

Head-On/Gegen die Wand (2004)

“If you can’t change the world, change yourself.”

The “The”

“After laughter come tears.”

Wendy René

Major Credits

Writer and Director: Fatih Akin

Cast: Birol Ünel (Cahit), Sibel Kekilli (Sibel), Guven Kirac (Seref), Catrin Streibeck (Maren), Meltem Cumbul (Selma, Sibel’s sister), Cem Akin (Yilmaz, Sibel’s brother)

Cinematography: Rainer Klausmann

Background

Fatih Akin’s fourth feature film proved to be a significant cultural event in Germany: it became the first German film in 18 years to win the Golden Bear at the Berlinale in 2004 and later won the European Film Prize and the National Society of Film Critics (USA) award for Best Foreign Film.

Like the film’s two protagonists, Hamburg-born Akin represents the second generation of a large body of Turkish immigrants who came to Germany in the 1950s-60s to provide workers for the so-called postwar “Economic Miracle” in West Germany. Although he considers himself a German filmmaker, Akin also acknowledges the importance of the Turkish cinema, and his success with this film was celebrated as a national triumph by both countries.

The primary actors, Ünel and Kekilli, were both widely honored for their performances. Birol Ünel’s reputation for notorious behavior on the sets of previous films earned him the nickname “the Turkish Kinski,” after Werner Herzog’s demonic muse, Klaus Kinski (*Aguirre, Wrath of God; Nosferatu*). Sibel Kekilli, like the character she plays, was ostracized by her Turkish family, her photos burned, after a magazine revealed that she had performed in a number of pornographic videos. Akin reports that the two lead actors did not personally like each other, although they performed professionally on the set.

The film was made as Turkey was involved in intense negotiations to join the European Union; although Akin has denied any political motives, the portrait of Istanbul as a cosmopolitan metropolis quite different from either the retro patriarchy of Sibel’s family or the picturesque “Otherness” of the orchestra performing on the banks of the Bosphorus, the liminal status of Turkey in relation to Europe can be read as a subtext of the narrative.

The literal translation of the German title, *Gegen die wand*, is “Against the Wall.”

Cinematic Qualities

- Soundtrack: The film’s central conflict between a contemporary punk sensibility and traditional Turkish values is brilliantly represented through music. Cahit’s joyful celebration, “Punk is not dead!” is reinforced by tracks like “Temple of Love” by the Sisters of Mercy and the pulsating sounds of “Life’s What you Make it” (Zinoba) that plays over the closing credits. This music is balanced by the frequent strains of Turkish pop and the six performances of the traditional orchestra playing against the picturesque background of Istanbul. The plot of the film turns on the wonderful scene of Sibel at the amusement park while we listen to Wendy René’s rendition of “After Laughter Come Tears.”
- Close-Ups: Akin employs many powerful close-ups of Kekilli’s striking face, which at different times appears flirtatious, rebellious, tender (“I know so little about you”), angry (I’m a Turkish wife!), resolute (“I’ll wait for you”) and mournful. Cahit’s transformation is also rendered in a series of close-ups that mark, as he puts it to Selma, his return to the living.
- Mise-en-scène: Sibel’s influence on Cahit is registered through the changes in his apartment. “It’s like a chick bomb exploded in here,” he remarks after she first cleans up his hovel; later, after she prepares a wonderful biber dolmasi dinner, he says, “Marrying you wasn’t such a bad idea.” The one constant in the mise-en-scène remains the poster of Siouxi and the Banshees.

Note as well two complementary long shots with Sibel in different interior spaces: at Seref's bachelor apartment where she seeks refuge from her family, and Cahit's loyal friend comforts her by singing a Turkish lullabye; the night scene in Cahit's room at the Royal London Hotel, a beautiful 2-shot that rhymes with the earlier comic scene, Cahit in the ruffled bedsheets on the right, Sibel, nude, standing at the dresser on the left—an unforgettable tableau.

Questions for Discussion

1. Akin's narrative is divided between Germany and Turkey. The second-generation German protagonists both return to their parents' homeland, but the film hardly affirms the value of "roots." What does the film seem to say about globalization and the new Europe?
2. *Head-On* might have been a mainstream romantic comedy: it begins with a typical "meeting cute" scene and soon turns to the familiar plot of a mismatched couple who are made for each other before the story takes a violent turn. How does Akin manipulate our genre expectations at several plot points? Does the film abandon the rom-com for *another* genre?
3. German cinema for the past two generations prior to *Head-On* has been preoccupied with national identity and coming to terms with the past, understood as either the Nazi era (post-1945) or the reunification era (post-1989). Akin's film is conspicuous for its lack of concern for either issue. At the same time, however, it does seem engaged with cultural and political debates beyond the personal lives of its characters. How would you define the *ideology* of *Head-On*?
4. How do the intercut scenes of the Turkish musicians on the banks of the Bosphorus affect our response to the narrative?
5. Although the protagonists seem to rebel against conventional values, the film ultimately seems to be intensely moral (beginning, perhaps, with Sibel's sudden assertion, "I am a Turkish wife," to Nico). What are the moral or ethical dimensions of each character's decision at the very end? To borrow Spike Lee's great title, do the characters (including Selma and Seref) ultimately "do the right thing"?