of Fatih Akin<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Fatih Akin, one of the most prominent directors of contemporary German-Turkish cinema, describes himself as a German filmmaker and – at least until the international success of *Gegen die Wand/Head-On* (2004) – downplayed the relevance of his ethnic background for his creative career. And yet, his feature films exhibit most of the characteristics associated with ‘accented cinema’, a type of cinema which has been identified by Hamid Naficy as an aesthetic response to displacement through exile, migration or diaspora. The underlying theme of Akin’s films is the migrant’s experience of rootlessness and the redemptive promise inherent in the return to one’s Heimat. This paper examines chronotopes of homeland in *Kurz und schmerzlos/Short Sharp Shock* (1998), *Solino* (2002) and *Head-On* and asks to what extent the preoccupation with Heimat, alongside the eclectic mix of generic templates which have informed Akin’s films, underscore the cultural hybridity of his oeuvre.*

## Keywords

Fatih Akin  
German-Turkish  
cinema  
diaspora  
accented cinema  
Heimatfilm

Following the critical and commercial success of Fatih Akin’s melodramatic love story *Gegen die Wand/Head-On* (2004), the first German film in eighteen years to win the Golden Bear at the International Film Festival in Berlin in 2004, Young German-Turkish Cinema is being promoted with increased fervour with the slogan ‘The New German Cinema is Turkish’ (Kulaoglu 1999). As this reference to New German Cinema suggests, German filmmakers of Turkish origin, such as Thomas Arslan, Yüksel Yavuz, Ayse Polat and Fatih Akin,<sup>2</sup> are perceived as the next wave of *auteurs* who will once again help German cinema to reach the level of international acclaim that was hitherto associated with the likes of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders and Alexander Kluge.

Yet, like any self-respecting new generation of filmmakers, Turkish-German filmmakers reject the cinema of their forebears. That is on the one hand the West German *Autorenkino* with its culturally elitist aspirations and its disdain for mainstream entertainment. That is on the other hand what has been variously labelled the ‘cinema of duty’ (Malik 1996) or the ‘cinema of the affected’ (Burns 2006: 148) as represented in the German context by the first generation Turkish-German filmmaker Tevfik Başer and German filmmaker Hark Bohm, who in the 1980s explored the problems faced by Turkish labour migrants and, in particular, Turkish women in Germany. These films take what Rob Burns (2006: 132) describes as a “‘social worker approach” to ethnic relations’, articulating social problems of marginalized groups of society in a documentary-realist fashion. Tevfik

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2 Yüksel Yavuz and Ayse Polat are, in fact, Kurds, who were born in Turkey and moved to Germany as children.

3 'The term 'migrant' is used as a self-description among young people whose parents or grandparents migrated to Germany' (Cheesman 2002: 181). Most of these children or grandchildren of guest workers were born in Germany or arrived when they were children. In that sense, it is more accurate to speak of the Turkish 'diaspora' in Germany rather than the Turkish migrant community.

Başer's best-known features *Vierzig Quadratmeter Deutschland/Forty Square Metres of Germany* (1986) and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies/Farewell to a False Paradise* (1989) are sombre, claustrophobic depictions of the plight of Turkish women, suffering from the oppression under Muslim patriarchy while living in Germany. *Farewell to a False Paradise* is a rather idealized depiction of a women's prison in Germany. The Turkish protagonist Elif, who has been sentenced to prison for killing her husband, thrives under the female solidarity she experiences and which reminds her of Turkish village life and the close-knit women's community back home. Remarkably, intracultural tensions are hardly an issue. Hark Bohm's film *Yasemin* (1988) by contrast makes the German-Turkish clash of cultures its main theme. The film that featured 'on almost every German-Turkish film programme and is circulated by the Goethe Institutes even in Thailand and India' (Göktürk 2000: 68) plays to every imaginable stereotype of intracultural tensions. Yasemin, a Turkish greengrocer's daughter living in Hamburg, leads a double life, acting the dutiful daughter at home, yet aspiring to be like her German classmates and friends outside home. The film ends with her 'escape' from Turkish patriarchy on the backseat of her German boyfriend's motorbike. As Deniz Göktürk and other critics of *Yasemin* have noted, the film's stance *vis à vis* multicultural integration is highly problematic. It reinforces the dichotomy of a liberal and liberating Western culture versus an oppressive, backward Turkish-Muslim culture by drawing on the common fantasy 'of victimised Turkish women, who, especially when young and beautiful, need to be rescued from their patriarchal community' (Göktürk 2000: 69).

In spite of depicting the experience of migrants in Germany,<sup>3</sup> Akin does not consider his films to stand in the tradition of the 'cinema of the affected'. Except for the fact that they depict Turkish, Italian, Greek and other immigrants in Germany, they have little in common with the 'cinema of the affected' in terms of their aesthetics and intent. At the same time, however, Akin's films use the cinematic tradition he renounces as a platform. Unlike, for example, Züli Aladag's *Elefantenherz/Elephant Heart* (2002) or, even more so, the thriller *Lautlos/Soundless* (2004) by the Turkish-German director Mennan Yapo, which completely avoids the burden of representation by not engaging with themes of migration and diaspora at all, Akin uses his Turkish background to differentiate himself from other young German directors with whom he is competing. In fact, while for many years the Hamburg-born director has downplayed the relevance of his Turkish origins for his creative career and referred to himself as a German filmmaker, since the critical and commercial success of *Head-On* he has more readily acknowledged the relevance of his Turkish background for his filmmaking (Mitchell and Akin 2006). His recent documentary *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005) makes the point that Istanbul is, indeed, the bridge between East and West, a multicultural melting pot in which diverse musical traditions and cultural influences happily coexist. While Akin rejects the label of a hyphenated identity filmmaker, his films tell a different story, falling into what has been called 'migrant', 'diasporic', 'ethnic identity', 'accented cinema' or '*cinéma de métissage*' ('cinema of hybridity'). The theme of Akin's films is the migrant's

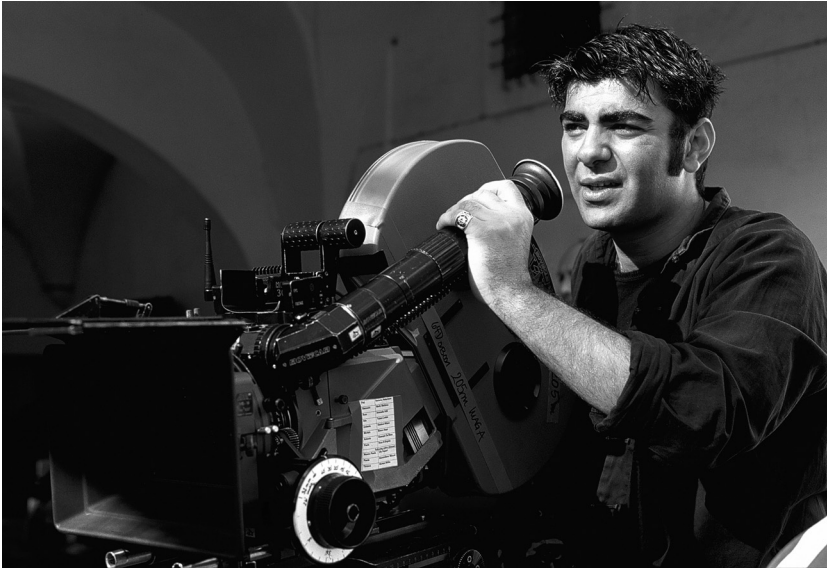


Figure 1: Fatih Akin (photo courtesy of X-Verleih).

experience of rootlessness, of culture clash and of living *between* or *in* two worlds. Several of his films culminate in their protagonists' journeys back to their cultural roots.

In this paper I propose to examine the significance of the protagonists' home-coming journeys in three of his feature films, namely, *Kurz und schmerzlos/Short Sharp Shock* (1998), *Solino* (2002) and *Head-On* in relation to the construction of hybrid cultural identities. My discussion will focus on the protagonists' quest for *Heimat*, understood as a structuring absence as well as a utopian promise, which is inscribed in the narratives of all three films. The discussion of the protagonists' itineraries is embedded in a consideration of the eclectic mix of generic templates, ranging from Italian-American gangster movies, European heritage cinema and the Turkish arabesk tradition, which have informed Akin's films and which underscore their cultural hybridity.

### **Bidding for the mainstream**

Fatih Akin is currently one of Germany's best-known film directors and, among the Turkish-German directors, the one whose trajectory from the margins to the mainstream has been most successful. Born in Hamburg in 1973, he started his career in the film industry as an actor in television films in 1994. But when 'he was no longer willing to play the "stereotype Turk" in film productions where 'migrants could only appear in one guise: as a problem' (Akin quoted in Burns 2006, 142) he started making his own films. After two shorts, *Sensin – Du bist es!/Sensin – You're the One!* (1995) and *Getürktt/Weed* (1996), his breakthrough came with the Martin Scorsese-inspired gangster movie *Short Sharp Shock*. Akin had written the script and approached the production company Wüste Film Production with the intention of playing Gabriel, the lead, in the film. However, Wüste

4 Akin identified the key three audiences of his films as German, Turkish and German-Turkish, cf. Mitchell 2006. Another significant factor that contributed to the success of *Head-On* was the revelation in the German and Turkish media that the lead actress, Sibel Kekilli, had been acting in porn movies before taking on the part of Sibel in Akin's film.

Film Production persuaded him to direct the film himself. Originally conceived as a television film for the ZDF (the second public broadcasting channel) *Kleines Fernsehspiel* (Little Television Feature), a television programme devoted to showcasing innovative films of Germany's next generation filmmakers, *Short Sharp Shock* was eventually distributed by Polygram and released with 70 prints (Schwingel 1999). Even though the film was anything but a commercial success, attracting only 80,000 viewers and being largely ignored by the Turkish community in Germany, it received good reviews and won a number of prizes including the Bavarian Film Award for Best Direction Young Film (1999), the Adolf Grimme Award (2001) and it was nominated for the German Film Award. Fatih Akin's commercial breakthrough came with the light-hearted road movie *Im Juli/In July* (2000), which stars two of Germany's most popular contemporary actors, Moritz Bleibtreu and Christiane Paul, and was seen by more than half a million viewers in Germany. *Solino* did equally well at the box office, while *Head-On* attracted nearly 800,000 viewers in Germany and was released in several other European countries. In addition to the Golden Bear at the Berlinale in 2004, it also won the FIPRESCI Prize, awards in several categories at the European Film Awards and the German Film Awards. Following its success at the Berlinale, in Turkey *Head-On* was the third most popular film and in Germany the eighth most popular in the year of its release (Seibert 2004). Akin's next project, a documentary about the rich and varied musical traditions of Istanbul, *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005) premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2005 and has since toured on the international festival circuit and been released in eleven countries.

What lies at the bottom of Fatih Akin's success are a number of factors. First, his films use narrative and generic templates of mainstream cinema, thus conveying ethnic identity themes in an accessible and popular format. Second, in a globalized market, 'exoticism is at a premium' (Cheesman 2002: 182), as the rapidly increasing interest in World Cinema indicates. Thus, the blend of western and Turkish music, ethnic identity themes and references to an eclectic mix of cultural and cinematic traditions sampled from Hollywood, Europe and 'the Orient', lends a cross-cultural appeal to Akin's films that have won audiences in Turkey, Germany and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> 'Sampling' may, indeed, be one of the most significant ingredients of his formula for success. 'I'm a kid of the hip-hop culture. I sample what I need and the rest I don't' (Akin 2005), he declared in an interview in London, following the English premiere of *Head-On*. It is in particular this strategy of juxtaposing and blending the seemingly disparate and incompatible that helps Akin realize his declared mission to move Turkish-German cinema out the niche assigned to the culture of migrants and guest workers and to make it an integral part of mainstream German culture (Akin 2004b). Akin's engagement with the theme of *Heimat* in several of his films can thus be interpreted as an indicator of his cultural hybridity or, as Thomas Elsaesser (2005) puts it, 'double occupancy', since the dialectical relationship between home and displacement is, on the one hand, a prime concern of migrant and diasporic cinema, while, on the other hand, *Heimat* is a quintessentially German theme.

## Between *Heimatfilm* and accented cinema

The preoccupation with *Heimat*, which finds expression in the protagonists' home-seeking journeys in several of Fatih Akin's films, has been identified by Hamid Naficy as a constitutive element of what he refers to as 'accented cinema'. Without wanting to pursue the question of conflicting and overlapping terminologies in any detail here, I need to mention that Naficy's concept of 'accented cinema' comprises different types of cinema made by exilic, diasporic, and postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers who live and work in countries other than their country of origin (Naficy 2001: 11ff). Accented cinema can be understood as an aesthetic response to the experience of displacement and deterritorialization. The distinction between the sub-categories of exilic, diasporic and postcolonial ethnic films is 'based chiefly on the varied relationship of the films and their makers to existing or imagined homeplaces' (Naficy 2001: 21). Yet what lies at the bottom of all accented films is that they reflect the 'double consciousness' (Naficy 2001: 22) of their creators. Accented films are often bi- or multi-lingual and blend aesthetic and stylistic impulses from the cinematic traditions of the filmmaker's home and host countries.<sup>5</sup> Typically, they posit 'the homeland as a grand and deeply rooted referent' (Naficy 2001: 27). This reference to the homeland can take many forms. Applying Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope (literally 'time space'), which Bakhtin uses as a critical tool to distinguish between different generic types of the novel (Bakhtin 1981), Naficy uses the chronotope of the homeland as a device to map the field of accented cinema. He differentiates, for example, between 'chronotopes of imagined homeland', 'home-seeking journeys' and 'journeys of homelessness'. He identifies the deep desire for one's homeland – *Heimweh* (as well as its opposite *Fernweh*) as a dominant theme of accented cinema.<sup>6</sup>

As Naficy illustrates with reference to numerous films, but in particular films made by exilic filmmakers,

every journey entails a return, or the thought of return. Therefore, home and travel, placement and displacement are always already intertwined. Return occupies a primary place in the minds of the exiles and a disproportionate amount of space in their films, for it is the dream of a glorious homecoming that structures exile.

(Naficy 2001: 229)

However, he acknowledges that the dream of homecoming is less pronounced in films by émigré or ethnic minority filmmakers – and Akin as well as other second-generation Turkish filmmakers living and working in Germany would arguably come closest to Naficy's category of ethnic identity filmmakers. 'Ethnic identity films tend to deal with what Werner Sollors has characterized as 'the central drama in American culture', which emerges from the conflict between descent relations, emphasizing bloodline and ethnicity, and consent relations, stressing self-made contractual affiliations' (Naficy 2001: 15).

The fact that the experience of migration, exile and diaspora seem to invoke nostalgic memories or fantasies precisely of what is lost or absent,

- 5 On transnational aesthetics and double consciousness see also Gilroy 1993.
- 6 '*Fernweh*' literally means the yearning for faraway places and is commonly translated as 'wanderlust'.

- 7 'Getürkt' can also be translated as 'forged'.
- 8 For further details and a discussion of these and many other films, cf. the website of the ARHC Research Network *Migrant and Diasporic Cinema in Contemporary Europe*, [www.migrantcinema.net](http://www.migrantcinema.net).

namely *Heimat*, is reflected in the telling names of a recent retrospective of Turkish-German cinema organized by the Goethe Institute and Inter Nationes which was entitled: 'Getürkt: Heimatfilme aus Deutschland' (Turkified: Heimatfilms from Germany) and the *Heimat Kunst* exhibition in the Berlin Haus der Kulturen in summer 2000.<sup>7</sup> This exhibition featured exclusively the art of multicultural artists working in Germany. As Hito Steyerl notes in her discussion of this exhibition: 'Every artist had the marker of foreignness [. . . thus] the concept of Heimat [had] been surrendered to the people who were routinely excluded from it' (Steyerl 2004: 165), possibly with the intention of promoting an inclusive, multi-cultural image of the Berlin Republic.

On the one hand, the *Heimat*-discourse underlying the narratives of the three films by Akin under consideration situates them unmistakably in the context of accented cinema. Journeys back to the protagonists' roots are a prominent theme of contemporary European migrant cinema. *Heimkehr/Home Coming*, (Germany 2003), the début film of the Croatian-born German filmmaker Damir Lukacevic; *Auslandstournee/Tour Abroad* (Ayse Polat, 2000), *Il bagno turco/Hamam Turkish Bath* (Ferzan Özpetek, 1997), *La fille de Keltoum/Keltoum's Daughter* (Mehdi Charef, 2001) and Tony Gatlif's recent road movie *Exils/Exiles* (2004) are just a few prominent examples of films articulating this theme.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, in most cases it is impossible for the film's protagonist to regain the certainty of secure roots, which has become replaced by the complex contingencies of transnational routes (cf. Gilroy 1993).

On the other hand, Akin's preoccupation with *Heimat* places him in a uniquely German cinematic and cultural tradition. What immediately springs to mind when one hears the word '*Heimat*' is the popular genre of the *Heimatfilm* of the 1950s, which behind the façade of trivial entertainment actually demonstrates an acute awareness of social problems and post-war trauma. As Sabine Hake rightly observes, 'the retreat to the harmonious living conditions found in typical landscapes such as the Bavarian Alps, the Rhine region, the Black Forrest and the Lüneburg Heath' (2002: 109) and idyllic villages, depicted in the 1950s *Heimatfilm*, was in fact a response to the mass displacement, forced migration and real loss of *Heimat* by which millions of refugees from Germany's lost territories in the East were affected after World War II. Thus, 'the *Heimatfilm* provided a simultaneously regressive and progressive fantasy of belonging that enlisted the well-known iconography of *Heimat* in the creation of a new collective identity' (Hake 2002: 110).

Although the comparison may seem far-fetched at first sight there are conspicuous similarities between the *Heimatfilm* and films made by diasporic filmmakers like Akin and others. Accented cinema and the *Heimatfilm* are both fundamentally concerned with questions of belonging and identity, with place and displacement and the quest for *Heimat*. In accented cinema *Heimat* is located in another country and the protagonists' attempt to regain their *Heimat* involves the crossing of borders and cultural divides. Yet going back in time and place proves difficult and, therefore, *Heimat* in accented cinema is typically a structuring absence, an unattainable utopia. In the German *Heimatfilm* of the 1950s, by contrast,

*Heimat* is a rural idyll and harmonious village community somewhere in West Germany where even those characters who have been displaced in the mass migration after World War II (such as Lüder Lüdersen in *Grün ist die Heide/Green is the Heath*, 1951) can find a new *Heimat* and are fully integrated into the local community.

There are also some striking correspondences in the dramatization of *Heimat* in accented cinema and in the *Heimatfilm*. The prominent role played by traditional Turkish 'gypsy' and folk music in Akin's films fulfils a function similar to the popular songs and *Volkslieder* in the *Heimatfilm* genre. What takes the place of the seasonal celebrations, music and dance and folkloristic costumes, all staple ingredients of the *Heimatfilm*, are the almost ubiquitous wedding ceremonies in migrant cinema. Wedding ceremonies bring the customs, traditions and the music from the *Heimat* to life in the context of the adopted culture and thus create a sense of nostalgia and collective identity.

That the Germans' preoccupation with *Heimat* far extends the post-war period and can, in fact, be considered as a quintessentially German theme, has been well documented in Johannes von Moltke's study *No Place Like Home: Locations of Heimat in German Cinema*. Tracing the origins of *Heimat*, 'a whole culture [. . .] that had begun to consolidate by the middle of the nineteenth century [. . . and] that initially found expression in the writings of the romantics as well as in political discourse surrounding German regionalism and nationalism' (von Moltke 2005: 7), von Moltke sketches the 'multiple rebirths of *Heimat*' and the ensuing 'polysemy' of the concept over the twentieth century. Harnessed to political and ideological causes as diverse as the blood and soil ideology of the Nazis and the ideological ideals of the Green Party in the 1970s, most recently, *Heimat* 'has come [to] serve as a trope for identity politics in an increasingly multicultural society' (von Moltke 2005: 7).

When in the 1980s the German filmmaker Edgar Reitz embarked upon his three-part television chronicle *Heimat* (1984, 1993, 2004) he defined *Heimat* not just as a specific place, the small imaginary Hunsrück village of Schabbach, but as an elusive ideal, a nostalgic memory, a yearning for one's cultural and individual roots, one's childhood. In an interview given in the early 1980s, Reitz remarked:

The word is always linked to strong feeling, mostly remembrances and longing. "Heimat" always evokes in me the feeling of something lost or very far away, something which one cannot easily find or find again. In this respect, it is also a German romantic word and a romantic feeling with a particular romantic dialectic. "Heimat" is such that if one would go closer and closer to it, one would discover that at the moment of arrival it is gone, it has dissolved into nothingness. It seems to me that one has a more precise idea of "Heimat" the further one is away from it. This for me is "Heimat", it's fiction, and one can arrive there only in poetry, and I include film in poetry.

(Reitz cited in Kaes 1989: 163)

Reitz's interpretation of *Heimat* is indebted to that of the philosopher Ernst Bloch, who, in the final sentence of his monumental treatise *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (The Principle of Hope) defines *Heimat* as utopia – and that is, in the

literal sense of the word 'utopia', a 'no place': 'There arises in the world something which appears to everyone in childhood and where no one has ever been: *Heimat*' (Bloch 1977: 1628, translated from German by the author).

If, then, *Heimat* means 'the site of one's lost childhood, of family, of identity' (Kaes 1989: 165) the quest for *Heimat* is also at the centre of Wim Wenders' road movies in which uprooted males return to their place of origin, hoping to attain a sense of selfhood and identity. For example, Travis in *Paris, Texas* (1984) returns to the place where he was conceived, only to find out that it is a bare patch of land in the Texan desert, called Paris. Likewise, Bruno in *Im Lauf der Zeit/Kings of the Road* (1976) visits his childhood hideaway where he has stowed away some old comic books.

While the preoccupation with *Heimat* clearly emerges as a perennial concern in Germany's intellectual and cultural history, the increased attention that has been accorded to *Heimat* over the past 20 years or so can be attributed to the dialectical relationship between *Heimat* and displacement. Increased mobility and, in particular, the process of globalization has led to a growing need for spatial stability, a yearning for rootedness and belonging. It has also resulted in a surge of publications on the topic of *Heimat* over the past decade.

Most prominently, the best-selling author Bernhard Schlink gave a lecture at the American Academy in Berlin in December 1999, which has subsequently been published under the title *Heimat als Utopie* (*Heimat as Utopia*, 2000). Schlink reframes the idea of *Heimat* in the context of globalization. Harking back to Ernst Bloch's concept of *Heimat* as utopia Schlink emphasizes the unattainability of *Heimat* as a nostalgic longing for something experienced in the past or in one's childhood that has been irretrievably lost. According to Schlink, in the age of globalization and increased mobility, *Heimweh* has become the human condition, experienced by ever growing numbers of people. It is in this context of referents that I should like to examine the theme of home-seeking journeys in Fatih Akin's three films.

### **Solino – Homecoming as salvation**

While all three films are thematically concerned with their protagonists' homebound journeys they differ significantly in terms of the dramatization of the return to what I shall call the protagonists' cultural roots or their *Heimat*. *Solino*, the only of the three films which is not based on a screenplay written by Akin himself, is characterized by a circular narrative structure and itinerary. The film begins in the small Italian town Solino, meaning 'little sun'. This is a picture-postcard-pretty, idyllic small town, which has everything to offer one can possibly want – except for enough work. Thus, in the early 1960s the Amato family, consisting of father Romano, mother Rosa and their two sons Gigi and Giancarlo, leave their provincial hometown behind to begin a new and economically more prosperous life in Germany. The film essentially depicts – in the most idealized terms – the experience of Italian guest workers who were 'invited' by the German government in the 1950s to contribute with their labour to the economic miracle. The Amato family ends up in the industrialized city of Duisburg, in the Ruhr region, at the time the centre of Germany's coal



mining and heavy industry. Duisburg is presented as a cold, dirty and inhospitable place compared with the provincial charm of sun-drenched Solino. Yet things improve for the Amato family, when Mr. Amato quits his job in the coalmines and the family opens the first pizzeria in Duisburg. They call it Solino. The family business flourishes, not least, because of mother Rosa's hard work in the kitchen. Gigi and Giancarlo are well adjusted to their lives in Duisburg where they spend part of their childhood and teenage years. However, Giancarlo is jealous of his brother's achievements and his girlfriend. Fraternal rivalry drives a rift between the brothers. Gigi is just about to launch his career as a filmmaker in Germany when his mother falls fatally ill. She leaves her unfaithful and domineering husband and returns to Solino, the *Heimat* she has desperately missed. Out of love and filial duty, Gigi follows her, sacrificing the life he built for himself in Germany. Yet the return to Solino turns out to be anything but a sacrifice: it brings complete fulfillment to mother and son. Rosa miraculously recovers from her fatal illness. In fact, it seems as if her fatal illness was what the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in 1688 identified as 'nostalgia' – an unfulfilled yearning and melancholia to return to one's *Heimat*. Gigi, too, finds complete salvation in Solino. His childhood sweetheart, Ada, is far more beautiful and faithful than his German girlfriend, in short, the perfect bride. In addition, Solino provides ample opportunities to fulfill Gigi's ambitions as a filmmaker: not only does the environment inspire him to make a most poetic short film but he also re-opens the local open air cinema turning it into a magical space, reminiscent of Giuseppe Tornatore's nostalgic retro movie, *Nuovo cinema Paradiso/Cinema Paradiso* (1989).<sup>9</sup>

9 In interviews about *Solino*, Akin mentions Italian Neo-Realism as a key influence despite the fact that there are no stylistic correspondences at all. However, in the audio commentary of the film's DVD release (X Edition, 2002) he acknowledges certain thematic correspondences with Luchino Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli/Rocco and His Brothers* (Italy, 1960), which tells the story of an Italian family migrating from southern Italy to Milano and which depicts fraternal rivalry and feud. Surprisingly, he makes no reference to *Cinema Paradiso* and even denies having seen the film.



Figure 2: *Solino*. Gigi (Barnaby Metschurat) and Ada (Tiziana Lodato) (photo courtesy of X-Verleih).

- 10 For a discussion of this particular aspect of *Cinema Paradiso*, cf. Eleftheriotis 2001: 180–209; for a distinction between heritage cinema and retro cinema, cf. Sargeant 2002.
- 11 In most accented cinema only the imagined homeland can be so ideal, however, in *Solino* the small Apulian town to which Gigi and his mother actually return does not fall short of the memory of the imagined homeland.
- 12 The narratives of Lukacevic's *Home Coming* and Ferzan Özpetek's *Haman Turkish Bath* (1997) are based on similar spatial oppositions whereby the host country is associated with material greed and alienation and the return to the homeland as a rediscovery of family values and of ones true self.

In fact, *Solino* contains a number of explicit references to *Cinema Paradiso*: both films provide a retrospective account of an idealized childhood in a small Italian village and both celebrate cinéphilia and the communal viewing experience of provincial Italian cinemas during the 1950s.<sup>10</sup> Gigi names the open air cinema that he restores to its former glory 'Nuovo Cinema', a reference to the Italian title of Tornatore's film *Nuovo cinema Paradiso*. Antonella Attili, who played Maria as a young woman in Tornatore's film, also plays Rosa in *Solino*. And, finally, both films tell the story of a homecoming. However, whereas the protagonist of *Cinema Paradiso*, a successful film director and producer working in Rome, returns to his birthplace in Sicily only to witness the demolition of the cinema that played a formative role in his life, Gigi successfully reintegrates into the Apulian village community, suggesting that time, just like a film, can be rewound.

As Fatih Akin notes, *Solino* is exceptional in so far as the protagonist's quest is successful or, to use Akin's words, leads to salvation:

All of my characters are searching for something. They are searching for a better life. However, with the exception of [Gigi in] *Solino*, all of them fail. Or it is left open whether the characters actually find a better life or not. They are looking for salvation in the country of their origin. But they cannot find salvation.

(Akin 2004a, translated from German by the author)

Arguably, the exceptional status of Gigi amongst the protagonists of Akin's films can be explained by the fact that his homebound journey – unlike that of Gabriel in *Short Sharp Shock* and Cahit and Sibel in *Head-On* – is a true return to his *Heimat*, whereby *Heimat* stands for the place where Gigi grew up and spent his childhood. Following the film's internal logic, Gigi can find complete fulfillment in Italy because he never lost his cultural roots. Thus, his homecoming represents what Hamid Naficy describes as a return to 'a utopian prelapsarian chronotope of the homeland that is uncontaminated by contemporary facts' (2001: 152). *Solino* encapsulates all the positive markers of Naficy's 'chronotopes of the imaged homeland':<sup>11</sup> it is an open space (in particular the open air cinema), timeless, 'feminine and maternal' (Naficy 2001: 154). Significantly, Gigi's return to his *Heimat* is linked to his mother. 'Wherever [the mother] is, there is Heimat', Anton Kaes writes, identifying this link as 'a motif [. . . of] many Heimat novels and much regional literature' (Kaes 1989: 168). Moreover, Gigi's decision to 'sacrifice' his career as a documentary filmmaker in Germany, prioritizing family values over career success, identifies him as a stereotypical Italian rather than as somebody whose value system has been corrupted by the material greed associated with life in Germany – and which resulted in the estrangement of Romano and Rosa Amato.<sup>12</sup>

What distinguishes Gigi in *Solino* from the protagonists of *Short Sharp Shock* and *Head-On* is that the Italian Gigi is a first-generation migrant with the lived experience of his cultural roots, whereas the Turks Gabriel, Sibel and Cahit grew up in Germany. They are post-migrants who are more at home in the multi-cultural or marginal milieu of Hamburg-Altona than in

Turkey.<sup>13</sup> Their desire to return is either non-existent or ambivalent. In fact, their homebound journeys are to a greater or lesser extent motivated by the need to escape, be it the law, the Albanian mafia or Turkish patriarchy.

### **Short Sharp Shock – Homecoming as an ‘ominous utopia’?**

*Short Sharp Shock* is a ghetto-centric gangster movie aesthetically modelled on *Mean Streets* (1973) by the Italian-American director Martin Scorsese. At the same time, the character constellation and the depiction of ethnic minorities living on the margins of legality points towards the strong influence of Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine/Hate* (1995).<sup>14</sup> Like *La Haine*, *Short Sharp Shock* tells the story of three culturally seemingly incompatible friends: Gabriel the Turk, Costa the Greek and Bobby the Serb. However, unlike in *La Haine*, the trio of multi-cultural friends is not segregated from their German peers. The German girl Alice, who runs a jewellery store together with Gabriel's sister, is part of the group of friends and is romantically involved first with Bobby and subsequently with Gabriel. Gabriel, who at the beginning of the film has just been released from prison, is initially depicted as someone who has adopted the life style and liberal moral values of Western society. He protects his sister from the moral restrictions their father would like to impose and he prioritizes the moral code of friendship over the traditions that govern Turkish society and family life. Gabriel is determined to stay well clear of the crimes and the gangster milieu in which Bobby and Costa are involved. Instead, he wants to earn a living as a taxi driver, aiming to save enough money to start a new life in Turkey. Significantly, his plan to move to Turkey is not motivated by nostalgia for his *Heimat* – in fact, there is no indication that Turkey is the place where Gabriel grew up. What Turkey represents for Gabriel is first and foremost a way out of moral corruption and the gang culture of Hamburg-Altona. Yet there is more to Turkey than the prospect of eschewing a life on the margins of legality. As Gabriel explains to Alice, experiencing the coldness and isolation of prison made him daydream of starting a new life in Turkey. The Turkey he fantasizes is a country which combines the best of both worlds: traditional Turkish village life and the westernized Turkey as a tourist destination. In Gabriel's Turkish utopia the traditional, tight-knit village community happily co-exists with a modern-day Turkey, epitomized by Gabriel's dream of a *dolce vita* in which he owns a small café on the beach, rents out boats to tourists and watches beautiful girls go by.

Yet significantly, this Turkish dream is not dramatized in the film. In this sense, *Short Sharp Shock* illustrates what Avtar Brah has described as a constitutive element of the diasporic imagination: the split between the *idea* of home and the *experience* of returning home, whereby home becomes a place of no return, a mythic place of desire (Brah 1997: 192). In other words, the imagination takes the place of the primary home. We never see Gabriel arrive in Turkey. His 'return' to Turkey is, rather, suggested in his purchase of a one-way-ticket to Istanbul and a gradual rapprochement with the Muslim culture of his father.

On three occasions, Gabriel's father (played by Fatih Akin's real father) invites his son to join him in prayer. But not until Gabriel has experienced

13 However, when Cahit and Sibel get to know each other they define their identity with reference to the places where their families come from in Turkey. According to Lale Yalçın-Heckmann (2002: 315–317) second and third generation migrants in Germany refer to the Turkish village or town where their families come from when asked about their *Heimat* in Germany but refer to their German adopted home town when asked about their home while on holiday in Turkey.

14 For a discussion of the intertextuality of *Short Sharp Shock* and Italian-American gangster and kung-fu films see Mennel (2002) and Gemünden (2004).

the fragility of the moral code of friendship does he respond positively to his father's suggestion. Having avenged the murder of Costa and Bobbi, Gabriel goes to his parents' home and hides the lethal weapon in the kitchen cupboard. His father, kneeling on the floor and facing Mecca, asks his son for the third time to pray with him. This time Gabriel does.

Despite the fact that the father's words, spoken in Turkish, are somewhat ironic and contain a meta-textual reference ('Will you pray with me, my son? Like a film, life too will come to an end.')., the film's final scene suggests that Gabriel's return to his Turkish *Heimat* is going to be a return to a more traditional Muslim culture, in particular, since he is seeking a way out of the moral corruption of the criminalized urban ghetto.

In their thought-provoking article 'No place like *Heimat*. Images of home(land)' David Morely and Kevin Roberts argue that the attempt to regain *Heimat* in the sense of a 'mythical bond rooted in a lost past, a past that has already disintegrated' (Morely and Roberts 1996: 89) is potentially a highly questionable endeavour. 'It is about conserving the "fundamentals" of culture and identity. And, as such, it is about sustaining cultural boundaries and boundedness. To belong in this way is to protect exclusive, and therefore excluding, identities against those who are seen as aliens and foreigners'. (Morely and Roberts 1996: 89). Thus,

xenophobia and fundamentalism are opposite sides of the same coin. For, indeed *Heimat*-seeking is a form of fundamentalism. The 'apostles of purity' are always moved by the fear 'that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own' . . . In contemporary European culture, the longing for home is not an innocent utopia.

(Morely and Roberts 1996: 89, 90)

What Morely and Roberts describe here is, of course, not just religious fundamentalism – which has recently been regarded with increasing suspicion – but any type of fundamentalism or obsession with protecting the fundamentals of one's culture and identity. One need only think of the abuse of the concept of *Heimat* during the Third Reich, when *Heimat* was closely linked to the blood and soil ideology of the Nazis.

Whether *Short Sharp Shock* actually conjures up the spectre of what Roberts and Morely call *Heimat* as 'an ominous utopia' (1996: 89) is open to debate. It is hard to imagine that the westernized Gabriel will turn into an Islamic fundamentalist when seeking refuge and atonement for his sins in Turkey. In fact, the film remains open as to whether Gabriel's home-seeking journey will bring him salvation, whether he is at all capable of adjusting to a cultural framework from which he has become estranged during his time in Germany.

### ***Head-On* – Homecoming as purgatory and redemption**

The opening sequence of *Head-On* shows Cahit, the male protagonist, driving at high speed head-on against a wall in an attempt to commit suicide. In the film's final sequence this spatial dead end is replaced by an open-ended journey. The final sequence shows the very same Cahit who has made his way 'back home' from Germany to Istanbul embarking on

the last leg of his home-coming journey: he gets on a coach to Mersin, the place where he was born. Yet this film, like *Short Sharp Shock*, remains ambiguous about the redemptive promise of Cahit's return to his cultural roots.

*Head-On* tells the story of Cahit, a self-destructive, alcoholic, cocaine-sniffing, 44-year-old Turk living in Hamburg and the 20-year-old, beautiful Turkish girl Sibel. When they meet in a clinic, Sibel is recovering from a suicide attempt, undertaken to escape her oppression by her traditional Muslim Turkish family. She is hedonistic and highly promiscuous. Since her family would not tolerate her behaviour she needs to get married to someone from a Turkish background in order to be free. Cahit, who is anything but a traditional Turkish man, is the ideal husband for the kind of marriage of convenience Sibel has in mind. But what begins as an alibi marriage gradually turns into an *amour fatal*, a dark passion that creates a strong and destructive bond between Cahit and Sibel. Sibel's promiscuity sparks Cahit's jealousy and he unintentionally kills one of his wife's lovers. Cahit is sentenced to prison. Sibel seeks refuge from her brother, who tries to avenge the shame she has brought upon the family, by fleeing to Istanbul. The monotonous life and hard work her cousin Selma imposes upon Sibel feels like a prison to her. Sibel leaves Selma and gradually descends into a kind of dark underworld or purgatory. It is her turn now to fall into the self-destructive pattern that Cahit followed at the beginning of the film. She takes drugs, gets raped and even provokes a group of thugs to beat her up and almost kill her. Miraculously she is rescued and survives. Years elapse. After his release from prison, Cahit travels to Istanbul hoping to be reunited with Sibel. But the Sibel he tracks down is a reformed woman. She has traded her seductive allure and her pursuit of sexual



Figure 3: *Gegen die Wand/Head-On*: Sibel (Sibel Kekilli) and Cahit (Biroł Ünel) (photo courtesy of Wüste Filmproduktion).

15 I thank Deniz Göktürk for drawing my attention to the intertextual links between *Head-On* and the arabesk tradition and for directing me towards Martin Stokes' inspiring study, *The Arabesk Debate* (1992).

adventures for an androgynous, less appealing appearance and safe domesticity. She lives with her young daughter and her boyfriend, presumably the father of her child. Even though she spends a few nights of passion with Cahit, she ultimately decides against abandoning her new domestic life, leaving Cahit to embark on his journey to Mersin alone.

So what do we make of Sibel's and Cahit's return to their cultural roots, roots from which they have been cut off? Sibel's initial experience of life in Istanbul shows that she is as estranged from contemporary Turkish culture as she was from the traditional Turkish family life back in Hamburg. She rejects the self-reliant, career-orientated life of her cousin Selma, describing the merciless routine of work and sleep as a form of imprisonment and death.

It is, perhaps, significant that Sibel's perception of her Turkish *Heimat* seems to invert the chronotopes Hamid Naficy identified as symptomatic of the exilic or diasporic experience. According to Naficy (2001: 152–221), the host country is typically presented as a dark, claustrophobic prison-like environment that sharply contrasts with memories of happier places back home. Yet this paradigm seems to have lost its validity for a diasporic filmmaker like Akin for whom the concept of an idealized Turkish *Heimat* is simply inappropriate. As Akin explained in an interview, his characters do not travel to the country of their origin but to a country that is fundamentally alien to them (Akin 2004a).

In contrast to Ferzan Özpetek's film *Hamam Turkish Bath*, which also depicts the return of a diasporic protagonist to Istanbul – a place where he has never been and the language of which he does not speak – the depiction of Istanbul in *Head-On* eschews the cliché of a romanticized Orient that we find in *Hamam*. In Özpetek's film, the Italian-Turkish protagonist's return to his cultural roots goes hand in hand with a liberating self-discovery and the attainment of a more authentic and fulfilled life (although he is killed at the end). The Turkish tradition of the hamam is equated with an exotic sensuousness as well as a tacit acceptance in traditional Turkish culture of male homo-eroticism and bi-sexuality. Such is the allure of the sensuous Orient that any Westerner who succumbs to it (the protagonist's deceased aunt, as well as his estranged wife) cannot but recognize its superiority over the fast-paced, career-obsessed, materialistic and sterile culture of the West.

Yet *Head-On* paints a rather different picture of the Oriental encounter. Akin's film borrows from the Turkish arabesk tradition, first and foremost a musical tradition which 'portrays a world of complex and turbulent emotions peopled by lovers doomed to solitude and a violent end' (Stokes 1992: 1).<sup>15</sup> While arabesk was originally the music of labour migrants who moved from the south-east of Turkey to the big cities, it soon developed into a more encompassing social and cultural phenomenon and manifested itself in other forms of cultural production, notably cinema. According to Martin Stokes, arabesk film narratives of the 1970s and 1980s are typically concerned with disrupted family life, migrant labour, alienation in the city, a state of solitude and conflicts of Turkish honour and modern morality which result in moral dilemmas and often self-destruction (Stokes 1992: 144, 145).

As Feridun Zaimoğlu, the best-selling writer and *enfant terrible* of Turkish-German literature, persuasively and provocatively argues, *Head-On* portrays the psyche of two typical young Orientals living in a diaspora. They are both suffering from a form of narcissistic lack of self-esteem, using auto-aggression as a last resort to escape from mediocrity. That is why Cahit drives head-on against a wall, why his confession that he is in love coincides with an act of self-mutilation and why Sibel slits her wrists several times in the course of the film. A lot of blood flows. Feridun Zaimoğlu notes:

In particular in the Orient, those in ecstasy and those in agony can build on a long tradition of self-mutilation. In public processions of penitence self-flagellators castigate themselves, following the rhythm of their wailing litanies until their backs are bleeding. Ecstatic fans of a pop star, predominantly angry young men from the poor districts, rip open their skin with razor blades, when they set eyes on their idol. All Orientals of this world know this addiction to catastrophe (in Turkish *kara sevda*). It is more than just melancholy and mourning about a missed opportunity or the loss of a lover, of innocence or of a beautiful moment. Anyone who experiences this paradox of ecstatic suffering can only do one thing: to bleed the bad blood.

(Zaimoğlu 2004, translated from German by the author)

Cahit and Sibel do precisely this, over and over again. Slit their wrists or hands, walk about or even dance and rejoice covered in blood – as long as they live in Germany. But when they are reunited at last in Istanbul they exorcise and finally overcome their *kara sevda*, their dark passion.<sup>16</sup> As Zaimoğlu (2004) puts it: ‘their *amour fatal* is spent . . . now they are really free from sin and free from each other’, thus implying that their final reunion is a moment of redemption.

The freedom Cahit and Sibel have gained at the end comes at a price. 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. And in this sense her homecoming, too, brings about her redemption.

## Conclusion

The eclectic mix of stylistic inspirations to which Fatih Akin’s films pay homage and the central significance of chronotopes of homeland in *Solino*, *Short Sharp Shock* and *Head-On* underscore Akin’s status as a diasporic filmmaker who spent his formative years in Germany. The preoccupation with *Heimat* points to a uniquely German cultural and cinematic tradition. Yet, whereas the chronotope of homeland in the *Heimatfilm* is that of the static rural idyll in which the protagonists are rooted or can find new roots and in which the cyclical rhythm of the seasons and of everyday life creates a comforting sense of stability, the chronotope of homeland in the accented cinema of Fatih Akin is that of the homecoming journey. The narratives of all three films are driven by the dialectic of displacement and home, whereby home is a mythic place of desire or redemption and, as

16 As Martin Stokes has kindly explained to me, *kara* means ‘black’ and *sevda* is the Turkish version of the Arabic *suwayyda*, which means ‘black bile, melancholy’ and ‘sadness’. *Kara sevda* is an important theme of arabesk film narratives. cf. Stokes 1992: 145–149. In her discussion of *Head-On* Suner (2005: 20, 21) also highlights the importance of *kara sevda* as the driving force behind Sibel and Cahit’s actions and as a central theme of the lyrics of the musical interludes that comment on the film’s narrative like a Greek chorus.

such, a constitutive aspect of the diasporic imagination. Even though the promise of redemption is inscribed in all three films, ultimately, only Gigi in *Solino* can reconnect with his cultural roots and find salvation in his *Heimat*, whereas Gabriel, Cahit and Sibel are deracinated, forever in some form of transit between two cultures, unable ever to arrive in the static idyll as we know it from the *Heimatfilm*.

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