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Soundtracks of Double Occupancy

Sampling Sounds and Cultures in Fatih Akin's Head On

Senta Siewert

Just like in German Punk or Hip Hop, what we are doing here is not a cinema of imitation, but rather a cinema of adaptation.

— Fatih Akin

In European Cinema, Thomas Elsaesser discusses Fatih Akin amongst other young contemporary filmmakers who challenge the predominant understanding of national cinema within film studies. Elsaesser’s wide-ranging scholarship crosses boundaries and coins terms that have established new discourses in film studies and humanities. One such concept is “double occupancy,” which refers to “a filmmaking and film-viewing community that crosses cultural and hyphenates ethnic borders.” According to this concept some of the most successful contemporary European filmmakers (Fatih Akin, Gurinder Chadha, Abdel Kechiche), all from different ethnic backgrounds, are doubly occupied, hyphenated Europeans (German-Turkish, British-Indian, French-Magreb). These directors seem best suited to address social problems and identify tendencies of change within European society at large. However, Elsaesser stresses that double occupancy can be applied to “every part of Europe, and to all of us: our identities are multiply defined, multiply experienced.” He proposes thinking of a “post-national” Europe and thereby implies that the common practice of identification according to national identity has become outdated and should make way for the possibility of post-national subjectivities.

Alongside films such as La Haine / Hate (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995), Trainspotting (Danny Boyle, 1996), Amsterdam Global Village (Johan van der Keuken, 1996), and Good Bye Lenin (Wolfgang Becker, 2003), which can be viewed as representing a New European Cinema, Elsaesser also briefly mentions the film Gegen die Wand / Head On by Fatih Akin (2004). As a “post-national subject” Akin explicitly refuses to let his work be reduced to his ethnic roots or to have him typecast as a migrant filmmaker. Akin defines Head On as a European film, in response to media reactions after his film won the Golden Bear prize at the Berlin Film Festival. Both the German and Turkish press claimed the prize as their own success, a reaction which suggested a certain anxiety about defining national identity. In contrast to these critics, Elsaesser focuses on the utopian dimension of double occupancy when he writes that Head On “draws its power, its universality, but also its politics, from the spectator following a human relationship that tries to live by a new socio-sexual contract.”

In response, my aim here is to build on Elsaesser’s concept of double occupancy and, moreover, add new dimensions to it by focusing on how it works on the level of sound. My hypothesis is that in New European Cinema it is precisely in the music that the double occupancy finds its fullest expression. In order to illustrate this point, I will begin by examining two examples of contemporary European films which depict sampling techniques and technologies in a more explicit manner, before turning to a close reading of Head On, which reveals a shift and amplification from musical sampling technique to sampling as an overall structuring element. In my analysis of these various sampling techniques, my main concern is with specific musical forms, audiovisual relations, musical emotion, sonic memory, and the role of the transnational in cinematic soundtracks.

Sampling

Akin’s documentary Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul (2005) is connected to Head On, as some protagonists and musicians appear in both films. Crossing the Bridge establishes a central role for music in carving out particular identity patterns and its cultural and geographic implications. It starts with a proverb by the ancient philosopher Confucius, stating that one must understand the music of a country in order to understand its culture. One central theme of the film is the bridging between West and East, Europe and Asia, in terms of spaces, cultures, and different musical styles. The main protagonist is Alexander Hacke, a member of the German avant-garde band Einstürzende Neubauten. He can be seen as a flaneur, who tries to capture the diverse sounds of Istanbul with a microphone. In Akin’s film, Hacke functions as a mediator who reworks these sounds, samples, mixes, and saves them on his computer in order to produce the soundtrack to the film. Hacke’s sampling technique can be understood as a broader aesthetic characteristic that also recurs in the film Head On and other European films such as Trainspotting, Hate, and Dans Paris / Inside Paris (Christophe Honore, 2006).

In Hate, one particular scene most notably underlines the importance of the music in contemporary films. Here a DJ opens the windows of his housing estate flat in the outer suburbs, and his music reaches down to the main protagonists walking below. The DJ is mixing the song “Sound Of Da Police” by KRS1 with “Fuck The Police” by Nique Ta Mere (NTM) and a loop of Edith Piaf singing
"Non! Je Ne Regretterien." The music establishes three cultural backgrounds, with American hip-hop and French hip-hop confronting a French chanson from the 1950s and 1960s. This sampling and cut 'n' mix technique together with the lyrics offers a good example for interpreting music in cinema as a form of storytelling. By appropriating different music styles the songs function as a social commentary: Piaf’s lyrics of "no regret" provide a justification for attacking the police. Moreover, Hate connects its narrative to real events and layers past and present time through its music.10

Head On, like Hate, also constantly blends film and musical traditions by sampling them and thus requiring that the audience provide a special kind of musicality and a way of understanding historical references. Sampling, as a form of discontinuity that is used in hip-hop and drum 'n' bass, among others styles of music, can best be described as a way to adapt, appropriate, recycle, and remediate pre-recorded material. In Head On, Akin samples seemingly diverse and contrary musical sounds from different cultures, times, genres, and styles. The music in the film functions as a sound bridge, which transcends cultural borders and reveals a state of double occupancy.

**Sound and Image**

In order to understand the referential and experiential function of music one must recognize that in film studies there is a tendency to focus more on the visual than on sound and music. One reason for neglecting the music could be that the soundtrack is generally considered secondary since most films are virtually complete before being passed on to the composer for scoring. Traditionally, composed music functions as a tool to underline the narrative and mood; this music is meant to remain "unheard" as film scholar Claudia Gorbman has famously stated.11 However, this tendency is slowly being reversed as a growing number of contemporary directors have already chosen the songs during the scriptwriting stage; this was also the case with Head On. This phenomenon, which is manifested in the soundtrack practice, suggests a shift in contemporary European films from a reliance on original background scores to foregrounding pre-existing songs. This is also reflected by the fact that the music supervisor of Head On, Klaus Maeck, has become increasingly influential over the years and was even hired as the producer of Akin's latest film Auf der anderen Seite / On the Other Side (2007).12

Another reason why music has been neglected in film studies could be due to the significant differences between sound and image in film. One important distinction is that, unlike one’s eyes, it is difficult to close one’s ears to sound. Moreover, the sound vibrations in the space of reception have the potential of going right into a spectator’s body. Is this why film theory tends to ignore sound, because sound cannot be easily objectified? Does this originate in the associations of the visual as linked to the rational and the mind, while the auditory has often been linked to the irrational and the body?13 By contrast, I would like to highlight that sound can affect the body of the audience, with its tone appealing to the emotions, even without the literal elements of the lyrics. This means that music can be seen as a powerful device for reorganizing the affective relationship between film and the spectator and can also convey a kind of presence.

Many critics have agreed that Head On has an intense wrenching effect on its audience. This can be partly attributed to the narrative of the characters' struggle in life and also to the rapid changes in locations, raw digital aesthetics, colors, atmosphere, moods but most of all, to the film's usage of various musical styles. In order to illustrate the dynamics of the music, which stresses the dual background of the characters and the director, I will now introduce several key scenes from Head On in more detail.

The film opens with a postcard view of Istanbul facing the shore of the Bosporus. A band is placed tableaux-like, sitting on top of oriental carpets, looking into the camera and playing the traditional Turkish song "Saniye'M," which is dominated by the sounds of a clarinet and violin.14 A Turkish singer is wearing a red evening dress, and, as we can read in the subtitles, she is singing about a failed love affair. After seeing these warm exterior colors, a quick cut to an artificially lit nightclub in Hamburg provides a vivid contrast. The protagonist Cahit (Birol Ünel) is introduced via a shaky hand-held camera shot. He is stumbling around, picking up glasses, and drinking leftover beer. He has long dirty hair and a desperate, frustrated facial expression. He seems to be on the verge of an emotional outburst when he begins talking to a friend in Turkish and then to others in German. After he moves to a different club featuring German punk rock, he starts a fight and gets kicked out and then drives his old car head on into a wall.15

This scene enact's an episode of the unexpeirenceable, a near-death experience. The audiovisual texture is complex: the squealing tires iritate and the flickering lights on the wall of the tunnel seem to anticipate this moment between life and death. The visual beat sets up an aural beat, which changes into the song "I Feel You" by Depeche Mode.16 The jump cuts of Cahit's changing facial expressions from hysterical laughter to crying are juxtaposed with FOV shots of Cahit driving his car zigzagstyle, to emphasize his drunken, desperate state of mind. While the song can be heard non-diegetically without any ruptures, the editing and the driving increase time's velocity.
The audience has to comprehend a lot simultaneously, moving quickly from Istanbul to Hamburg, from traditional Turkish music to alternative German punk rock and an international song. Apart from the complex negotiations in the dynamic between the crossover of western pop rock music and oriental music, the audience also visually experiences the intensity of Cahit’s suicidal behavior. The narrative does not explain the main character’s motivations. Instead, the only thing the audience has to go on is the audiovisual texture. For this reason, viewers may have to listen more closely to the sound, which means that the beat and lyrics provide further narrative explanation. The lyrics in “I Feel You” resemble those in the beginning of the Turkish song, in that they tell us about the end of an unfulfilled relationship: “This is the morning of our love, it’s just the dawning of our love.” Listening to the clash of musical styles opens up facets of the characters, which words and images alone cannot explain.

As Elsaesser has noted about HEAD ON: “After a near-death accident, the male protagonist, having cancelled all obligations even to the proposition of staying alive, eventually agrees to enter into a kind of contract, with an almost equally post-mortem young woman.” Like Cahit, the female protagonist Sibel (Sibel Kekilli) is also accompanied by a multifaceted soundtrack. She is introduced in a close-up, not unlike a classic melodrama. However, a single camera pan movement quickly shows the audience her wrists, indicating that she is a psychiatric patient who has also survived a suicide attempt. From the moment she first appears, she offers a strong unapologetic seductive gaze into the camera, which is addressed to Cahit, who is also in the clinic. After she discovers that Cahit is Turkish, she tries to persuade him to marry her so that she can flee her strict Muslim parent’s home. Later, at their traditional wedding they take cocaine and dance excessively to traditional Turkish wedding music. Sibel moves into Cahit’s anarchic and dirty apartment. She cooks and cleans, but maintains her independence from him while she leads a liberated sex life, with many different partners. Sibel redecorates Cahit’s apartment, leaving behind only one single reminder of his past, a poster of the 1980s punk rock band Siouxsies and the Banshees on the door. In this way, pop music is also part of the visuals in the form of a poster of a band as a reference to the identity patterns of the male protagonist. Moreover, a hospital doctor attempts to relate to Cahit by referring to a pop band and their lyrics. He asks if Cahit knows the band The The and their line: “If you can’t change the world, change your world.” This reference to pop music functions as a communication bridge between two people from different cultural backgrounds.

Enhancing Emotions with Diegetic Music

In another scene, the importance that music has for the characters becomes apparent, which one experiences on the level of diegetic music. Soon after their marriage, Sibel comes back to their home and dances to the song “Temple Of Love,” joined by Cahit. The song, originally by The Sisters of Mercy, represents the 1980s western rock tradition, and in the film it is mixed with Middle Eastern musical styles, including the haunting voice of Israeli singer Ofra Haza. With her dancing, Sibel combines typical 1980s German head banging with Turkish dance. At the song’s climax the image freezes, fixing Cahit in his wildest dance move, resembling the image of a pop star. As the song continues, Sibel and Cahit are now suddenly shown in a nightclub and still dancing to the same song. As Sibel is seen seducing a man, Cahit’s jealousy marks the beginning of their passionate yet destructive love affair. When Cahit later becomes aware of his feelings, he is shown dancing in another club with his arms in the air covered in blood.

In the film, these extreme feelings are manifested in alcohol and drug use, in dancing and self-inflicted wounds, and always accompanied by a specific soundtrack. This is illustrated in a later scene, after Cahit has accidentally killed Sibel’s former lover in a fight. When Sibel returns home alone after this incident she puts on music that matches her grieving mood and the impossible love relationship she has with Cahit. She now puts on the Turkish song “Agla Sevdam.” This enhances her emotions, and she begins to cut herself to feel even more pain. This pain is visualized as she watches her own blood flow all over her and is further emphasized by the melodramatic music. The “empathetic music” matches the mood of the action. Both Cahit and Sibel live a life of ecstatic suffering, which is called kara sevda in Turkish, which describes people who are either in ecstasy or agony and who long to see and feel their blood in order to intensify their feelings. This particular behavior is rooted in an oriental tradition of suffering for love, as Feridun Zaimoglu has observed. Based on these examples, which show that diegetic music plays a key role in enhancing feelings, the next section shows diegetic music as a sonic memory device.

Musical Codes / Sonic Memory

After the fatal incident, Cahit is sent to prison, and Sibel flees to Istanbul. There she is seen entering a nightclub, where she takes drugs (this time the “oriental” drug opium), dancing and turning in spirals on her own with her eyes closed. This scene, seems to show her trying to escape the space of the Turkish nightclub
by transferring herself to a virtual space via excessive dancing until she collapses and subsequently is violently assaulted. Here the song "I Feel You" by Depeche Mode is played diegetically, the same song that was played as a soundtrack as Cahit drove headfirst into a wall. The song connects two different locations (Hamburg and Istanbul) and two people (Cahit and Sibel), who are both experiencing extreme physical pain and emotional despair. The song, like feedback, functions here as a "cue" for the audience, enabling them to predict an imminent disaster. By this time, the audience can sense what is going to happen next via the soundtrack. The song refers to a particular mood of a previous event and also to a shared sonic memory for audience members. When well-known songs are played in familiar spaces — such as nightclubs or cars — the participation of the audience is at its highest level. In these familiar spaces where everyone has had their own personal experiences with dancing in the past, the sonic memory is the most intense because personal experiences, combined with scenes from the film, blur the lines between actual and virtual, fantasy and reality. Just as the consumption of energetic and hallucinogenic drugs brings one into a non-space, a space outside the body, dancing can evoke a delocalization of the body that suspends normal affective relationships and perception of the self.

When coupled with memory, this sound experience can be described as the sonic equivalent to the déjà vu. Steve Goodman has coined the term "déjà entendu" to describe the sonic memory as something that has resonated before with some part of one's body. He calls it "an unfolded acoustic memory, which is latent, virulent" and is waiting to be activated by a trigger, which stimulates an embodied memory. "Déjà entendu" implies the enhancement of chronological time by active memory. This goes beyond the somatic experience of the aural and the visual to a deeper personal resonance of the body. Goodman notes that one has to consider both the referential and the experiential function of music.

Transcultural Soundtrack

In Head On it does not matter on what level one understands all the German, Turkish, or English lyrics, because the beat, rhythm, and tone of voice all have an effect regardless of their cultural reference points. This border-crossing quality of music is also described by Simon Frith, who has suggested that "sounds carry across fences and walls and oceans, across classes, races and nations." Musicologist John Sloboda also argues that, as an emotional response, music is transcultural. If one takes into account all of the qualities of music that have thus far been mentioned, then Elsaesser's concept of double occupancy helps us to understand the characters and the director, their affinity with both pop and traditional music from various cultures. Audiences are also doubly occupied or even multi-occupied, as they share certain of the film's musical codes, because they live in, with and through these codes. This means that the viewers can sense what affects the characters in the film. The function of music is to captivate the audience: their bodies are affected by the rhythms that are transmitted via vibrant bodily experiences, which shows that music, enhanced by camera work, recreates and simulates an experience in a way that the mere sequencing of images cannot.

In this way, the music acts as a bridge for the spectator, whose experience of extreme states usually does not involve the slashing of one's wrists, trying to commit suicide or escaping an oppressive Turkish family life, but that via well-known spaces (nightclubs, cars, etc.) — that combine both familiarity and extra-territoriality — the spectator's access is therefore enhanced, which is equal to the extreme emotional states, where ecstasy and agony are so closely commingled. The extreme emotional states denote the particular types of protagonists found in Head On as well as other contemporary European films such as TRAINSPOTTING, HATE, and INSIDE PARIS. In these films, the protagonists escape the binary narrative of either succeeding or failing; they are neither rebels nor conformists; instead they can be seen as survivors, who live a life with risky cutting-edge experiences like racing at extreme speeds in a car, dancing excessively, or taking drugs. Elsaesser also describes similar contemporary protagonists when he introduces them as "abject heroes" (referring to Julia Kristeva’s famous term), here delineating a utopian dimension of double occupancy, because these abject heroes tell us something about "the conditions of [the] possibility of a counter-image of what it means to be human." In the case of Head On, Elsaesser points to a special kind of abject heroes: the post-mortem heroes, who have "cancelled all obligations even to the proposition of staying alive."

In other words, here the extreme states of the characters place them in a no-man's-land, from which they are brought back to life by the various affective, semantic, and historical references embedded in the music. When "Life's What You Make It" by Talk Talk is heard at the end of the film, it functions as a classic déjà entendu, because Cahit had played this same melody earlier in the film on the piano. Here it is obvious that songs can even serve as lifesavers, because through the lyrics, rhythm, and the tone of voice, the song offers a glimpse of hope for the protagonists and for the audience, who have to recover from the tour de force of the soundtrack. This strategy of considering the music in a film shows that the dichotomies of doubleness one first recognizes in Head On (German vs. Turkish, Occident vs. Orient, western pop music vs. Turkish "traditional" music) are undermined and therefore display a post-national Europe. This is linked to the multi-defined identities of all Europeans, whose identities are already hyphenated, with respect to regional, societal, and gender aspects.
Generally speaking, the films of the New European Cinema let the audience experience new perceptual modes, subjectivities along a specifically sonic kind of bodily memory. The concept of double occupancy helps develop an audiovisual analysis that fully apprehends the combination of cinema and popular music, which has either been overlooked or been inadequately classified. Even though the films are situated in and draw on local cultures, subcultures, and patterns of identity formations, these national or regional peculiarities are best understood within broader “European” or even global patterns of identity formation, co-habitation and conflict resolution among the young and their relation to pop music.

Notes


3. Elsaesser, European Cinema 27.


5. He further claims that the concept of double occupancy intends to provisionally succeed that of the historical imaginary, by suggesting that “mirror-relations and forms of ‘othering’ typical of a previous period may be in [the] process of being superseded, as identity politics through boundary-drawing gives way to [a] general recognition of cohabitation, mutual interference and mutual responsibility as necessary forms of a new solidarity and sense of co-existence.” Elsaesser, European Cinema 27.

6. In Germany, people were proud that a “German” won the Golden Bear for the first time in eighteen years, while in Turkey they celebrated the first success of a Turkish filmmaker in forty years. (There were other critics, who focused on the porn background of the female protagonist Sibel Kekilli.) “I don’t do migrant cinema. I don’t accept this categorization for my films. They don’t talk about migranty, they talk about me and my life.” Fatih Akin interviewed by Asu Aksoy, “Reality: Check,” Vertigo 2 (2005). Akin later talks about an identity in motion. Fatih Akin in an interview with Andreas Kilb and Peter Körte, “Der Islamismus in der Türkei macht mir keine Angst,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (1 Sept. 2007).

7. Elsaesser, European Cinema 125.

8. Some critics refer to different cinematic traditions in connection with HEAD ON and find similarities to Turkish cinema or the New German Cinema. Asuman Suner compares HEAD ON to the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Asuman Suner, “Dark Passion,” Sight and Sound (March 2005). This reference to Fassbinder is very apparent, especially when we think of the music used in MARATHA (1974) or IN A YEAR OF 13 MOONS (1978) where pop music was already being juxtaposed with classical music and original scores. See Senta Siewert, Entgrenzung im Film bei Rainer Werner Fassbinder, unpublished MA thesis (Freie Universität Berlin, 1999). In Akin’s film AUF DER Anderen Seite / ON THE OTHER SIDE (2007) one of the main characters plays Han­na Schygulla, a favorite Fassbinder actress. In my current research, I have explored pop music in such contemporary European films as TRAINSPOTTING, 24 Hour Party People, VELVET GOLDMINE, LOLA RENNT / RUN, LOLA, RUN, SONNENALLE / SUN ALLEY, LA Haine / HATE, CLUBBED TO DEATH, and DANS PARIS / INSIDE PARIS.

9. The soundtrack of CROSSING THE BRIDGE is comprised of Turkish hip-hop and Turkish rock music, which refer to the Western tradition; and arabesque and Gypsy music, which relate to the Middle Eastern world. Akin’s films not only refer to New German Cinema director Fassbinder; there are also references to Wim Wenders, because CROSSING THE BRIDGE is reminiscent of BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB (1999), where the main protagonist, Ray Cooper, is also a flamenco, and pop songs are used as life-savers (like in Wenders’s earlier films).

10. The beginning of the film shows scenes of violence from actual television footage of youth riots against the French police after they shot a sixteen-year-old boy. This montage of found footage is underscored by Bob Marley’s song “Burnin’ and Lootin’,” which seems to connect the images to broader post-colonial struggles against sup­pression. This sampling of images allows the tragic shooting to become part of the fictional story. Moreover, it is as if the past and the present are simultaneously being experienced through the song.


12. Klaus Maack is the founder of the music distribution company Freibank, the man­ager of Einstürzenden Neubauten, music supervisor for HEAD ON, KEBAH CONNECTIONS (Anno Saul, screenplay by Fatih Akin, 2005), and the producer of CROSSING THE BRIDGE and AUF DER ANDEREN SEITE.

13. This perceived tension has a long philosophical tradition, as seen in The Birth of Tragedy where Friedrich Nietzsche describes this conflict, referring to Apollo’s victory for the rational control over Dionysus’s emotional excess, which shows that a body out of control was considered to be subjected to all types of dangerous excesses, associated with drugs and the sublime. Compare to Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

14. Sanije’M (Selim Sesler, Alexander Hacke), Selim Sesler and Orchestra, Idel Dner. See also Fatih Akin, Gegen die Wand: Das Buch zum Film (Cologne: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 2004).

15. This scene refers to the original German title GEGEN DIE WANDE, and means literally “against the wall.”


17. Elsaesser, European Cinema 125.
18. "Lonely Planet" by The The on *Dusk* (Sony Music, 1993). Cahit even switches to English in other scenes, citing song titles in order to communicate his feelings.


20. "Agla Sevdam" (Attila Özdemiroglu, Aysel Gürel), Agir Roman. The lyrics of the song refer to her failed love.


22. See Feridun Zaimoglu, “Lebenswut, Herzhitze,” *Tagesspiegel* (10 March 2004). In Turkey, some ecstatic fans still cut themselves at pop concerts, similar to what Cahit does in the film. This emotion can be described as “an overwhelming condition experienced almost like an incurable illness, from which the ‘victim’ can never recover.” Compare to Asuman Suner “Sex, Suicide, Romantic Abandon and Hard Rock Collide in HEAD-ON, Fatih Akin’s Electrifying Exploration of the Changing Dynamics of German-Turkish Identity,” *Sight and Sound* (March 2005).


27. Elsaesser, *European Cinema* 125: "Abject heroes or heroines in European cinema are not only symptomatic for what they tell us about a society and subjectivity that no longer has a social contract about what count as the minimum conditions of value and use, labor and affective work in a given society or community."
