Locating Heaven: Fatih Akin’s Meditation on the Outcome of Tolerance and Hospitality

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Abstract
Akin’s *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) lends itself to a narrative structure that differs from the three-part chapter organization the film explicitly dramatizes. Recognition of this alternative narrative transforms the subject and genre of the film significantly. Heaven becomes less concerned with the coincidences on the film’s surface that link one story line to the next, and more curious about the commonalities that connect human beings on a more conceptual level. It becomes less entangled in the tragedies of the first two chapters and more emancipated by the acts of genuine reception grounded in generous hospitality in the last half. This paper identifies the trigger for the conceptual reorganization herein proposed, the distinct characterization of each narrative half when thusly arranged, and the religious function the film assumes as a result.
When reviewers in the States describe Fatih Akin’s *The Edge of Heaven* (2007), they do so with glowing, albeit incomplete or somewhat inaccurate categorizations of the film. Steven Rea calls *Heaven* “near-perfect” and “profound...”\(^1\) Ann Hornaday concurs adding that the film is everything Alejandro González Iñárritu’s highly acclaimed *Babel* (2006) wanted to be, but failed to accomplish.\(^2\) A.O. Scott simply calls the film a “revelation.”\(^3\) Impressive as these accolades are they do little to name the subject of *Heaven’s* profundity or purpose of its revelation. When they attempt to tease out the inspiration for Akin’s accomplishments, they do so trusting the explicit elements of the film too much, and end up producing insights that are as restrictive as they are discerning. Mark Olsen, for instance, notes the ways in which the “back-and forth interconnectedness slowly strips away the characters’ obvious differences, leaving only their common humanity,” but he fails to name that which makes them common.\(^4\) Roger Ebert acknowledges the goodness and perseverance of Akin’s characters, but he neglects to identify what it is that gives these characters their decency or resolve.\(^5\) While such shortcomings do not mollify fervor for the film, they do divert audience attention from the narrative and stylistic devices Akin uses to specify these attitudes and actions, which consequently minimizes the effect of *Heaven’s* denouement.

The corrective for the restrictive analysis above mentioned is simple: use the twice-told travel sequence that initially stands outside the chapters as the trigger
for the conceptual mapping of two thematic halves. The first half would consist of chapters one and two and would explore the natural consequences of tolerance, which is revealed to always already be intolerance—and thereby the guarantee of a relationship ended. The second thematic half would begin with the journeys the film’s most central characters—Susanne and Nejat—make in the third chapter, which allow relationships to be restored when the sort of hospitality demonstrated by Abraham in Genesis replaces mere tolerance. While not the most obvious narrative pattern, the two-part conceptual structure proposed does allow one to more faithfully characterize the motivation for the dramatic shifts in the last half of the film and the way in which Akin involves the spectator in his film’s final image. Taken together, this remapping further permits one to more aptly name not only the most essential commonalities between Heaven’s characters, but what it is that makes them good and persevere, namely, a willingness to engage the other on narrative rather than ideological levels. Before describing this vital commonality, an examination of the distinct characteristics of each of the two thematic halves is in order.

When the film opens and the aforementioned travel sequence is first introduced, it does so with a great deal of ambiguity. The camera frames an ordinary building set along an unnamed dirt road before beginning a slow, right pan that final settles on a plain gas station and an equally plain car. The traveler enters
the station. The customary sorts of events take place and the trekker resumes his travels. After a few seconds, Nejat, the traveler, enters a tunnel, the screen goes black, and Akin cuts to an intertitle announcing the first chapter. The opening sequence reveals very little beyond the fact that Nejat is on a journey. The destination and purpose of his journey will not be understood until later in the film, and even then, if the argument of this paper holds, the newfound clarity will push viewers to consider even this opening event as an announcement of Heaven’s first investigation rather than some literal progression. This opening announces the beginning of Heaven’s initial thematic investigation into the natural outcome of tolerance, which, in a word, is death, a point underscored by the inclusion of “death” in the titles for both chapters this sequence frames.6

This investigation into the expected outcomes of tolerance begins with a look at the strained relationship between Nejat and his elderly father, Ali. Akin uses virtually every aspect of the first chapter to establish 1) the differences between Ali and Nejat, 2) the extent to which tolerance mediates their relationships, and 3) the way in which relationships so arbitrated exist one act away from termination. Akin establishes from the beginning the sorts of surface level reasons for such relationships. The films two male leads occupy very different worlds. Ali visits brothels. Nejat gives lectures to college classes. When together, the son brings books for his father to read; the father asks who his son is “screwing at the
moment.” More subtle differences exist as well, differences revealed most clearly in the ways the two treat Yeter, the prostitute Ali hires to live with him. Ali says very little to her and when he does, he almost always issues some command. Nejat, on the other hand, treats her more humanely. He asks about her life, whether she has children, what it is her daughter does, and whether her daughter knows how her mother makes a living. On the surface, such discussions provide information that will justify subsequent turns in the plot; but, when understood in the thematic context of the first chapter, they tempt the viewer to justify the distance Nejat keeps from his father. The disapproving son tolerates his father as long as he can, that is, until his father commits an act so intolerable he can no longer stand him. This eventual moment occurs when Ali strikes Yeter in a drunken outburst and she dies from the fall. Ali’s crime exposes the limits of his son’s tolerance and leads Nejat to end relations with his father. Akin’s script brings the full extent of this separation to the surface in the final lines of the first chapter when a cousin asks Nejat about Ali. Nejat responds flatly, “a murderer is not my father.” So goes tolerance.

Having registered Nejat’s response to his father’s actions, the first chapter closes, but not the first thematic half of the film. For Heaven to expose the limits of tolerance as this paper claims it does, it must implicate a cultural attitude and not the idiosyncrasies of one relationship. Akin encourages his viewers to connect what has been and what will follow by returning to the original travel sequence now
further down the road before announcing the second chapter. The image suggests that the film remains along its initial trajectory. The characters in the second chapter, different as they are from those in the first, will equally allow tolerance to mediate their relationship and in so doing will face the same tragic outcomes. The relationship in the second chapter may be German rather than Turkish and female rather than male, but that does not mean that they are any different on the conceptual level on which they are construed. The relationship between mother and daughter lingers just as perilously over the hazardous edge of tolerance as between father and son in the first chapter. The former depends in equal parts on the whim of tolerance. This relationship ends when Susanne’s tolerance is exasperated by her daughter’s decision to remain in Turkey longer than first expected. Exasperated by the news, Susanne tells her daughter that she has “had enough,” that if Lotte is going to “keep wasting her life,” then she will “finally be on her own.” The limits of Susanne’s tolerance have been exposed and she severs her relationship with her daughter. Tragically, Lotte is shot in the streets of Istanbul before the relationship is restored, and the first thematic half of the film concludes with this death.

With the tragic ends of tolerance twice examined and stretched beyond the quarks of anyone one situation, Akin’s script begins to search out a more stable basis for human relations. Akin alerts audiences to the film’s new direction by having Susanne and Nejat alternatively embark on new travels. Susanne travels to
Istanbul to collect Lotte’s things after her tragic murder. Before reaching Lotte’s room, Susanne endures a sleepless night in her Istanbul hotel during which she beats her fists against the walls, thrashes on the floor, and eventually collapses in a chair. The camera retreats to one corner of the room throughout the entire ordeal drawing attention to itself only through subtle fades that mark the passing of time and the contours of her experience. The segment captures an important shift in Susanne’s character. The instantly recognizable restraint that guarded her interactions earlier gives way to an equally identifiable vulnerability. The implications of this shift appear in definite form a few scenes later when Susanne enters Lotte’s room and begins looking through her things. She finds the jacket Lotte was wearing the last time she saw her and breathes it in. Her desire to inhale her daughter’s smell goes beyond establishing her sense of loss; having no control over what scent the jacket will emit, yet willing to breathe it in anyway, it marks a newfound willingness to receive her daughter without qualification. In so doing, Akin begins to reveal the character of the attitude that will distinguish this thematic chapter from the first, namely, the sort of hospitality reflected by Abraham in Genesis 18, which is to say unconditional acceptance.

Akin dramatizes the result of Susanne’s newfound willingness to receive her daughter in one of the most impressive sequences of the Heaven. Susanne reclines on Lotte’s bed and reads her daughter’s diary. Akin verbalizes the words
Susanne reads using a voice-over in Lotte’s voice, which is significant because it signals that Susanne hears these words as though Lotte were speaking them. The grieving mother no longer cares to filter her daughter’s voice through her own. The final words uttered by Lotte redraw the sharp contrast between the two Susanne’s in the film. Lotte claims that her mother does not understand her because she can only see herself in her daughter. Such is the limitation of tolerance: it must always begin with the self rather than the other. The Susanne in this segment is not the mother guided by such tolerance. This Susanne breathes in her daughter and hears Lotte in her own voice. This new attitude results in a visually dramatic moment. Susanne falls to sleep with Lotte’s diary across her chest. The cut from Susanne’s darkened face places an overly lit, slightly open window before the viewer. The camera pans from this shot until it settles on a medium close-up of Lotte’s face, which glows with the same light that encircled the window. A second sharp cut captures Susanne’s face, which is now enveloped by the same light that surrounds Lotte’s. An unfamiliar smile breaks across Susanne’s face, which is matched seconds later when a third cut returns to Lotte’s equally exuberant expression. Willing to see and be seen by the other, the self is made new and brought into intimate relationship with another. Only an honest act of hospitality characterized by unconditional acceptance permits such transformation and it is this attitude alone that most marks the second thematic half of the film.
Having overcome the limits of tolerance in one story line, Akin returns to Ali and Nejat. Akin’s chooses to reintroduce these characters one at a time, which underscores the divide that exists between them when their story resumes. A series of shots find Ali alone on a park bench. The camera ultimately ends with an extreme close-up of Ali’s face stylistically similar to the shots used during the exchange between Susanne and Lotte. The difference between the faces in Lotte’s room and in the park is gut-wrenching. As the camera lingers, Ali’s eyes reden and fill with tears. His face grimaces with an unmistakable sadness. Contrary to Nejat’s pronunciation at the end of the first chapter that his father is dead, the shot conveys a man very much alive. The evident grief on Ali’s face could be attributed to any number of things initially, but Akin ensures audiences do not mistake its source by moving from this shot to an exchange between Nejat and a cousin. The cousin admits to having seen Ali and having heard the grieving father’s belief that his son would not want to see him. The juxtaposition of the dramatic embrace of Susanne and Lotte and the ongoing estrangement between Nejat and Ali serve two vital purposes. On the one hand, they establish in one concise sweep a sharp visual contrast between the effects of tolerance and hospitality. On the other, and just as importantly, they reorient the viewer to the chasm Nejat must cross if ever he is to meet his father again. The obvious question is, “What will it take to push Nejat toward the same hospitality that reconciled Susanne and Lotte.”
Somewhat surprisingly, a religious discussion triggers Nejat’s transformation. Religion has played a very small role in Heaven. Religious men appear in the first chapter to intimidate Yeter to “repent” from her “false path.” Their efforts, ironically, are responsible for Yeter’s acceptance of Ali’s ridiculous offer to buy her, which results in her untimely death. Afraid for her life if she remains in the brothel, she has nowhere else to go. Religious influence of this sort fits the thematic purposes of the first half of the film as construed in this paper. Religious tolerance occasions the same tragic results relational tolerance does. The question is whether religion has any part in a world where tolerant attitudes must be rejected. Akin responds to this possibility during a discussion between Susanne and Nejat over Bayram—the three-day “Feast of Sacrifice”—to show that it can, so long as it functions on the level of narrative and not ideology.7 Prompted by Susanne’s desire to know what it is that is sacrificed on Bayram, Nejat relates the Muslim version of Abraham’s sacrifice:

God wanted to put Abraham’s faith to the test, so he ordered him to sacrifice his son. Abraham took his son, Ishmael, to the sacrificial mount. But just as he was about to kill him, his knife went blunt. God was satisfied and sent Abraham a sheep to sacrifice in place of his son.

Susanne response is simple: “We have the same story.” Susanne could have reacted differently and were she still in Germany she most certainly would have been. She might have noted the differences between Nejat’s story and her own (Ishmael is being sacrificed in this story rather than Isaac). Or she might have taken offense at
a God that would require such sacrifices. Such responses would have insisted on ideological understandings of the story and would refuse any and all narrative value. Grounded as she is in hospitality at this point in the story, Susanne ignores the ideology of what she hears and simply accepts and responds to what she hears. In so doing, she allows Nejat’s telling to create points of contact rather than sites of contest.

The mutual benefit of Susanne’s response is realized immediately. Free to hear the story and respond to it as narrative rather than ideology, Nejat admits to being afraid of this tale as a child and having asked his father if he would sacrifice him should God order it. When Susanne asks his father’s response, Nejat confesses, “He said he would even make God his enemy in order to protect me.” Ali’s answer is nearly identical to the one the film’s grieving mother comes to articulate in the second half of the film. Both responses understand the story as a narrative and respond to the people that story touches rather than the ideological trappings it entertains. Ali might have explained why such a sacrifice would be necessary, but he rejects ideological responses of this sort to speak to the fears the story raised in his young son. Nejat’s remembrance of his father’s words brings Ali back to life so to speak, which Akin’s script expressly reveals when Susanne asks “Is your father still alive”? Nejat responds that he is and in so doing begins a new journey to go and find his father. Akin cuts to the initial travel sequence as it was in the beginning.
only this time audiences realize the true significance of the trip: having replaced mere tolerance with genuine acceptance, Nejat is pursuing his father.

Audiences do not get to see Ali and Nejat’s reunion, but Akin does give audiences a chance to imagine what that reunion will look like. He does this by adopting many of the same stylistic devices he used to convey the reunion between Susanne and Lotte. The antepenultimate shot is an extreme close-up that frames Nejat’s face as he removes his sunglasses and stares into the empty sea that lies in front of him. The camera cuts behind Nejat to create a shot that at once accentuates the eventual return of the father and aligns Nejat with another story of Abraham, the one related in Genesis 18 and on which an understanding of hospitality begins. Nejat stands for several seconds without any movement before finally taking a seat in the sand. The transition leaves Nejat in the very position of Abraham at his tent in Mamre. By sequencing the two references to Abraham in the way he has—that is, more or less out of linear sequence—Akin creates an ending that works in reverse of the stories, but very much in the order of the two thematic halves of his film. Hospitality as personified by Nejat’s waiting for his father refuses the sacrifices required by tolerance. Such an ending offers something more profound than a story about “paths that almost cross but don’t, and the tragedy of the near miss...”8 The film captures the way to avoid avert the tragedy of these “near
misses” by forging a space for reception based in hospitality that refuses sacrifice, and, in so doing, position oneself and the other at “the edge of heaven.”

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6. Chapter One is entitled “Yeter’s Death,” and Chapter Two is entitled, “Lotte’s Death.” The misdirection so to speak of the first chapter is significance. Chapter One is as much about the death of Ali as it is about Yeter’s death, which becomes clear by the end of the first chapter as will soon be discussed.

7. The holiday itself is significant as Thomas Elsaesser reminds us: Bayram is the “Turkish national holiday that unites secular and religious groups, regardless of their differences.” Elsaesser, Thomas, “Ethical Calculas,” posted on the Film Society of Lincoln Center webpage, accessed Jan. 10, 2009.