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Turkish German Cinema in the New Millennium: Sites, Sounds, and Screens

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***Turkish German Cinema in the New Millennium: Sites, Sounds, and Screens.* Edited by Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel.** New York: Berghahn Books, 2012. 260 pp. \$90 Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-85745-768-4.

Amidst increasing interest in Germany's transnational cultural scene, the past few years have been marked by a proliferation of scholarly interest in Turkish German cinema. Among these studies are sections within notable publications: Stephen Brockmann's 2010 *A Critical History of German Film* and Jennifer M. Kapczynski and Michael D. Richardson's 2012 edited volume *A New History of German Cinema* both include chapters on prominent Turkish German director Fatih Akin's film *Gegen die Wand* (Head-On, 2004), and the latter also contains a chapter on the 1999 Berlinale, which featured short films made by four Turkish German filmmakers, Akin among them. Paul Cooke's 2012 book *Contemporary German Cinema* features Akin's work in a section on transnational cinema. Ali Nihat Eken's 2009 *Representations of Turkish Immigrants in Turkish-German Cinema: Tevfik Ba er's "40 Square Meters of Germany" and Fatih Akin's "Head-On"* was, to my knowledge, the first monograph on the topic in English. Also noteworthy is Maria Stehle's 2012 book *Ghetto Voices in Contemporary German Culture*, a third of which she dedicates to discussing what she calls "ghetto filmscapes," situating cinema among its sister arts, literature and music.

The aforementioned book chapters appearing within larger cinematic histories of Germany serve as welcome invitations for students and general readers and allow Turkish German filmic production to be seen, for better or for worse, as belonging to the same cultural tradition as unaccented German film. Eken's and Stehle's work as well as countless journal articles by scholars from around the globe have created a significant body of criticism for specialists within these and closely related disciplines. But Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel's *Turkish German Cinema in the New Millennium: Sites, Sounds, and Screens*, centered on Turkish German cinema while simultaneously embedded within the context of other transnational cultural phenomena, fills a void in scholarship on both Turkish German studies and German cinema studies. This book is important, not only because it is the first full-length edited volume on Turkish German cinema, but also because of its robust theoretical foundation, its seamless interdisciplinarity, and its strong focus on aesthetics.

The book features fifteen chapters divided into four sections. The arguments presented in each chapter offer compelling new methodologies which strive to bring aesthetics into a conversation that has often focused narrowly on issues which Marco Abel describes in his chapter as belonging within an "identitarian, or representational, framework" (44). For the purposes of this review I will first consider the introduction that outlines the book's theoretical concerns and then direct my attention to a few of the chapters, noting that the other scholars whose work I cannot address here make equally valuable contributions to the discipline.

Hake and Mennel's intervention into the field-specific discourse is apparent in the book's very title; though this area of study is generally labeled "Turkish-German Studies," here, the hyphen is missing. The editors explain that their aim is "not to gloss over the contradictions" within the field; the decision to omit the hyphen thus communicates an "unwillingness to reduce the remarkable productivity of Turkish German filmmakers to the easy logics and compatibility and commensurability implied by it" (2). It may seem like a simple issue of semantics, but, for the editors, the hyphen symbolizes a reductive tendency within the scholarship and reception of cultural media. Only time will tell if other scholars will follow in the editors' lead in omitting the

hyphen, and what effect this new convention would have on explorations of topics such as migration studies, hybridity and the third space, and identity and identification.¹

The book's introduction functions as a primer to the key questions of interpreting both filmic representations of Turkish German experience and the scholarly discourses surrounding these films. Hake and Mennel deftly summarize debates of more than 40 years of cultural production. They break down the films into three main phases which correspond to historical moments and political and policy developments, including changes to citizenship status, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and 9/11. The editors claim that these societal factors match up with aesthetic and rhetorical qualities of the films made in a given phase. The first of these phases occurred in the 1970s and 80s, in which a social realist lens was employed to bring attention to the problems of Turkish guest workers, often resulting in a "paternalistic structure and exoticizing aesthetic" (5). Many of these films depict the victimization of women of Turkish heritage within diasporic communities, like Hark Bohm's 1988 *Yasemin*. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* (Ali: Fear Eats the Soul, 1974) also belonging to this phase, instead portrays the ongoing racism of the German host culture in the post-WWII era. Phase two is characterized by "the self-reflexive appropriation of generic conventions by a new generation of younger German, Turkish, and second-generation Turkish German filmmakers," such as Seyhan Derin, Thomas Arslan, and Kutluğ Ataman. As the title would suggest, films belonging to the third phase, which starts in the year 2000, are the book's main focus. This phase is described as employing "critical engagement with questions of migration and immigration beyond Germany" and is marked by ventures into genre cinema, a willingness to experiment with form, and the utilization of diverse media platforms (5).

Though helpful as a heuristic, categorizations that rely on chronology falter when certain directors may belong to more than one phase according to the editors' classifications. Consider, for example, Akin, whose first feature film *Kurz und Schmerzlos* (Short Sharp Shock, 1998) appeared in 1998. Does this mean that this film and Akin's earlier short films belong to the second phase, whereas the rest of his films belong in the third phase because they were released a few years later? Similarly, Akin's *Gegen die Wand* also includes some of the characteristics of phase two, which is described as embracing a "playfulness and performativity" whose "affective habitus is one of empowerment and self-assertion" (5). Should we thus somewhat arbitrarily cut Akin's work in two due to a slight anachronistic hitch when laid atop the editors' proposed timeline, or should we instead judge aesthetic and thematic developments within his oeuvre in the sense of auteurial continuity? In light of these uncertainties, it is not eminently clear to me where the precise distinctions are to be made between phases two and three. I believe, however, that this ambiguity does not detract from Hake and Mennel's impetus behind the volume; on the contrary, it is consistent with their goal of not resolving tensions within the field's aesthetic and theoretical practices.

Thus, the timeline offered and the questions it raises serve as a useful guideline to the student of Turkish German cinema. Even more helpful is how the editors situate their discussion on film within larger academic, theoretical, and aesthetic trends within Turkish German cultural production, within the wider contexts of European, North American and other transnational, diasporic, exilic, and accented cinemas, as well as within broader innovations in postcolonial theory and literary, media, cultural, and gender studies. Throughout the book, readers unfamiliar

¹For the sake of consistency, I will employ the spelling "Turkish German" throughout the review.

with discourses surrounding these issues are exposed to the ideas of ‘must-read’ theorists within the field, like Leslie Adelson, Tom Cheesman, B. Venkat Mani, and Azade Seyhan. Contributions by Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling, and Berna Gueneli, each of whom has gained prominence over the past several years for her or his innovative scholarship, showcase the exciting new directions in which the field is expanding. The successful interweaving of these various narratives is a credit to the editors’ vision for the future of Turkish German film studies, and speaks to the vast disciplinary strengths of the contributors.

Genre is an important aesthetic consideration approached by several of the authors. Daniela Berghahn’s chapter “My Big Fat Turkish Wedding: From Culture Clash to Romcom,” for example, looks at ways in which the generic conventions of romantic comedy allow for the staging of harmony and playful disharmony between Turkish and German cultures, as represented by the love between, and eventual marriage of, the protagonists. Using the 2009 film *Evet, I Do!* as its primary case study, Berghahn argues that, while earlier filmic representations of marriage and weddings often melodramatically underscored the incompatibility of the alien Turkish population within Germany, the romcoms of the second generation subvert this expectation through the employment of humor, which plays an important role in the “containment and domestication of ethnic and religious difference” (26). Likewise, Angelica Fenner’s chapter “Roots and Routes of the Diasporic Documentarian: A Psychogeography of Fatih Akin’s *We Forgot to Go Back*” uses documentary film to reimagine spatial practices that allow the filmmakers’ lens to “enact an itinerary that variously redraws boundaries, charts new vectors between people and places, and expands frontiers” (61). Berghahn and Fenner enrich their arguments by engaging in comparative analyses of films by Hollywood and Bollywood, and Hollywood and French directors, respectively. This ability to draw connections to other national and transnational cultural traditions is present throughout the book, making these essays approachable to scholars from many other linguistic and canonical backgrounds.

Two chapters shed light on discourses of perception and reception in the media; “The Perception and Marketing of Fatih Akin in the German Press” by Karolin Machtans and “Hyphenated Identities” by Ayça Tunç Cox each explore how the politics of a given publication affects the way in which films and directors are viewed and reviewed. As no cultural medium exists in a vacuum, these perspectives are vital to understanding the effect of film on the public and vice versa. Additionally, outside the scope of film ‘proper’, three chapters analyze television programs and made-for-television films. Of particular interest to me was Brent Peterson’s look at the wildly popular show *Türkisch für Anfänger* (Turkish for Beginners, aired 2006-2009) and how it may serve a pedagogical function, “teaching cosmopolitanism to Germans” (96).

As is to be expected in a volume on Turkish German cinema, Fatih Akin is a recurring presence throughout. While there is already an entire section devoted to his work, many other essays reference him in some way. This focus on his work is hardly surprising when one considers Akin’s prolificacy and far-reaching cultural impact, and it also ensures the utility of this volume for college courses, which are more likely to incorporate one of his films into the syllabus than works of lesser-known directors. The editors and contributors should also be commended, however, for their explorations of productions by Buket Alaku, Aysun Bademsoy, Feo Alada, and other directors whose films, at least within the North American academic context, have not been given the critical attention they deserve.

By engaging simultaneously with aesthetic trends and theoretical trajectories, and by locating their work within an interdisciplinary constellation, Hake, Mennel, and their contributors offer a wealth of information, as well as enticement for future viewing, study, and debate. By refusing to ease the contradictions but rather striving to portray the field and the artists and scholars who compose it in a way that underscores these very complexities, Hake and Mennel have assured that their work will be of lasting significance, an excellent resource for students and scholars alike.

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