

## *Gegen die Wand / Head On: Transcript*

Fatih Akin's 2004 film *Gegen die Wand* depicts the unconventional relationship between Cahit, a 40-something Turkish-German male, and Sibel, a twenty-something Turkish-German female. Today I'm going to look at the themes of gender and ethnicity in *Gegen die Wand*.

In order to fully understand the portrayal of gender and ethnicity and Akin's aims in *Gegen die Wand*, it's important to first look at other earlier Turkish-German films. Turkish-German cinema from the 1970s and 1980s, as well as West German film from the same period which deals with the lives of Turkish-Germans, has been described as 'centred around the problems of Turkish women who were oppressed by their [...] fathers, brothers or husbands, excluded from the public [...] and confined in enclosed spaces'. The films also feature the 'liberation of poor Turkish women from enclosure, oppression [...] or even prostitution', the liberation usually carried out by purposeless German men. In *Gegen die Wand*, Akin aims to change this pattern, as can be seen in the film's portrayal of gender and ethnicity. I'm going to look at what is new in the portrayal of gender and ethnicity, and then some ways in which it could be improved.

One difference between *Gegen die Wand* and the films from the 1970s and 1980s is that in Akin's work there are two clear protagonists: Sibel and Cahit, a woman and a man, both Germans of Turkish descent. In his inclusion of Cahit, and by making him a main character, Akin makes clear that it is not just Turkish (or Turkish-German) *women* who have problems, from which they need liberation. What is more, Cahit's problems are not those of an oppressive father, brother or husband, or those of a stereotypical young male Turkish-German criminal, as can be found in Akin's 1998 film *Kurz und Schmerzlos*. Sibel's problem is, once again, her family and its values yet Cahit's having 'lost [him]self', as he puts it towards the

end of the film, stems from the death of his wife, a non-ethnically specific cause of his lack of direction. We see that Turkish-German men, like anyone, can have a range of problems, unrelated to their ethnicity.

Cahit also does not simply fulfil the role of the purposeless Westerner, seen in Turkish-German films from the 1970s and 1980s. The reason for his purposelessness may be an event that many German men could experience, but his Turkish background is important, as he realises before travelling to his birthplace at the end of the film. Akin does not present Cahit's Turkish background as a source of oppression; he shows that Cahit dealing with his background can help him. I'll go into more detail about this later on. Similarly, although Sibel's problems stem from her Turkish family, she is not rescued from the oppressive Turkishness in her life by a German man. Instead, Turkish-German Cahit has the power to help her.

It is also important to realise that Sibel has more control over her life than the victimised Turkish women in previous Turkish-German, and West German, cinema. She is not 'excluded from the public' and 'confined in enclosed spaces'. She is not depicted as a woman trapped at home. Even before she marries Cahit we see her going for a run outside; leaving the psychiatric clinic in which she and Cahit meet and going to a bar, before voluntarily returning to the clinic; visiting Cahit in his flat; and picking her cousin Selma up from the airport. Sibel has freedom of movement and takes advantage of it.

*Gegen die Wand* is not a story of a man saving a woman, but an exploration of different ways a man and a woman can save themselves. Sibel states that her reason for cutting her wrists, before we encounter her in the psychiatric clinic, was 'I thought they'd leave me alone then', the 'they' referring to her father and brother. She clearly wants to take control of her life and escape the oppression of the men in her family. A desire for control, and to make one's mark,

is also clear in Cahit's destruction of places, and people. He destroys Sibel's furnishings for his flat to regain control of it and is violent towards those who taunt him so he gains the upper hand.

Sibel and Cahit, fittingly, find the help they need in the psychiatric clinic. Yet it is not a psychiatrist who helps them: Cahit and Sibel help each other to help themselves. Sibel needs Cahit to agree to marry her but she has a plan to liberate herself, and her marriage proposal, in the second scene in which she features, demonstrates power that traditionally women do not have, and certainly not Turkish women in film from the 1970s and 1980s. This power results in her liberating herself, with Cahit's support, and becoming sexually independent. Similarly, Sibel impresses Maren with her hairdressing skills and gets a job in her salon, becoming financially independent, and it is Cahit who talks to Maren in the first instance.

Sibel also helps Cahit to really regain control of his life. As he puts it, 'she gives me love and she gives me power', power to change how he lives. Sibel cuts Cahit's hair and he gets a shave. She sorts out his flat and later we see him first systematically destroying but then restoring it. When Cahit says 'without her, I'd never have made it', he is referring to surviving prison, yet we can see that after his imprisonment he has stopped drinking alcohol and becoming violent, and it is likely that Sibel is the reason for this too.

*Gegen Die Wand* also differs from earlier Turkish-German films, and films in the romance genre, because Sibel and Cahit do not live happily ever after together. What seems to make Sibel change her mind, and not go to Mersin with Cahit at the end of the film, is the sound of her child and new partner interacting. She could be reminded of her daughter and partner's happiness and her decision could be a selfless act, or she could simply realise she now loves her child and partner more than Cahit.

In Akin's commentary on the film he discusses the scenes in which Sibel and Cahit are reunited in Istanbul, after Cahit is released from prison. Akin says 'we tried to give those whole scenes this kind of dry atmosphere [...] like the love has gone away'. It is true that there are long silences in these scenes and the dialogue that there is lacks emotion. This is both in terms of content, with Sibel saying 'was hast du vor?' and 'das ist schön', and flat intonation. Cahit asks Sibel whether she wants to come with him to Mersin and they make plans to go in a remarkably matter-of-fact way. Neither of them seems remotely excited to be reunited with their spouse. It seems that Sibel's decision at the end of the film is not just to stay with her new partner and daughter, but *not* to go with Cahit.

It is important here that Sibel is free to leave Istanbul, and nearly does, and is also free to make a decision to stay. Gender stereotypes are evident here, with Sibel as the responsible mother and Cahit as, as Akin puts it in his commentary, the 'lonesome cowboy riding into the sunset'. Yet these stereotypes are broken down by the fact that, just as it is Sibel who initiates her and Cahit's relationship, it is her that makes the decision to end it definitively, and has the freedom to do this.

The decision she makes is not only unexpected in the context of conventional versions of romance in films, in which Sibel would live happily ever after with Cahit, but also in the context of Sibel's former desire to 'leben und [...] tanzen und [...] ficken. Und nicht nur mit einem Typen'. Her choice at the end of the film is between one relationship 'mit einem Typen' and another with a different man, rather than the sexual liberation she wanted. Yet it is important to realise that in conventional versions of romance, or versions of lives of crime in film, Sibel would not find another boyfriend when Cahit was in prison, but rather play the role of the faithful wife who waits dutifully, and passively, for her man. This is what she tells

him she will do when he is first in prison, but Sibel ends up having a husband and a boyfriend whom she can choose between, which shows she is relatively sexually liberated.

We are shown she cannot reinvent herself exactly how she wanted but what Sibel feels and wants does also seem to change, as can first be seen in her loving Cahit, rather than desiring different men, and then in her rejection of him. Sibel does not have complete control over her emotions and desires and she is not successful in the way she wanted to be at the beginning of the film, but a different kind of success is evident in the power this woman has to make decisions and create her own life.

Now let's look in more detail at Sibel's decision to move to Istanbul, Cahit's decision to go to Mersin and how the film deals with ethnic background. Turkish-German and West German cinema from the 1970s and 1980s often shows Turkish culture to be conservative and oppressive: something to escape from. *Gegen die Wand* still shows that Sibel's life with her traditional Turkish family is oppressive, but that there is much more to Turkishness than this.

Throughout *Gegen die Wand*, between scenes, we are confronted with a traditional picture of Turkey: a group of musicians playing traditional Turkish music on the bank of the Bosphorus in Istanbul, with a mosque in the background. These musical interludes remind us of the stereotypical view of Turkey and deliberately contrast with what we see of Istanbul in the rest of the film, which represents the city as modern and cosmopolitan. The opening scene of the musicians also contrasts with the second scene, in which we see the unkempt Cahit picking up bottles and drinking in a dirty Hamburg club. The viewer may well be surprised to hear this man speaking Turkish. Akin is showing us how different from each other people from Turkish backgrounds can be and that your ethnicity does not mean you have to behave in a certain way.

*Gegen Die Wand* also shows us that ethnic background is of different importance to different people. Another reason for there being *two* protagonists in the film, as well as showing that both Turkish-German men and women have problems, is to portray two very different Turkish-Germans who have different relationships with their ethnicities. At the beginning of *Gegen die Wand*, Sibel's values are much more German than Turkish, but she is in contrast to Cahit, who is not in touch with his background at all. He is living his life as a 'decadent German' and refers to Turks using the racist term 'Kanaken'.

On one hand, German culture and values can be seen to offer freedom to Sibel at the beginning of the film, when she wishes to 'leben und [...] tanzen und [...] ficken. Und nicht nur mit einem Typen'. Ethnic Germans are also presented as being accepting of Turkish-Germans integrating. Cahit's friends Maren and Nico, who become Sibel's friends, are ethnically German, as is Cahit's ex-wife Katharina. We are shown that it is possible for Turkish-Germans to be integrated in an ethnically German community.

On the other hand, we are shown Cahit cannot reinvent himself exactly as he wants, without wanting to kill himself as he attempts to at the beginning of the film, because he, like everyone, has a background and a history. As I've already touched on, in *Gegen die Wand* Akin portrays ethnic background as something important and shows that being in touch with one's background can be a source of help. In fact, in both *Gegen die Wand* and his 2007 film *Auf der anderen Seite* Akin shows that dealing with one's heritage is essential for Turkish-Germans who want to change their lives for the better.

Sibel favours Turkish club nights and cooks Turkish food, showing that, despite the tensions between her and her father and brother, she has a fondness for Turkish culture. She flees to Istanbul when Cahit kills Nico and goes to prison because she fears her brother will kill her to defend the family's honour, but something positive comes out of her perilous situation.

Although fleeing to Istanbul is not what Sibel would have chosen to do had the situation been different, it does enable her to get in touch with her background and in Istanbul, as Selma puts it, Sibel has a new life and is happy.

Throughout the film Sibel also challenges Cahit's rejection of his Turkish heritage and Turkish people, telling him 'du bist auch selber einer,' and it is because of Sibel that Cahit's Turkish improves, he goes to Turkey and that at the end of the film he is on the way to his hometown, Mersin, to discover his roots. Cahit tells Sibel 'ich fahre nach Mersin, da wo ich geboren bin. Ich mache mir keine Sorgen' and this comment, coupled with the fact that he goes to Turkey to find Sibel but he leaves without her, instead of staying with her in Istanbul, shows that his roots are more important to him and going to Mersin is the right thing to do. In Mersin he can have a fresh start and, as Akin says when he discusses the penultimate scene in his commentary on the film, 'I guess he will find his peace'. Let's now look at the ways in which genders and ethnicities are portrayed in a more stereotypical way.

The most obvious problem with the presentation of gender and ethnicity in *Gegen die Wand* is the stereotypical portrayal of Sibel's family. As Sibel tells Cahit, her brother has broken her nose because she was holding hands with a boy and when Cahit kills Nico, as well as Sibel being forced to flee the country out of fear that her brother will kill her to defend the family's honour, her family burn their photographs of her. Sibel's father and brother are represented in a wholly negative way. They do not learn anything or develop as characters in the film, so there seems to be no possibility for them to become less oppressive. Also, because they are not complex characters, the viewer does not learn much about their thoughts or the reasons behind their behaviour. We are just left with the stereotype seen in many other films.

Cahit's aggression also contributes to a stereotypical negative representation of Turkish masculinity in *Gegen die Wand*. Although Cahit's lack of direction has a non-ethnically specific cause, namely the death of his wife Katharina, his aggression links him to young male Turkish-German criminals, as can be found in Akin's *Kurz und Schmerzlos*. It is only when Cahit goes to prison for having killed Nico, and become a real criminal, that he learns to be less aggressive.

Some traditional views about *women* can also be found in *Gegen die Wand*. Sibel goes from wanting to be sexually liberated at the beginning of the film to wanting to be with her partner and child, which, one could argue, reflects a progression in the lives of many modern Western women. But what messages about sexually liberated women does the film leave the viewer with?

When Cahit kills Nico, who has slept with Sibel then been rejected by her, it is as a response to Nico baiting Cahit, saying that Sibel is a prostitute and Cahit her pimp. When we see Sibel arriving in Istanbul it is clear that she sees herself as responsible for Nico's death: she has a new short haircut, is wearing no make-up and is wearing baggy clothes that cover all of her body. She has tried to rid herself of her sexuality and for the rest of the film she has short hair and has abandoned her aim to have multiple sexual partners. Akin seems to be telling us that being truly sexually liberated does not end well, and women are better off in a relationship.

This is also reflected in the character of Selma. She is extremely successful in her job but is divorced, alone and, the film implies, unloved. When Cahit sees her towards the end of the film and asks her how she is, she replies 'I'm still single', and struggles to hide her sadness about this fact. The fact that she defines herself in this way, despite her successful career, reflects the film's emphasis on the importance of women being in a stable relationship.

However, in conclusion, despite these more traditional and stereotypical aspects to *Gegen die Wand*'s portrayal of gender and ethnicity, Akin does fulfil the aim of changing the pattern found in Turkish-German and West German cinema from the 1970s and 1980s. Cahit and Sibel, a Turkish-German man and woman, help each other to help themselves, and both characters realise the importance, and the complexities, of their Turkish background.

## References

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