



T A P E PRESENTS: BUT WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?

# Head-On

## **SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

After it took the top prizes at the 54th Berlinale and the 2004 European Film Awards, German/Turkish director Fatih Akin's *Head-On* was claimed by Germany and Turkey alike. German newspapers talked of 'German cinema' winning Berlin's Golden Bear for the first time in 18 years, while the Turkish press celebrated the 'great victory' of 'a Turkish filmmaker'. It was not difficult, however, to detect a sense of discomfort amid the applause. *Head-On*, after all, resists easy assimilation into the existing matrix of cultural stereotypes, and it is perhaps for this reason that most of the media coverage in both countries focused not so much on the film itself as on 'juicy' controversies involving the performers, notably lead actress Sibel Kekilli's previous appearances in porn videos.

But then *Head-On* is not an easy film to pin down. Audiences seem to find it deeply unsettling, perhaps because it draws on cultural tropes that coexist in an eclectic and volatile disorder. *Head-On* arguably belongs to a sub-genre that could be called the 'hardcore love story', a group of films whose mood is different from that of either romance or melodrama, despite some shared themes. There is always a doomed affair at the centre of such movies, but what transforms this commonplace into something extraordinary here is *Head-On*'s elusive atmosphere – an affective intensity, a concentration of desire and passion conveyed with utter conviction. The 'hardcore love story' category might absorb such disparate titles as Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), Fassbinder's Sirkian (anti)melodrama *Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), Ettore Scola's costume drama *Passion of Love* (1981) and Wong Kar Wai's *Happy Together* (1997). *Head-On* joins them less because of its storyline than because of its haunting tone.

Like Fatih Akin himself, the film's two protagonists are members of the second generation of Turkish immigrants in Germany. Cahit (Birol Ünel) is a middle-aged loner who has a job collecting glasses in a rock club and spends the rest of his time fuelled by heavy doses of hard rock, alcohol and cocaine. At the film's beginning, after a night spent at a bar, he drives his car at full speed into a wall. In hospital he meets Sibel (Sibel Kekilli), an attractive young woman who has also tried to kill herself. After a brief encounter in the doctor's waiting room, Sibel rushes after Cahit and asks him to marry her.

Despite Cahit's initial refusal, it is obvious he is attracted to Sibel and will eventually say yes. She is desperate to escape the authority of her father and the brother who, we learn, broke her nose after seeing her with a boy. She chooses Cahit because he is Turkish, which means her family will accept him, but also because his cool looks suggest he will be unlikely to stop her from pursuing the independence she craves. After a series of farcical scenes of

pre-nuptial arrangements, they marry. Sibel takes advantage of her newfound freedom from day one, storming out during a quarrel about Cahit's former wife and spending the night with a guy she meets in a bar.

One refreshing element of *Head-On* is its non-judgemental attitude to its female protagonist's appetite for hedonism. What might otherwise be perceived as banal promiscuity is rendered here as a sincere and naive passion for living life to the full. The film conveys the sheer enjoyment Sibel derives from having her belly-button pierced, putting on sexy clothes, dancing at clubs, and sleeping with men she likes the look of. Meanwhile a subtle attraction builds between Sibel and Cahit, thwarted by a fundamental obstacle. Sibel cannot make love with Cahit, she explains, because this would make her truly his wife, so jeopardising her cherished independence.

This state of affairs is abruptly interrupted when Cahit unintentionally kills one of Sibel's boyfriends after he has made insulting remarks about her. The mood of the film darkens as Cahit is imprisoned and Sibel recognises, at the very moment she loses him, how much she has been in love with Cahit: an instance of, to borrow cultural theorist Walter Benjamin's phrase, 'love at last sight'. As she mourns their relationship, she also realises that her brother might try to kill her to save the 'family honour'. Before escaping to Istanbul, she pays a visit to Cahit; in their first truly intimate moment, she tells him she will wait for him.

In Istanbul we see a different Sibel. She cuts off her beautiful long hair and dons shabby, masculine clothes. Her expression is sober and depressed and she seems drained of all her energy and passion. She moves in with her female cousin Selma (Meltem Cumbul), an ambitious middle manager in a big hotel. For a while Sibel adopts a strictly conservative lifestyle, working as a chambermaid during the day and watching television in the evenings. In a letter to Cahit, she writes: 'Istanbul is an energetic city full of life. I feel that I am the only lifeless thing in this city.' But one night, driven mad by boredom, she walks down to the buzzing Beyoglu district in search of drugs. She soon falls into a self-destructive pattern like the one Cahit followed at the start of the film: now it is Sibel's turn to run, as the German and Turkish titles of the film have it, 'against the wall' and crash.

Thus *Head-On* is divided into two parts: first, a light-hearted Hamburg-set romantic black comedy, then a heavier, Istanbul-set tragedy. But though only the second half of the story actually takes place in Istanbul, images of that city pervade the film throughout.

Drawing on diverse cultural influences and challenging the notion of an authentic or fixed cultural identity, *Head-On* poses questions about place, tradition and language. The Turkish-German characters shuttle between languages as the film moves locations; the conversations between Cahit and Sibel are striking more for their broken German. Time and again the switching of languages becomes an ironic, even subversive device. When Sibel is trying to convince Cahit to marry her, they argue loudly in German on a bus empty

of other passengers. After Sibel declares that her family will accept Cahit because he's Turkish, the bus stops and the driver, who turns out to be Turkish himself, starts yelling at them in Turkish to get out of his bus since he cannot stand 'bastards like [them] who have no respect for their God and religion.' Cahit coolly reminds him in German that this is not 'his' bus, but it belongs to the municipality. The driver gets increasingly furious.

A reverse scenario occurs in Istanbul when Cahit is looking for Sibel. Hiring a cab at the airport, he doesn't know where to go, so tells the driver to cruise around for a while. The driver asks where he's from and on learning that Cahit originates from Hamburg he delightedly switches to German, explaining that he lived in Munich for several years. Then when Cahit visits Selma and finds her reluctant to help him to track down Sibel, he moves from German to Turkish to try to express his feelings but is unable to do so, as if Turkish were a foreign language (or maybe as if Turkish were not foreign enough). So he switches to English, a language foreign to both of them. Yet during her prison visit, Sibel said in Turkish the words Cahit takes to his heart: 'I will wait for you.'

*Head-On* also shuttles between cultural codes. Having grown up in Germany with Turkish parents, the protagonists seem to feel equally (not) at home in either culture, quoting freely from both their Turkish and German cultural heritages. Yet the film presents this not as a problem of non-belonging but rather as an opportunity to construct multiple belongings. Instead of portraying the experience of exile in terms of homelessness and loss, *Head-On* emphasises its enabling side, what Edward Said called the 'plurality of vision' it offers.

Fatih Akin has said that his film has no ambition to 'represent' the Turkish minority in Germany. Instead, his protagonists are outsiders, 'on a quest to find themselves.' They seek to invent a new life, a new morality, and they pay a price for trying to do so. The film ends with the suggestion that for both of them the quest and the passion are ongoing. In the words of one Turkish pop song: 'What would remain from the story, if there were not passion?'

**Asuman Suner, *Sight & Sound*, March 2005**

## **Sorry, My Somali Is Not Very Good**

A young Somali woman has trouble with her mother tongue.

SORRY, MY SOMALI IS NOT VERY GOOD

Director: Warda Mohamed  
UK 2020  
2 mins

HEAD-ON (GEGEN DIE WAND)

Director: Fatih Akin  
©/Production Company: Wüste Filmproduktion  
©/In co-production with: Corazón International, NDR - Norddeutscher Rundfunk  
©/In association with: Arte Deutschland  
In association with: FilmFörderung Hamburg, FFA - Filmförderungsanstalt, NordMedia, BKM  
World Sales: Bavaria Film International  
Producers: Ralph Schwingel, Stefan Schubert  
Co-producers: Fatih Akin, Andreas Thiel, Mehmet Kurtulus  
Commissioning Editor (NDR): Jeanette Würfl  
Commissioning Editor (ARTE): Andreas Schreitmüller  
Line Producer (Turkish Unit): Ali Akdeniz  
Key Unit Production Manager: Jan Weber  
Key Unit Production Manager (Turkish Unit): Muharrem Gülmez  
Set Unit Production Manager: Roman Brandt  
Set Unit Production Manager (Turkish Unit): Levent Öztekin  
Production Manager: Ingrid Holzapfel  
Production Services in Turkey: Panfilm  
Production Accountant: Uwe Grobecker  
Production Accountant (Turkish Unit): Erhan Özogul  
Location Manager (Turkish Unit): Menderes Demir  
Post-production Supervisor: Nicole Neumann  
Artistic Advisor: Andreas Thiel  
Turkish Production Adviser: Shermin Langhoff  
Set Trainee: Georgios Arvanitis  
1st Assistant Director: Andreas Thiel  
2nd Assistant Director: Nergis Usta  
Script Supervisor: Nergis Usta  
Casting: Mia Seck  
Screenplay: Fatih Akin  
Director of Photography: Rainer Klausmann  
2nd Unit Photographer: Christian Klopp  
Chief Lighting Technician: Torsten Lemke  
Stills Photography: Kerstin Stelter  
Special Effects: Peter Wiemker  
Editor: Andrew Bird  
Art Director: Tamo Kunz  
Art Directors (Turkish Unit): Sirma Bradley, Nergis Caliskan  
Property Master (Exteriors): Beate Ter Schüren  
Property Master (Interiors): Christoph Birth  
Costumes: Katrin Aschendorf  
Make-up: Daniel Schröder, Nursen Balci  
Title Design: Oliver Lammert  
Opticals: Roland Nethe  
Colour Timer: Jens Fischer  
Music: Selim Sesler und Orchester, Idil Üner, Maceo Parker und Band, Aytun Ede, Fanfare Ciocarlia

Music Consultant: Klaus Maeck  
Sound Design: Jörg Krieger, Nani Schumann  
Sound Supervisor: Martin Langenbach  
Sound Recordist: Kai Lüde  
Sound Mixer: Richard Borowski  
Post-synchronization: Richard Borowski  
English Version: Film und Video Untertitelung Gerhard Lehmann AG  
English Version Subtitles: Jeffrey A. McGuire  
Fight Choreography: Emanuel Bettencourt  
Stunt Co-ordination: Double Action, Ronnie Paul  
Acting Coaches: Mira Amari, Dieter Braun  
Unit Publicist: Meike Matthies

Cast

Birol Ünel (Cahit Tomruk)  
Sibel Kekilli (Sibel Güner)  
Catrin Striebeck (Maren)  
Güven Kiraç (Seref)  
Meltem Cumbul (Selma, cousin)  
Zarah McKenzie (waitress at factory)  
Stefan Gebelhoff (Nico)  
Francesco Fiannaca (man in bar)  
Mona Mur (Zoe Bar regular)  
Ralph Misske (psychiatric patient 1)  
Philipp Baltus (psychiatric patient 2)  
Hermann Lause (Dr Schiller)  
Karin Niwiger (cashier at pyschiatrist’s)  
Demir Gökgöl (Yunus Güner, father)  
Cem Akin (Yilmaz Güner, son)  
Aysel Iscan (Birsen Güner, mother)  
Orhan Güner (bus passenger)  
Herr Tekin (barber)  
Andreas Thiel (wedding official)  
Adam Bousdoukos (wedding barman)  
Monique Akin (customer at hair products store)  
Marco Greiser (man at disco)  
Senol Ugurlu (Shane)  
Sileyman Kaplan (Sly)  
Hatun Kazci (Hatice)  
Canan Ata (Canan)  
Nurcan Esmertürk (Nurcan)  
Yilmaz Canan (doorman 1)  
Alma Ouglu Sahin (doorman 2)  
Cahit Aygüler (thug)  
Reinhold Schulz (detention centre attendant)  
Mehmet Kurtulus (Istanbul barman)  
Feridun Koç (Osman 1)  
Tulga Serim (Osman 2)  
Tugay Erverdi (Osman 3)  
Selim Erdogan (taxi driver)  
Tim Seyfi (Bavarian taxi driver)  
Misra Tomruk (Pamuk, daughter)

Germany 2003©  
121 mins

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Black Girl (La noire de...) Mon 12 Jul 18:20  
The Namesake Wed 14 Jul 17:40 (+ live spoken-word performance); Wed 21 Jul 20:40  
What Will People Say (Hva vil folk si) Fri 16 Jul 20:30; Sat 31 Jul 17:30  
Binti Mon 19 Jul 20:40  
While We Live (Medan vi lever) Tue 20 Jul 20:30  
In Conversation with Nikesh Shukla Fri 23 Jul 18:20  
Pinky Sat 24 Jul 11:40  
Lilting Sat 24 Jul 17:20; Fri 30 Jul 20:40  
Head-On (Gegen die Wand) Tue 27 Jul 20:40  
Shoot the Messenger + Q&A with director Ngozi Onwurah, hosted by T A P E’s Angela Moneke Thu 29 Jul 17:45  
Culture Shock: Short Film Programme + Q&A with UNDR LNDN Fri 30 Jul 17:40

T A P E was founded in 2015 as a response to the lack of representation on screen. Find out more about this curatorial collective at [tapecollective.co.uk](http://tapecollective.co.uk)

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