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Fatih Akin's Cinema and the New Sound of Europe

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Abstract

This is a book review of Berna Gueneli's *Fatih Akin's Cinema and the New Sound of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

Keywords

Islam, Turkey, Germany, Transnationalism

Author Notes

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Thomas Elsaesser claims that "any book about European cinema should start with a statement that there is no such a thing as European cinema."[1] In the heyday of globalization, cross-cultural communication, multiculturalism, immigration, a refugee crisis stemming from the latest wars in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the crisis within European Union politics, and the changing borders of the Schengen zone, concepts like Europe and Europeanness refer at once to nothing and many things and become an area of constant struggle among different groups. In her book Berna Gueneli claims that German cinema's long history, from Weimar cinema to Nazi cinema and New German cinema, has now entered a new phase marked by the heavy presence of transnational auteurs.

In an era when the very concept of *border* is under question and continuously crossed by identities, religions, productions, individuals and groups, Gueneli dives deep into the question of how we should understand European cinema by highlighting the fact that the term "national" is too limited to understand and explain today's cinema industry, and takes a step further to claim that even the ways in which we use the term "transnational" are limited, since it is mostly used to define non-Western filmmakers working in the West. Hence, she offers new entry points to the discussion. Returning to the mythological origins of Europe's name, Gueneli refers to the story of Europa, who was kidnapped by Zeus from the

Middle East. By recalling the forgotten connections in history and cross-cultural interaction, she discusses the ways in which European cinema developed itself by disregarding its transnational nature and situates Fatih Akın as a director who is making interventions to the European cinema by revitalizing its heterogeneity through his choices in sound, mise-en-scene, and casting, as well as plot and narrative. *Fatih Akın's Cinema and The New Sound of Europe,* the first book-length monograph on Akın, not only covers a missing part in the scholarship but also opens up new chapters in our understanding of Turkish German Cinema.

The birth of the Turkish German cinema is a result of the changes experienced in the society after the immigration of Turkish workers to Germany after 1961 with the "Turkish Work Power Agreement" signed by both countries to fulfill the Federal Republic's shortage in manpower. Announced as the "Die Türken Kommen" (The Turks are Coming) in newspapers, the Federal Employment Agency announced the coming of Turkish workers to West Germany. Since the initial agreement was only to hire the workers for a short period of time, the cultural integration programs of the immigrants were not fulfilled properly. However, when these immigrants decided to stay and brought their families to Germany, a cultural clash between Turks and Germans started to reveal itself in many parts of the sociocultural life, mostly visible in their religious differences. Accordingly, earlier examples of Turkish German cinema were mainly interested in the journey of Turkish immigrants to the West and the struggles they faced due to their

Muslim/Turkish identity. However, as the years passed and the second and third generation immigrants started to be a part of the social life in Germany, earlier struggles and identities started to change in a way to bend the understanding of "Turkishness" and showed itself in the representation of different media as well. Gueneli's book makes an intervention to the scholarship exactly at this point. Even though her initial concern is with the creation of polyphonic soundscapes in Akın's films that bridge different nations, religions, geographies and create a shared space that invites her readers to reevaluate their understanding of Turkish German cinema and the representation of readily accepted stereotypes (mostly the Turkish/Islamic identity), Gueneli does even more than she claims. She offers various entry points to the concept of "transnational" and touches upon issues like genre, auteur, star personas, production companies, film festivals, and their impact on the creation and development of transnational European cinema.

In her first chapter, "Mapping Europe: The Road Movie Genre and Transnational European Space in Film," Gueneli focuses on the concept of traveler and the ways in which the traveler's mobility can contribute to the extension and the realization of polyphonic soundscapes in Akın's film *In July* (2000), creating a new understanding of Europeanness. She centers on the question, "Who and what defines Europe?" (44). Recalling the seismic shifts in European politics after 2000—shifts that tremendously changed the demographics and the sociopolitical identity of the continent—Gueneli emphasizes the multicultural and transnational

nature of the European countries that have been either under- or mis-represented in film. Considering *In July* as a precursor to Akın's Turkish German entanglement period, Gueneli claims that with this film the director already maps a Europe beyond EU borders and highlights the arbitrariness of borders with the help of the road movie genre by imagining and screening a Europe, or the vision of it, with the interaction and existence of various languages, dialects, and the coexistence of urban/rural landscapes. Gueneli claims that the act of travelling in Akın's film, the journey from Hamburg to Budapest and then to Istanbul, creates a "spatial continuity" (46) beyond the Schengen zone and portrays the commonalities of these geographies in terms of their shared differences. In addition to the heterogeneity in languages (German, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, and English) and dialects (Hamburgisch, Bavarian, and Black Sea), Gueneli also considers Akın's musical choices as an additional value to his portrayal of polyphonic Europe. Quoting Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Gueneli claims that "there is no auditory container for sound" (47) compared to image. She highlights the simultaneous existence of the remix and mash-up of electronic music and black sea folk music in the film, and the performance of Brazilian-German reggae band accompanied by the sounds of Islamic prayers. She claims that *In July*'s sound becomes the entity that connects Europe, turns it into a fluid spatial and aural zone for various identities and voices, and undermines and challenges the borders. In addition to discussing the sonic qualities of the film, Gueneli also successfully

brings the road movie genre into the conversation, connects sonic travel with spatial travel, and shows how they complement one another. Moreover, she contends Akın's multidirectional journey and his presentation of characters who are oscillating in between borders offers a new insight to the formation of Turkish German cinema in which cultural stereotypes are challenged, the concept of "exotic other" is diminished, and "a mobile and decentralized Europe" emerges. Besides the analysis of filmic universe of *In July*, Gueneli puts a great emphasis on auteurs and star personas and their transnational character as well. In addition to the obvious transnational identity of Fatih Akın, the son of first-generation Turkish immigrants in Germany, Gueneli reminds her reader of the impact of the casting choices, such as the presence of Turkish German, Serbian, and Hungarian star personas and their effect in making the film transnational. In the process, her argument becomes something bigger than she suggests and moves beyond the scholarship of sound studies.

In her second chapter, "The Sound of Polyphony: Multilingualism, Multiethnicity, and Linguistic Empowerment in *Head On*," Gueneli changes her perspective and focuses on the use of language and dialects, rather than prioritizing musical choices, even though the film offers more than enough material for such a discussion. Talking about characters' language skills and their effect on identity and belonging, Gueneli claims that in Akın's film, especially female characters' mastery of various languages and their code-switching skills mark their

empowerment, which, she claims, is a new move in Turkish German cinema that used to have a tendency to portray female characters as mute. In discussing *Head On* (2004), Gueneli focuses on the decentralized identities asserted by polyglot characters living "where multiple linguistic and geographical affiliations become possible" (82). Referring to earlier examples of Turkish German cinema, such as Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Shirin's Wedding* and Tevfik Başer's *40 Square Meters of Germany*, in which "eternal [female] others" are portrayed with the oppressions they are facing due to living in a Western country as Turkish women who are expected to follow the cultural and religious doctrines, Gueneli positions Akın's cinema in a new era, an era of change in representation.

Even though Gueneli's arguments about the change brought by Akın to Turkish German cinema are thought-provoking, her chapter begs for more explanation of the ways these female characters are empowered through their mastery over various languages. For example, when Gueneli is talking about Sibel's uses of a variety of dialects, languages, and styles, she gives examples from the scenes in which Sibel is talking with a soft tone to her father, or using her proper German in a communal environment. These moments, while they can be considered as showing her empowerment, can equally be considered as moments of "passing" from one identity to the other without voicing her unique self. Gueneli says that "Sibel's language use helps to give insight into, but also complicates, the representation of various Turkish German characters in films, freeing them from

earlier one-dimensional cinematic depictions" (86). In other words, while Akın's cinema empowers Turkish German cinema by freeing it from binaries and one-sided representations, it raises questions whether female characters in *Head On* are empowered in the filmic universe, considering the fact that they are still victims of society's repressive social and moral codes; such as the expectation of Sibel's family for her to marry a Turkish/Muslim man, which is a reflection of social practices by some Turkish Muslims, including those living in the diaspora. Similarly, claiming that Sibel's cousin Selma is another empowered character because of her use of fluent English in the workspace and her career may be true of the representation of female characters in Turkish German cinema. However, the fact that Selma is rooting for Sibel to settle down with a Turkish man, having children, and confining her cousin to a lifestyle she tried to escape for so long, and the fact that Selma sacrificed her femininity for her success in a patriarchal capitalist world, are worth discussing when talking about the level and limits of their empowerment. Gueneli also refers to the location of Selma's workplace, Taksim, as the representative of secular Turkey. While Taksim is the meeting point for almost all political protests and rallies in Istanbul, whether for the celebration of bigger events such as May 1 International Worker's Day, March 8 International Women's Day, the first Pride Day ever held in Istanbul in 2003, or more small scale protests, such as the weekly meeting of "Saturday Mothers" in Taksim square since 1995, Gueneli chooses to refer to the Gezi Park protests (2013) to indicate Taksim

and the connotation it carries about secularism when talking about Selma's empowerment in her workspace—an anachronism in her discussion, since the film was released a decade before this event.

Chapter Three, "The Sound of Music: Transnational Soundscapes," uses *The Edge of Heaven* as its case study to understand the ways in which "Akın's musical soundtrack invites the film's audience to aesthetically experience heterogenous European polyphony" (101). In addition to Akın's transnational identity, Gueneli also refers to Romanian German DJ Shantel and Rona Harther and their impact on changing the sonic quality of the film through their remixes and mash-ups of music from various parts of Europe to reinforce the normalization of the polyphonic environment that Akın tries to create. In addition to noting the "accented speech" of the characters, Gueneli again highlights the multi-directional journey of the characters, who are first-generation Turkish immigrants in Germany and German expats in Turkey. As in her first chapter, the writer again successfully merges the concept of travel and border crossing with the emergence of various sounds, arguing for a sense of continuity achieved through these two entities that are complementing one another. Moreover, Gueneli emphasizes the importance of two songs in the film, Kazım Koyuncu's "Ben Seni Sevdiğimi" (That I Love You) and Sezen Aksu's "Ölürsem Yazıktır" (If I die it would be in vain). Kazım Koyuncu was an artist from Black Sea region whose fame rested not only on his songs but also on his activism regarding leftist politics and the environment, and who died of

cancer when he was 33 years old. His death sparked many discussions about the effects of Chernobyl in the Black Sea region and his songs gained further meanings during and after his lifetime. According to Gueneli, using his song four times in the film in different geographies brings together similar feelings under the same aural expression and represents a different yet connected construction of Europe. Similarly, during the scene when Susanne (a German woman) and Nejat (a German Turkish man) are in a *meyhane* (a Turkish restaurant where *meze* -appetizers- and *rakı* -traditional Turkish alcoholic drink- are served) sharing their grief over Lotte's death, Aksu's song creates a unified aural space among different identities and geographies. Moreover, since the *meze* scene is famous for its use in Yeşilçam (Turkish popular cinema from the 1950s to the 1980s), Gueneli observes that Akın not only connects spaces but also different national cinemas. Similarly, the sound of German songs in Istanbul again refers to the oscillation of different cultures in between spaces, just like the characters' multidirectional journeys. Gueneli says: "The juxtoposition of Koyuncu, Aksu, Bach, and so forth suggests that these sounds and sights are not isolated, but rather exist simultaneously and in exchange with each other. Arabic prayers and Bach on a banjo do not have to be mutually exclusive but can be part of the same, overlapping geographic space" (111-2). Moreover, the writer, as she does consistently throughout her monograph, also refers to the transnational identities of the actors and actresses in the film, famous because of their appearances in international cinema, whose presence hints at various

intertextual links beyond Turkish-German entanglement and expands our understanding of transnational European cinema.

After her close analysis of Akın's films, Gueneli sketches a bigger picture within which her reader can trace the diffusion of transnational practices and auteurs. By contextualizing Akın's cinema within a broader map of other "global auteurs . . . who contribute to the creation of a new transnational cosmopolitan Europe on the screen" (130), Gueneli solidifies her argument with examples of similar attempts and impacts made by such others as Philippe Lioret, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Emir Kusturica, Michael Haneke, and Mathieu Kassovitz. By choosing her examples from different national cinemas, she expands the borders of her discussion beyond Turkish, German, Turkish German, and Turkish-German cinema. Since the main argument of Gueneli's monograph concerns the polyphonic soundscape of Europe and transnational actants in it, one expects to find a similar focus in her last chapter. However, Gueneli, approaching the topic from a broader perspective, creates bridges between films whose thematic and stylistic concerns are about multiculturalism and diversity in general. She starts her discussion with Emir Kusturica, a transnational director who has included multiple sounds and voices in his films. Documenting Kusturica's multiethnic cast, various languages and music, and internationally funded films, especially *Black Cat*, Gueneli emphasizes their parallels with *In July* and proposes Kusturica as a precursor to Akın and to the formation of New European cinema. However, her strong first step

to this chapter falls outside the leading argument of the monograph. In the course of her discussion of Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005), and Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011) and *Winter Sleep* (2014), Gueneli loses sight of her own complex understanding of "transnational." Throughout her earlier discussion, she claimed and consistently emphasized the importance of the transnational identities of auteur director, multiethnic cast with transnational roots, and the use of different languages, dialects, and music. Even though Frears indulges in discussions on diversity in his film, he fails to check other boxes raised by Gueneli's former discussions of transnationalism. *Caché* finds no room for any polyphonic European soundscape. Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* and *Winter Sleep* are Turkish films which are deeply interested in local and regional problems in Eastern Turkey with stock characters. Claiming that these films are a part of transnational European cinema because they have appeared in international film festivals and been produced by different countries is much less compelling than Gueneli's earlier discussions of heterogenous audio-visual environments, directors, and actors. Toward the end of her discussion, Gueneli mentions "the ongoing expansion of European Cinema," and reminds her readers of directors like Deniz Gamze Ergüven (French Turkish), and Andrea Štaka (Croatian Swiss), and invites scholars to do further research about the works of these people who represent polyphonic European soundscape. Instead of earlier examples from Haneke, Ceylan, or Frears,

these works seem in closer alignment with her core argument, even though they occupy a smaller space in her book.

Although Gueneli's book does not depend exclusively on the methodology of sound studies, it masterfully uses the concepts of the field to merge it with the corpus of transnational cinema. By doing so, Gueneli opens the possibility of future discussions with multiple entry points, making her book important and worth reading for anyone who wishes to explore new venues in the scholarship of European cinema, as well as those who wish to understand new modes of religious and cultural representation of Turkishness and Islam. While she claims that Akın "can include 'Turkishness'—without celebrating, normalizing, lamenting, or fearing it" (164) in his films, Gueneli does the same for transnational cinema, recasting European cinema by discussing directors and films whose place in Europe is debated, accepting the fact that European cinema has always been transnational.

[1] Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*. (Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 13.