

Esra Mirze Santesso:

**Problematizing the Hyphen:
Disorientation and Doubled Otherness
in Fatih Akin's *Head-On***

For some time, postcolonial and diaspora studies have expressed a deep and occasionally uncritical enthusiasm for “hybridity”, first as a form of existence that undermined imperial power and authority, and later as a new form of subjectivity—a form that can upset the various binaries surrounding “otherness.”¹ The idea of hybridity as a challenge to essentialist understandings of identity has become a trope in numerous films about globalization, migration, and transnationalism, though other authors and filmmakers have been more skeptical about hyphenated and hybrid identities as a way forward, particularly when the subjects in question are “doubly othered” (i.e. by race and religion, or by religion and gender).² Drawing on critical notions including diaspoetics and disorientation, this essay looks at Fatih Akin’s 2004 film, *Head-On*, as a challenge to the notion that hybridity solves the problem of otherness, and indeed to the notion that hybridity is even possible. The film, lauded upon its release, has, I argue, gained additional significance because of the accuracy of its more pessimistic predictions about the future of pluralism and hybrid Turkish identities.

Guest Workers and the Politics of Inclusion

Gastarbeiter, the guest-worker program established by a number of European states (Germany, Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands, as well as the Scandinavian nations) to boost national economies and rebuild depleted infrastructures after World War II, has an ambivalent place in the Western imagination. Even though it is broadly understood that this arrangement provided a much-needed stimulus, some view it as the beginning of Europe’s “invasion” by foreigners. As it became apparent that the “guests” (consisting mostly of a young labor force arriving from poorer nations) would be a permanent addition to the population, the question of inclusion generated profound political rifts, reinforcing binary oppositions between “native” and “alien”, “self” and “other”, “East” and “West”, “Islam” and “Christianity”. A particularly vexed relationship existed between German nationals and Turkish immigrants, who started settling in ethnic ghettos in metropolitan centers. In no time, the Turkish laborer came to personify Europe’s larger apprehensions about foreign infiltration; in Levent Soysal’s words, “[a]s guest workers are progressively rendered into symbolic foreigners, in an inverse movement to the

normalization of their status, the foreigner has assumed the guise of the Turk” (Soysal 500). The Turk, taking on the position of the abject, symptomized an identity crisis prompted by the shifting significations of “home”: as the “host land” transformed into the “homeland”, anxieties stirred among Turkish immigrants, who feared being stuck in an interminable state of *gurbet* (exile) while some German nationals began to complain of *Überfremdung* (over-foreignization) — best exemplified in Max Frisch’s words: “We called for labor, but people came instead” (Mandel 51).

Gastarbeiter ended in 1973; today there are approximately 2.7 million residents of Turkish origin in Germany (King and Kilinc 126). It took another decade or two for the “Turk” to be transformed from a commoditized migrant worker to a legitimate member of society; this shift not only required re-imagining German identity (during the 1980s and 90s) in a multicultural context, but also adopting a new level of religious tolerance towards a faith group thought to be antithetical to the values of modern, progressive European society. Integration debates became even more contentious in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 as Islam came to be seen as a direct threat to national security. Soysal makes the following observations:

In public, popular, and scholarly discourses, Turkish migrants appear, at best, as relentless advocates of revitalized Turkishness or Islam, or, at worst, as essentially unassimilable agents of foreignness. Furthermore, this attribution of radical otherness, in cultural or ethnic variety, sets the migrants apart from public spaces in their country of residence, renders their participation invisible, and presents their situation as anomie. (493)

Many reporting agencies throughout Europe (OSCE, Runnymede Trust) spotted a rise in Islamophobia after the terrorist attacks.³ This marked another shift in the symbolic reception of the Turk; no longer the emblem of the abject, the Turk was now stigmatized as the active, radical Islamist, posing a real and imminent security threat. Tahir Abbas observes that in the West,

Muslim cultures are seen as monolithic; Islamic cultures are substantially different from other cultures; Islam is perceived as implacably threatening; Islam's adherents use their faith to political or military advantage; Muslim criticism of Western cultures and societies is rejected out of hand; the fear of Islam is mixed with racist hostility to immigration; and Islamophobia is assumed to be natural and unproblematic. (12)

As Ayhan Kaya observes, German media has fueled these views: the 1997 issue of *Der Spiegel* characterized young Turks as “criminals” and “fundamentalists” (Kaya 230). Perhaps in an ironic way, the failure to view the Turk as a “normal” German and instead as the irreducible racial/religious other exposed the limits of liberal democracies in the West.

For the Turkish immigrant, the triangulation of Turkish, German, and Muslim identities—no matter how unstable these categories might be—necessitated a rethinking of national belonging, racial heritage, and religious membership. Some critics have pointed out that the first wave of migrants understood their position as outcasts, and were satisfied with the prospect of achieving “a degree of economic integration and becom[ing] upwardly mobile, without homogenizing culturally” (Benmayor and Skotnes 2-3). In this regard, they identified for themselves a two-fold mission: to participate in the German economy while preserving their cultural roots, and prepare for a return home by educating their (German-born) children about their heritage. By contrast, second-generation immigrants grew up to be relatively receptive to cultural exchange but they also understood that their interaction with the host nation would be regarded as a betrayal of their origins by the older generation. The role of Islam in this balancing act became increasingly important. Moving from a Muslim homeland in the 1970s and 80s (one where public expressions of religion were prohibited: the Turkish constitution guaranteed a secular public sphere) to a more lenient Western state (which legally guarantees freedom of religious expression even when remaining socially suspicious of Islamic practices) opened up fresh prospects in the process of self-fashioning.

According to Mandel (2008), the comparatively moderate implementation of secularism in Germany engendered a more stringent observation of Islam within the Turkish migrant community. In a way, Islam provided a sense of belonging to immigrants occupying a minority position within a Christian-oriented national space. Mandel furthermore states that for many Turks, reconfiguration of identity in a non-secular diasporic context “may have been partly a reaction to the fear of an unfamiliar Christian culture that might threaten their own and their children’s attachments to their homeland, culture, and religion, but also a reaction to a newly discovered freedom of religious expression offered by liberal German society.” (7). An abiding sense of nostalgia, coupled with a desire for counter-identification with the host culture, led the members of the diasporic community to perform their foreignness in an exaggerated way, and indeed to become not just Turkish nationalists but proud Islamists. For many immigrants, Turkishness and Islam became synonymous as they publicly re-affirmed their roots.

During this tumultuous process, the cultural production of the Turkish migrant community became increasingly visible, and eventually created an important niche market in the literary and cinematic fields. We can understand German-Turkish cultural work as experiencing three basic phases: the initial phase consisted of the labor story of first generation immigrants, which shed light on their severe alienation from German culture. A new type of writing emerged in the mid-1980s that advocated acceptance by focusing on “culture and identity stories,” paving the path towards a “normalization of [foreigner] status” (Soysal 497, 500). From the late 1990s, there occurred a transnational turn in immigrant writing and film, which “disrupt[ed] the hegemony of prosaic labor-culture stories” (Soysal 504). These s new productions moved beyond the victimization narrative of the Turk, and looked for new forms of expression to examine the legacy as well as the challenges of what I will shortly argue is a “doubly othered” Turkish-German identity.

Fatih Akin’s *Head-On*

It is within this historical context that I would like to pursue a critical reading of *Head-On* (*Gegen die Wand*, 2004), directed by the Turkish-German filmmaker, Fatih Akin. The film participates in diaspora poetics by using specific tropes of displacement. In doing so, it presents a highly complex critique of a hyphenated subjectivity based on dual allegiance. Furthermore, the film uses the Turkish-Germany community to illustrate Turkey's liminal position within Europe and reflect on the political resistance against Turkey's membership in the European Union. (At the time, Turkey was preparing to make a bid for membership in the European Union). Born in Hamburg to Turkish immigrant parents, Akin routinely explores Turkish-German identity and addresses the quandaries of hyphenated subjectivity, as evident in films including *Short Sharp Shock* (*Kurz und Schmerzlos*, 1998), *Kebab Connection* (2004), and *Edge of Heaven* (*Auf der anderen Seite*, 2007). Nezi̇h Erdođan attributes Akin's success to his "double consciousness as a diasporic Turk living and working in Germany, his transnational existence as a filmmaker and his contested national and cultural belonging" (27). In an interview, Akin acknowledges his liminality, stating "[w]e are brought up in two cultures, we are the new Germans" (qtd. in Fachinger 244). In this regard, Akin transcends his artistic purpose, and takes on the role of a "political ambassador" whose cinematic vision seeks to transform the monolithic representation of Turkish culture—both at home and abroad (Erdođan 35).

It is no surprise, therefore, that both countries were quick to cast him as a national prodigy, whose dual vision enriched and supplanted both cinematic traditions: he was credited with the revitalization of German cinema in a transnational context: "the new German film is 'Turkish' and that 'Turkish' cultural film production has the potential of salvaging 'German' culture" (Fachinger 245). Likewise, he was recognized as an innovator in Turkey for re-inventing the "melodramatic modalities" of Yeřilçam (the metonym for the Turkish film industry). Many applauded him for moving away from the commercially-driven cinematic productions aimed at Turkish audiences to more sophisticated transnational trends, oriented towards global spectators. As Savas Arslan contends, "Unlike Yeřilçam, the new cinema of Turkey is no longer limited by a narrowly defined notion of 'Turkishness.' Instead [Akin's films] are representative

examples of the many different strands and facets of Turkey's new, globalized and diversified film culture" (95). It is precisely the "globalized and diversified" aspect of Akin's films that makes them relevant to discussions of Turkey's EU membership, thus promoting as well as critiquing the idea of a Eurasian identity as a possible amalgamation of East and West.

Head-On, the recipient of the Golden Bear at Berlinale (2004), brilliantly captures the "the changing dynamics of German-Turkish identity" (Suner 16). Indeed, the complex depiction of the immigrant experience acts as a counter-narrative to the traditional flattened experiences of the abject Turk. The film focuses on the unconventional love story between Cahit Tomruk (Biol Ünel), a middle-aged punk-rocker who makes a living by collecting empty bottles at bars, and Sibel Güner (Sibel Kekilli), the daughter of a conservative Turkish family living in Hamburg. The two protagonists exemplify the emergence of a new consciousness among young Turks in Germany, more sympathetic to the host culture, and disgruntled with the policing efforts of the minority community that impedes their desire for cultural exchange. The lovers meet at a rehabilitation center after their attempts at suicide: Cahit is admitted for driving into a wall, head on, and Sibel cuts her wrists habitually. Upon meeting Cahit, Sibel boldly proposes marriage after enquiring if she is Turkish. Although Sibel's pushiness seems comical at first, her increasing irritation—which escalates to another episode of slashing herself after Cahit's numerous refusals—reveals the level of her desperation. Sibel's insistence on marrying Cahit is a symptom of her inability to remain within the patriarchal structure of her family, and more importantly, to be reduced to an emblem of the family's good standing and reputation within the community. Cahit eventually gives in and to control his rebellious daughter, Sibel's religious father consents to the unusual marriage; even though Cahit is not a particularly desirable bachelor (older, barely-employed, no strong family connections), the fact that he is a Turk makes him an acceptable groom.

Of course, Sibel's subversion hides an elusive paradox, in that she is only freeing herself from the constraints of her family by giving in to their impositions. In "Putting

Obstructions in Young Turks' Way," the German-born Turkish essayist, Ayse makes the following point:

[These young Turkish girls] have no qualifications and no profession. Even though they don't want to spend the rest of their lives in chastity and in prison, moving out of their parents' home to live on their own is out of the question, even if it were financially possible. (244)

At first, Cahit and Sibel imagine their marriage as a sham, a way to escape community pressure; gradually, however, they realize that their solution holds its own complications. By entering, however superficially, into a marriage, both Cahit and Sibel symbolically conform to the rules of the community. To their own surprise, they find themselves performing the stereotypical roles prescribed by the husband-wife relationship: Sibel assumes the role of a care-taker while Cahit becomes an exasperated husband who acts as a bodyguard, rescuing her from awkward situations when she picks up strangers at bars. In time, the independence they hope to gain through their mock marriage is overshadowed by an actual intimacy that develops between the two. Yet as Cahit's indifference turns into affection, Sibel fears that the possibility of falling in love with her legal husband will undermine her struggle to break free from her community. However, just as Sibel begins to warm up to Cahit, Cahit gets into a fight with a young German man who accuses him of being Sibel's pimp. The provocation resonates with Cahit and in a moment of rage, he attacks and kills the man with a broken bottle, and faces twenty years in prison for manslaughter. Visiting him in his cell, Sibel vows that she will wait for his release. However, because the incident carries the stigma of a jealousy killing, she is immediately ostracized by her family and community. Her father burns all her pictures while her brother attacks her in the street for shaming their family name. Sibel's only option is to flee her family by heading to Istanbul, to take refuge with her cousin.

I argue that this film is relevant to larger analyses of the phenomenon of what I have elsewhere called "disorientation", a temporary disruption of identity that is caused by the confusion, alienation, and instability felt by the Muslim immigrant in the West—

regardless of one's level of religiosity. It is much to Akin's credit that in his dealings with diasporic identity he moves away from the familiar narrative, based on a simple binary of assimilation and rejection. Rather than presenting the clash of Turkish and German cultures as the sole genesis of an identity crisis, he focuses on the pressures within the minority community itself to represent the nuances in attitudes towards integration. In this way, he presents a dialogic exploration of the predicaments faced by second-generation German-born Turks who experience a marked psycho-social disorientation because of their inability to balance the public sphere of their experience (national life), and the private sphere (diasporic life): they are neither German enough due to their racial difference, nor Turkish enough due to their cultural assimilation; hence they remain outside both these seemingly irreconcilable ways of life.

Diaspoetics, Disorientation, and the Challenges of the Hyphen

Postcolonial studies has provided a critical forum to explore the upshot of crossing borders—especially as it relates to the cosmopolitanization of the post-imperial space as a result of mass migrations. For Sudesh Mishra, movement across borders has given rise to a new type of study that he calls “diaspoetics”:

The genre of diaspora criticism [...] sustains itself by recognising and repeating certain methodological manoeuvres derived from contemporary theory [...] by recruiting and transforming a quasi-biblical description—diaspora—into a modern critical practice; and by staging a series of statements about traveling communities that, in a sly combinatory manner, surpass all the previous orders of bearing witness to migratory events and mobile subjects. (13-4)

Mishra describes three significant “scenes of exemplification” that defines diaspoetics: “scene of dual territoriality” (separate terrains that produces a split subject), “scene of situational laterality” (“a double movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization” (17), and “scene of archival specificity” (individualized histories that replace idealized scenarios). Drawing on Mishra's formulation of diaspoetics, I contend that these three stages articulate a general sense of “disorientation”, a confused apathy caused by the

inability to navigate skilfully between different—often contradictory—value systems. In *Head-On*, German-born Turkish immigrants exemplify the way disorientation works as form of psychic paralysis caused by doubled otherness: second-generation immigrants, in other words, are doubly othered – by the majority culture as well as the diasporic community. Disorientation exposes a type of abeyance, a raw reaction to the double liminality experienced by the other, which induces a disruption of identity. This disruption gives way to a weakened sense of self, and an inability to act rationally or to act at all.

Both Sibel and Cahit are disoriented characters because of their inability to wrestle with the “negotiation of ethnicity and gender within the Turkish-German context” (Fachinger 254). Cahit willingly distances himself from the diasporic community as a way to cast off his Turkishness, which he finds inhibiting. His inarticulate Turkish raises concerns during his visit to Sibel’s family to ask her hand in marriage; when Sibel’s brother asks him why his Turkish is weak, Cahit simply remarks that he threw it away. Although Cahit has no specific obstacle to reconciling German values with his Turkish background, the death of his first wife haunts him in a way that destroys his *raison d'être*. His day-to-day living reflects a complete state of apathy.

By contrast, Sibel aspires to live life to the fullest even if that means going against the wishes of her parents. However, her gendered otherness creates further complications for her quest for independence; she understands that severing her ties with her father will automatically lead to her being ostracized by the Turkish community. As Nawal El Saadawi (1977) reminds us, in conservative Muslim societies, young women represent their families through their modest conduct; women’s bodies, in that sense, becomes a mechanism through which the families are surveilled and tested, and controlling their de-sexualized daughters ironically allows the family to find a marriage match. Saadawi further explains that “Ignorance about the body and its functions in girls and women is considered a sign of purity, honor and good morals and if, in contrast, a girl does know anything about sex and about her body, it is considered something undesirable and even shameful” (67). As a disoriented member of a minority group whose actions are closely

scrutinized, Sibel is unable to reconcile her cultural obligations and personal aspirations. Her efforts to gain autonomy and to escape from the confines of her secluded life are constantly sabotaged. Ayse's insights are once again helpful here: "Everything that wasn't Turkish was rejected as outright bad. To live like Germans was out of the question, because the German girls, in their opinion, were whores who would give themselves to anyone" ("Women are Property" 242). In this highly patriarchal, repressive community (her brother breaks her nose after she talks to a German boy), Sibel knows that her survival depends upon safeguarding her public image as an obedient, submissive woman—and that is precisely why she sees a way out with Cahit. Only when the father transfers his authority to the husband can the daughter leave the house with her honor intact; in this way, the family structure—the only defense against the corruption of the outside world—ostensibly continues to protect the traditionally-accepted gender roles and integrity of the Muslim family. Sibel is content to create the illusion of her "purity" and chastity by participating in a fake marriage.

However, in their disoriented state, both Cahit and Sibel have trouble navigating the effects of their newly-combined hyphenated identities. "A hyphen," writes Azade Seyhan, "simultaneously separates and connects, contests and agrees" (15). As a subject position, hyphen both opens up possibilities but also limits options—since each adjustment is defined against a set of cultural positions designated by the hyphen. Therefore, the hyphen can "divide[...] and weaken [...] the logic of adaptability and resourcefulness" (76). The antagonistic alignment of the sides suggests a constant competition that enhances otherness rather than eradicating it. As Akin's characters illustrate, it becomes difficult to pursue a fully-reconciled doubleness under community pressure. This point is illustrated vividly in the film: while having an argument on a bus, Cahit and Sibel are thrown out of the vehicle by a much older bus driver (who happens to be Turkish, and who overhears their private conversation); he declares that he cannot tolerate "bastards like [them] who have no respect for their God and religion." This public humiliation and rejection by other Turks illustrates the actual heterogeneity of a seemingly monolithic diasporic identity. Here, Cahit and Sibel appear as a minority group within a minority community. By highlighting the differences and tensions within the

diasporic community, Akin shows how failure to balance these value-systems can generate a level of paranoia, leading to self-abuse and destruction—as we see with the suicide attempts of the two protagonists. Cahit and Sibel are ultimately unrepresentable within their own communities. As a consequence, they move into a new form of disaffected subjectivity, one which is based on subversion (of race and gender) and counter-identification (with diasporic and national cultures).

Normally, the process of self-fashioning inspired by the scene of situational laterality is imagined to fuel hybridity as a form of cultural amalgamation. Defined as “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations,” hybridity embraces in-betweenness as a positive influence in the reconstruction of the diasporic self (Bhabha 9). Homi Bhabha has been instrumental in advocating hybridity as a discursive practice that helps construct a renewed sense of self. Describing hybridity as a creative interchange between two modes of existence, Bhabha envisions it as “the sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” invested in “the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (112). Similarly, Stuart Hall elaborates on “in-betweenness” as a site of empowerment:

The diaspora experience [...] is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, though transformation and difference. (qtd. in Nyman 24)

For these critics, hybridity’s challenge to purity, authenticity, and homogenisation is invaluable. Indeed, this “grafting” of identities has become a measuring tool to assess the success or failure of a postcolonial text, with its facility in promoting in-betweenness becoming the most important paradigm for self-awareness.

However, this default position has been challenged by many “insider” authors and filmmakers, who clearly view the immigrant experience in “less teleological ways”

(Santesso 17). To put it differently, to argue that hybridity and hybrid consciousness are the natural end-points of the immigrant experience, and the innate subject of immigrant narratives, is to depend upon an understanding of identity as something that can easily be blurred. In *Head-On*, Akin recognizes hyphenation as complex and potentially rewarding; however, he is not naïve about its instantaneous promise for attaining hybridity. As he demonstrates via Cahit and Sibel, the subject's need to be appropriated "into a multidimensional set of radical discontinuous realities" creates a "fragmented and schizophrenic decentering [of the self]" that eventually results in disengagement (Jameson 413). In the film, both protagonists reveal the difficulties, and perhaps the impossibility, of maintaining a balance between—or blurring of—the two sides of the hyphen that can lead towards hybridity. The reason for this is precisely what Hall had previously discussed in terms of the sense of "a primary origin" that causes the subject to lose the flexibility of moving in between positions and he identifies the loss of that original influence as essential for the emergence of a flexible identity (Chen 394). This is the heart of the problem for the second-generation immigrant: to put an end to their marginalization, the young immigrants have to engage in a bicultural dialogue, yet the equilibrium between those two cultures is difficult to maintain when one is constantly haunted by "a primary origin"—as we see in the case of Cahit and Sibel. For them, it is impossible to think and act since their hyphenated identity rests predominantly on a mediated, rather than an experienced, sense of Turkishness that privileges the values of the diasporic community. Unable to discard this primary origin, the two of them fall victim to an ontological paradox: they need the presence of the older generation to understand their inescapable Turkishness, but they also have to break free from the constraints of their diasporic community to gain the autonomy needed for a true understanding of the self. This conceptualization of identity dramatically deviates from the hybridity model, often presented as a beneficial consequence of postcolonial border-crossing.

We see a brief sliver of hope when the sham marriage between Cahit and Sibel unexpectedly regenerates their faith in camaraderie, ultimately becoming an antidote for the depression and self-destructive tendencies that emerge out of a doubly-othered,

disoriented life. Neither of them is interested in changing the world, or even in satisfying the basic demands of their two societies. All they really want is to forget the meaninglessness of their lives, put some distance between themselves and their restricting communities, and end their disorientation by embracing their individual desires. Their fake marriage, ironically, becomes the only real thing in their artificial and closely controlled lives. However, their miscalculations about autonomy eventually cause their relationship to become more of a curse than a salvation. Their self-destructive tendencies shatter their faith in the possibility of venturing beyond the hyphen and achieving re-orientation.

The Return Narrative

The question of disorientation takes a new turn when it is discussed in the context of going back to the Turkish homeland: by exploring this option, Akin simultaneously calls attention to the differences between Turkish-Germans (referred to by Turkish nationals as “Alaman” or “Almanci”) and Turks living “back home.” In the vast, vibrant city of Istanbul, Sibel hopes to find salvation, yet the city’s potential for healing is called into question. It must be noted that in Akin’s films, Istanbul usually assumes a special role as a space of redemption and temptation; as he stated in an interview, “[m]y home is Hamburg but I am also the spicy voice of Istanbul. And I love spicy food. I need spice to feel I am alive” (Erdoğan 34). But there is a different logic at work in this film: Sibel’s return to Turkey is not motivated by a desire to reconnect with her roots; it is rather an “escape” from her disoriented self in Germany. Istanbul, in this case, is understood as “an escape route” for the female immigrant “reacting against patriarchy and against the traditional social mores” that are ironically more oppressive in diasporic communities than in the Turkish motherland (King & Kilinc 130). Sibel’s “home-seeking journey” masks a larger desire to shed her hyphenation by fitting in with the “normal” Turks (Erdoğan 30). Yet, as Fachinger rightly points out, the return “to the ‘homeland’ is highly ambiguous in [Akin’s] films”: while Turkey offers “a radical new beginning,” it does not come across as a “liberating space” (257). Indeed, it soon becomes apparent that German-born Turks will fail to shed their otherness in Turkey, just as in Germany, and continue to feel marginalized. Estranged from their roots, and linguistically foreign (Turkish-German

accents and slang are widely derided in Turkey), they cannot pass as Turks and continue to occupy the position of an outsider, doomed to remain as “Almanci.”

Şenocak and Tulay reflect on the consequences of a return which furthers the immigrant’s displacement rather than removing it:

A change of place without a simultaneous change of perspective, leads to emptiness. The break with the original *Heimat* took place long ago. But this break and all its consequences must be understood so that the resultant emptiness can be filled. [...] The Turkish youth cannot cling to phantasmagoria of the lost *Heimat*. (259)

Just because Sibel is able to cross borders does not mean that she is mentally prepared for the challenges of re-integrating. Frustrated with her inability to adapt, she becomes increasingly self-abusive and puts herself in extremely dangerous situations. Sibel’s estrangement from what is supposed to be her “native” culture illustrates the way in which her disorientation is sustained: her initial experiences of separation, uncertainty, and confusion in Germany continue as she tries to re-assert herself in a nation that also treats her as an alien.

Cahit goes through something similar, as he makes the same journey years later. He realizes that it is not just him who has thrown away his Turkish identity years ago; Turkey, in a sense, has thrown him away as well. The couple eventually reunite, and spend two days in a hotel room; Sibel, who now lives with another man and has a daughter, knows that she is in love with Cahit but is unable to accompany him to his birthplace, Mersin, as she fears that doing so would risk bringing her own daughter into the cycle of othering in which she and Cahit have spent their lives. So the initial predicament continues to haunt them: neither Sibel nor Cahit can shed their hyphenations even when they go back to Turkey; perhaps they are no longer Turkish-Germans but now they have become German-Turks, doomed to remain at the margins of the society. Therefore, *Head-On* problematizes the hyphenation of identity as a standard, or even viable, solution to the marginalization of the immigrant, and rather presents it as a sort of

captivity. When Cahit, at the end of the film, boards a bus alone to head back to Mersin, it is with the knowledge that both Germanness and Turkishness now exist beyond his reach. The concluding position of the film is not an optimistic one.

Turkey and the European Union

Head-On of course, was never just a character study, or even simply a film about hybrid identity; on a deeper level the film was meant to be seen as a reflection on the nature of Turkey's complex relationship to Europe. The Turkish migrant's liminal position in the West, for example, intentionally echoes Turkey's vexed association with the EU. Starting in 1987, Turkey made a series of bids to join the EU in 1987; by 1997, its membership application was officially initiated at the Helsinki Summit, which started a series of reforms and improvements to make the legal and financial systems compatible with European rules and regulations (also known as *acquis communautaire*). From a political perspective, *Head-On* expresses the various tensions long felt by Turks at home and abroad in their efforts to construct a Eurasian identity bridging the East and West. Pushing this logic further, it is possible to think about *Head-On* as a film that is not only about the hyphenated identity of two Turkish characters but that of Turkey itself. In another interview, Akin explains that "[i]n making the film, I was also interested in exploring the question of whether Turkey is really European enough for the European Union" (Dúrr and Wellershoff). Turkey's membership, of course, raises questions about European geography and identity:

Where does Europe end? Where is there a sense of 'we Europeans' as a meaningful expression of a larger sovereign people? Would Russia ever qualify extending as it does as far as Vladivostok? Does Turkey really qualify, or is it the true test of a submerged sense of Europe as a Christian world, defining itself against the otherness of the world of Islam? (Kroes 10-1)

Akin was aware of these debates, and he did not shy away from vocally supporting Turkey's accession—at least until 2005 (he later expressed concerns about the unchecked capitalism as a result of its membership) (Erdoğan 35-6).

The entire situation, of course, has changed today, which lends *Head-On*—and in particular its pessimistic conclusion—a new and different significance. For decades, Turkey’s secular democracy has been presented as an emulative model for other Middle-Eastern states. Only a few years ago, Turkey’s prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was touring the Arab world, praising Turkey’s stable government, its economic growth, and its commitment to Western-oriented modernization, suggesting that EU membership was imminent. Today, the political reality is radically different, as Erdoğan’s Turkey has re-aligned its cultural and political axis away from Europe and towards the Islamic world. And the feeling is mutual; there is now a measure within the EU to suspend Turkey’s candidacy because of the “repressive measures” introduced after the attempted coup in July 2016, which violated the basic constitutional rights of its citizens (BBC, 24 Nov. 2016).

For many Turks, especially those who support Erdoğan, this reversal was long seen as inevitable, a result of unrealistic attempts to transform Turkish identity into something more Europe-friendly. In its initial efforts to join the EU, Turkey traditionally presented itself as a unique blending of two civilizations; the articulation of a Eurasian identity was, in a way, a serious attempt at negating the East/West binary and overturning Orientalist discourse. In doing so, however, Turkey found itself doubly othered—alienated from the East for its secular principles, and insulated from the West by its Muslim heritage. This situation created a crisis of representation, and an unavoidable fragmentation. For some, particularly in the artistic community, the synthesizing of these two irreconcilable identities can only be accomplished through narrative exercises, a unifying articulation of collective values that can provide stable ground for national unity. However, Turkey’s liminal position complicates the creation of such a reconciliatory narrative; the Turkish nation has experienced a disorienting rupture between its optimistic projection of a Eurasian identity and the rejection of this possible identity by other nation-states. Perhaps more importantly, by privileging the hyphen, Turkey’s desire for duality eliminates the possibility of a more plural identity (one built around a series of “ands”). Questions about ethnic background are no longer included in the Turkish Census, part of a strategy to present unified “Turkishness”; the more than 60

ethnic groups and minorities living in Turkey are now forced to fit into a more narrowly-defined Eurasian identity.

Today, Turkey faces a more specific threat under the current regime: the policies and the “new constitution” introduced by Erdoğan aim to reverse longstanding Kemalist principles of modernization, and foster instead a nostalgic longing for the Ottoman past and its autocratic combination of political power and religious authority. In that regard, the Turkish state is prepared to “throw away” its Europeanness altogether and embrace instead a categorically Turkish and Muslim identity. In the end, *Head-On* is indeed a tragic vision, not only of the doubly othered Cahit and Sibel but also, in Akin’s view, of the future of a doubly othered Turkey as well.

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¹ Homi Bhabha theorizes hybridity as a collapsing of borders:

Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social, develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an 'in-between' temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history. This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double-edge, which [...] represents a hybridity; a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality.' (13)

² Hybridity is generally viewed as the single most creative act for constructing a viable, "modern" diasporic identity. However, it is misleading to think that hybridity can be a clear and attainable goal for every immigrant, in all circumstances. As research shows, the diasporic subject does not become automatically hybridized due to geographical dislocation; there are instances in which radicalization, not hybridity, occurs as a response to displacement. Furthermore, those who consider hybridity as a critique of binary oppositions often "ignore the fact that hybridity itself rests on the a priori existence of an opposition; this manner of representation, in other words, ends up participating in the validation of binaries rather than circumventing the essentialist rhetoric associated with it" (Santesso 18).

³ The European Monitoring Centre on Racism concluded that "across the entire spectrum of the EU member states incidents were identified where a negative or a discriminatory act was perpetrated against Muslims or an entity that was associated with Islam" (Allen & Nielsen 34).