

# CREATIVE SPACES OF THE IMMIGRANTS: REVISITING THE DISCUSSIONS ON CITY-SPACE, TECHNOLOGY AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES

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Taking into consideration the matters of diaspora and immigrants, and their 'possible' relationship within the translocal creative and technological flows, this paper will concentrate on the films of one of the most recent notable film-makers: Fatih Akin. This paper will focus on whether Akin's films can form an antagonistic creative space in relation to the hegemonic discourse of the practices of the city-spaces where these immigrants dwell.

To start with, as some authors argue I too endorse the view that globalization always remains an unfinished project. The creation of a 'global culture' should not be perceived as a straightforward homogenization practice. Globalization rather encompasses those processes of systemic desegregation in which the local cultures turn out to be thoroughly interdependent and interconnected. [1] After remarking on globalization and underlining the significance of local cultures within the emergence of the so called global culture(s), one could argue that one area of manifestations of this would be cinema, whereas music would be another. Accordingly, the global cultural flows engender new spatializations around various cultural productions of the diasporic peoples, which have an effect on the global (sub)cultures in return. Just as within the sphere of music, cinema too is a medium that has or rather has the potentiality of altering the everyday practices and viewpoints of people as well as reflecting them.

It is within the discussions of space and the process of globalization that we can merge the issue of city-spaces, how they become the focal points of Deleuze and Guattarian conceptualization of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, as Deleuze and Guattari's geo-philosophy environs territorialization and thus flows. Also, the notion of 'desire' is important in their analyses, as it is an underlying factor of flow and the direction of flow. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire enables beings to be pulled towards each other, which produce connections, and it is these connections that are considered in spatial terms by these two authors. [2]

Articulating the geo-philosophical propositions of Deleuze and Guattari in her work as well, one of the interesting conceptualizations about Doreen Massey, I believe, is her elaboration on space. In this regard, she argues that space is initially the product of interrelations –either emerging from a huge, global level or as tiny as one to one relationships. Second, what Massey proposes is that space encompasses distinct trajectories that coexist simultaneously which thus enable the coexistence of heterogeneities. Third, and which is connected to her other two assumptions, is that space is never finished and closed. [3] Hence, space is always a process that is being made which always entails openness and multiplicity. Recalling the process of globalization in the light of these arguments, where mobility and migrations can be seen as flows and becomings at the heart of the process of globalization, or rather glocalization, how can then the so called "migrant" cinema open up new spatializations, thus pave the way for new becomings, or in other words the 'possibility' itself for new becomings? Spatiality that encompasses such possibilities for new happenings and vibrancy, and just for this reason I would prefer to call it a third space. Also, taking into consideration Lefebvre's elaboration on (social) space as a (social) product, [4] Innis

also contemplates on space in terms of technology and its spatial and social organization of knowledge. Likewise, communication technologies simultaneously produce and demolish difference in their subjects. Innis thus depicts technology being part of a more complex apparatus that both brings out and holds back power. Hence, marginal groups resist as well as they depend on the cultural technologies that create their awareness of themselves as margins. [5] Inferring from Innis's ideas on the relationship between space and technology, it could be questioned if and to what extent technological medium is employed by those at the "margins" of society. That is, in terms of this paper, the aggrieved populations utilizing the technological medium artistically, such as that of shooting and producing films, thus reflecting the hardships of their everyday lives and disseminating their voice more "powerfully".

In this respect, Fatih Akin, who is a second-generation Turkish-German director born in Hamburg, became one of Germany's distinct filmmakers in our contemporary era. Or rather, Fatih Akin is a German filmmaker with a Turkish name and Turkish parents. Akin's dislike of the hyphenated identity label can also be observed from his words in an interview after his film *Short Sharp Shock* which gained a wide success in 1998: "If I can't be Fatih Akin, I'd prefer to be known as the German Martin Scorsese." [6]

Consequently, how Fatih Akin engages the city-spaces in his films will also be another crucial aspect that will be elaborated upon. Furthermore, it will be proposed that Akin creates spaces through his films, which can also be thought of as flows of desire that rather form a third space. This third space is constituted through the characters Fatih Akin employs and the cities Hamburg and Istanbul where his films' protagonists are situated or rather unsettled at –just like Akin himself. Such unsettledness can sometimes be seen by their transition between these two cities, or the idea of going back (to their "idealized homeland"), as well as a disturbance or a feeling of displacement they seem to experience in their current city. In terms of city-spaces and the creation of a possible homeland, taking into consideration the engendering of a third space, I will concentrate on these three films of Fatih Akin: his first full length feature film *Short Sharp Shock* (*Kurz und Schmerzlos*) in 1998, his 2000 movie *In July* (*Im Juli*) and maybe his first worldwide known movie *Head-On* (*Gegen die Wand*) in 2004.

In Fatih Akin's *Short Sharp Shock*, the main characters 'Costa', 'Gabriel' and 'Bobby' who are respectively from Greek, Turkish and Serbian family backgrounds are three close friends with "criminal" personas. The viewer also sees a praying father, a representation that, as Rob Burns indicates, "comes perilously close to the figure of the speechless Turk propagated by 'guestworker literature' and the 'cinema of the affected.'" [7] With the 'cinema of affected' Rob Burns addresses the growth and recognition of the diasporic literature in the 1980s, involving the profound effect of the Turkish-German authors, who also influenced the migrant filmmakers. [8] Accordingly, the Gastarbeiter or guest worker experience was worked up in filmmaking. However, starting from the 1990s there emerged a new generation of filmmakers whose works to quote Rob Burns "is above all notable for the sustained attempt to dismantle rather than recycle cultural stereotypes and to open up a 'third space' between the celebration and the denial of otherness." [9] Although these groups of filmmakers emerging in the 1990s are rather heterogeneous in their filmmaking, they still share a common incentive in their desire to break away from the earlier dominant images that portrayed the migrant Turks as victim. Fatih Akin, who is one of the most successful filmmakers depicting this situation, underlined in one of his interviews that he had started to make his own movies because he was reluctant towards those film productions where migrants could only appear as a "problem". Rather he explains that he sees his growing up in two cultures to be an advantage and enunciates as follows: "I do not have to transmit a message of tolerance or deny one of my cultures. I simply link them –in my person and in my films." [10] These words of Fatih Akin can be observed in his films by the way he reflects a peculiar persona in almost all of his film characters. It is as though the ethnic and socio-cultural features remain secondary compared to the characters he deploy;

as if wanting to highlight the uniqueness of each individuality –where people in the so called “real life” may sometimes be blind to, as a result of their apriori prejudices and categorizations.

I also agree with Burns that Fatih Akin is not resisting to position stereotypes in the name of challenging them. [11] Hence, Akin sometimes by fiercely inserting the viewer to the patriarchal dominance and violence where the female protagonists may at times seem to appear as victims, he also manages somehow to subvert and destroy such representations of dichotomies such as victor/victim, oppressor/oppressed and so on. In my re-reading of Akin’s films, such a subversion of the boundaries of such dichotomies are not just in terms of gender or ethnic backgrounds, but also encompass the inner journey of the main characters; as if Akin is shouting out loudly through them to his viewer saying “feel the pain and fear as well as joy and hope in that moment of human existence.” However, in my point of view, such psychological connotations develop as a result of Akin’s exposure of the viewer to the materialistic reality as well as brutality, nevertheless still interestingly managing to resume the hope for the possibility of the impossible, even when the main characters may hit bottom: for example, the way Akin uses spaces of captivity or claustrophobic spaces such as prisons. Again, as Rob Burns emphasizes, “Akin’s films’ prisons are configured directly and either are shown only at the moment of liberation or function as sites of enlightenment.” As towards the end of his film *In July*, the main character Daniel discovers in prison the reason why Isa has been carrying a dead body in his car’s trunk, which allows for a new bond and sympathy between the two men. Whereas in Akin’s film *Head-On*, the prison becomes the space where Sibel visiting Cahit there for the first time confesses that she loves him which in turn changes Cahit’s stance towards life. Accompanying such a transformation in his inner life, when he gets out of jail he has rather a different style and appearance: the reckless and dirty rocker Cahit is gone and a more charismatic and stylish Cahit has come. Hence, the boundaries between the brutal reality and spiritual imaginary all get blurred.

In Akin’s 2004 film *Head-On*, one can remark on his presentation of spatial and temporal transition between Hamburg and Istanbul. [12] Further, Akin utilizes the issue of self-destruction through the male protagonist Cahit who has distanced himself from his Turkish background, therefore cannot speak Turkish well, and who has a suicidal background and loves punk and rock music as well as cocaine. His apartment in Hamburg is as dirty and messy as a pig’s hole. One night in his car, he attempts to commit suicide by stepping on the accelerator and crashes into the wall, later opening up his eyes in a hospital. Just shortly after this incident he meets Sibel, the female protagonist of the film while waiting for his doctor at the rehab center to call him. Just after getting out of the doctors room, Akin sort of surprises his viewers through his character Sibel, who has also tried to kill herself and therefore is too staying in the same rehab center, runs towards Cahit, whom she has never met before, says “you’re Turkish aren’t you? Please marry me.” Cahit in his cool manner rebuffs her in slang and goes away hurriedly. The viewer gets to realize Sibel’s insistence in marriage is only because she wants get free from her family and marrying a Turkish man is her only escape.

Now, going back to the spatial transitions in Fatih Akin’s films, and in this case of *Head-On*, as mentioned earlier, there are two cities: Hamburg and Istanbul. Cahit, after getting out of jail goes to Istanbul to find Sibel, where one immediately becomes aware of the sea, the Bosphorus Bridge and the cosmopolitan city with busy and colorful sideboards at the Beyoğlu area in Istanbul. As in almost all of his films, Akin playfully utilizes space, under various categories in my point of view. In this respect, music is maybe one of the most crucial creators of space in his films. Akin applies music and sounds so eclectically, from punk-rock music, to jazz and soul, to hip-hop, to electronic, to traditional as well as alternative Turkish music and many more. Hence, the ‘lived spaces’ of the characters and the spatial transitions are accompanied by the director’s sophisticated taste for variety of musical genres. For instance, in *Head-On*, the

film opens up with an orchestra of a gypsy band in front of Istanbul's Bosphorus Bridge where a woman sings a traditional love song 'Saniye'm'. This should be seen as the chorus of the movie as it appears a few more times throughout the film. However, as said previously, while Cahit is in the car trying his failed suicide attempt, he listens to Depeche Mode's song 'I feel You'. In various scenes one can hear the song of Nick Cave to the West Berliner experimental group Einstürzende Neubauten.

Another suggestion to why Fatih Akin can be thought of as yielding a third space can be analyzed in terms of Lefebvre's 'representational spaces'. Lived spaces are those spaces that embody the real and the imagined spaces simultaneously. Or to put it in Lefebvre's words, "representational space is alive: it speaks... It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time... It may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic." [13] Within Lefebvrian trialectics, the third space, that is, the representational spaces also embody the first and second spaces, which are the perceived and the conceived. Likewise, Fatih Akin's films can be seen as this gateway to the third space because of its expressiveness of the diasporic community. Such an expressiveness is not only seen in the case regarding the Turkish diaspora, but also the Italian, just in the case of his 2002 film *Solino* or the Greek in the case of his 2009 movie *Soul Kitchen* and so on.

In terms of Akin's expressiveness of the lived spaces of both those in Hamburg and in Istanbul, I prefer to call it a possible representation. One of the reasons for this is my own problem with the issue of 'representation' as when one declares that s(he) represents something or a group of people it would never be a one to one replica of what is being represented. Second, representation could itself entail a hegemony resulting from relations of power. Also, as there is a constant flow and dynamism within the spatial praxis, there will remain possible gaps as well as a possibility of change. Nevertheless, with its 'possible representations', successful cultural productions such as the films of Fatih Akin, I believe, have the power of altering boundaries of a globalizing, glocalizing or translocalizing world and its everydayness. Hence, recalling Deleuze and Guattari, by such an expressiveness through his films Akin de-territorializes the boundaries of the social space and its cultural flows and desire, in order to incorporate his own desires and thus re-territorializes them.

Akin's characters are not trapped within a victimized space, but they interact within the everyday life with others of various backgrounds. Respectively, Akin's films indicate a move from the cinema of the victimized, or the affected, or the subaltern to a cinema of hybridity. Although, the viewer is presented with characters that are attributed local aspects of various ethnic backgrounds, they interact and engender alliances or disaffiliations with each other within a transnational spatiality and temporality. For instance, one of the main underlying preoccupations of the director in his film *In July* seems to be the idea of "boarders". I view this film as standing for Akin's own transnational imaging of the world and his preoccupation with questions such as passports, borders and the reasons of restrictions for crossing territories. As in most of his films, Fatih Akin reflects the utopia where he crosses borders in order to achieve a better place that is symbolized with the city of Istanbul. Correspondingly, the male protagonist Daniel who is a shy schoolteacher with a routine life in Hamburg, one day buys a ring with a Mayan sun symbol from a street vendor called Juli (July). Juli tells Daniel that he will find his true love by the guide of this ring and that he will recognize that person, as she will too have the same Mayan symbol of the sun. However, Juli, who herself fancies Daniel believes that in the end he will understand this person is Juli herself. Later on, Daniel falls in love with a mysterious Turkish woman named Melek ('Angel' in Turkish), from Berlin, who comes to his town wearing a t-shirt with a sun pattern on, leaves for Istanbul for vacation a day after. Daniel being so charmed by Melek believes she is the one hence decides to catch up with her in Istanbul. It is after this incident that the road trip begins in Hamburg, passes through Bavaria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and then it finally ends in Istanbul. In the beginning of his road trip while in

the car, Daniel coincidentally sees Juli who is hitchhiking. The paths of Juli and Daniel will intersect from time to time where in the end of the film, Daniel will realize that his so called “sun” that he was searching for and going after was not Melek but Juli herself.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of smooth space, deterritorialization and nomad can be very well applied to *In July*, as well as to his other films. However, in this case of *In July*, the deterritorialization takes place as part of the road trip of Daniel and Juli where Akin seems to be teasing with the ideas of physical borders and the official documents needed to prove that one belongs to a specific place. This film, according to me, is most probably one of the director’s best manifestations of his emphasized transnationalism and hence his so-called nomadic characteristic that is expressed through his creation of smooth spaces. The smooth space, for Deleuze and Guattari, is the space of the intensive becomings and the nomad, whereas the striated space is the product of stratification, especially that is caused by the State apparatus. [14]

I believe as being part of the second-generation youth with a Turkish descent, Fatih Akin would not be the migrant like his parents, but a nomad in Deleuze and Guattarian terms. As he moves while he is seated, just like the nomad; he is from Hamburg. What he is right now, that is, his worldview was formed through his experiences in that city, hence Akin’s hometown. However, the director himself moves globally as part of what he produces cinematically. In this respect, it would not be wrong to argue that he creates smooth spaces through his expressiveness; in other words through his cultural productions of films, where one could witness his criticisms as well as his hope for a better world. One of the manifestations of this would be the multilingualism in his films: Turkish, German, Greek etc would appear in different parts of his film as well as the variety of sounds and music he employs as mentioned before. Rather than the nations, we see that it is the cities that have a profound emphasis in the films of such second and third generation of filmmakers, which would not be a surprise when taking into consideration the emergence of a new global cultural economy built around city or urban spaces. To recall Lefebvre once again, space is socially produced. For this reason, it could be thought that humans create the spaces where they live and therefore it could be remarked that space embodies the ‘political’ as it involves the appropriation and distribution of resources within the everyday life. However, the openness and the multiplicity attributes of space, as Massey have underlined, also engenders the possibilities and changes yet to take place. In this respect, it could be thought that Fatih Akin is one of those artists who reshape the dynamics of spatial formations through his questioning and expression of the everyday lived spaces of the ‘displaced’ peoples and their so called “differences” for a cultural reconsideration of spatial politics.

## References and Notes:

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