Masculinity and Transnational Paradigms: The Cinema of Fatih Akin

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Fatih Akin’s work as a whole has been very positively received by academics, praised for its transnational vision and its examination of questions of nationality, ethnicity, and identity. Most readings of his cinema address ideological issues of some sort and focus on identity politics and its relationship to cultural, linguistic, musical, biological, and political heritage. Undoubtedly, Akin has left an indelible and unique mark on the German Cinema of the last fifteen years, perhaps especially in his use of music to comment on plot elements and to offer transnational imaginings of geographically German spaces. Many critics have elucidated Akin’s imagined transnational community as one that goes beyond a notion of existing «between» cultures and incorporates interesting and progressive ideas about urban spaces, music, ethnic identities, creativity, and multi-ethnic neighborhoods. Few critics who address issues of ethnicity and transnationalism have spoken at length, if at all, about the intersection of these phenomena with gender except in the case of Gegen die Wand and Auf der anderen Seite. In the case of these two films, productive debates about Akin’s representation of gender have occurred both formally in academic articles and informally in listserv discussions (WiG, for example). In analyses of films such as Im Juli, Soul Kitchen, and Solino, however, gender tends to be absent as an analytic category. Thus a relatively retrogressive treatment of gendered identity goes uncommented, and a hegemonic heteronormative male experience becomes universalized in developing discourses on a transnational urban reality and aesthetic, intentionally or not. In fact, with the exception of Auf der anderen Seite, all of Akin’s films would fail the Bechdel test. That is, one would have to answer «no» for them if asked whether in these films two women ever talk to each other about something other than a man.

This essay will focus on Akin’s men. Analyzing his representations and explorations of the construction of an urban, transnational masculine identity, I want to suggest that we can group his six big feature films to date, all of which rely to some degree on gender (and other) stereotypes, into two categories: those that explore questions of gender in an open-ended, analytic manner and contest traditional masculinities in some way even when they
invoke and naturalize stereotypes (Kurz und Schmerzlos, Gegen die Wand, and Auf der anderen Seite) and those that reaffirm and invite a consensus about the immutability of the heteronormative sex-gender system (Im Juli, Solino, and Soul Kitchen). The primary purpose of the essay is to inject gender as a more prominent analytic category into the critical discourses surrounding Akin’s cinema and in particular into discussions that celebrate his transnational achievement and vision without acknowledging that masculinity as defined within a traditional heteronormative sex-gender system emerges as the fundamental foundation of the same. Whereas there exists a tendency to distinguish between a «cinema of consensus» (Rentschler) and an art or resistance cinema along auteur lines, one that has resulted in Akin being cast primarily as a director of the latter, his body of work includes some films that can be squarely placed in the category of an updated cinema of consensus, even as they appear to query concepts of ethnic identity and national identification.

Akin’s representations of masculinity are primarily representations of an ethnically diverse urban masculinity. In Kurz und Schmerzlos, we encounter Greek, Serbian, and Turkish men struggling to adapt to life in Hamburg Altona’s crime milieu. Im Juli focuses on Daniel, a German student teacher whose life is depicted as boring because he is single and «respectably» middle-class in Hamburg. Solino deals with men of Italian origin trying to make a life and a living in Duisburg. Gegen die Wand and Auf der anderen Seite deal primarily with the plight of Turkish-German men (and to some degree women) between Hamburg and Istanbul or Bremen and Istanbul, and Soul Kitchen offers a mix of ethnically German, Greek, and Turkish men trying to make it in Hamburg in the business and culinary worlds. In all cases, the main characters are men who struggle within their milieus and with their social status. But in all cases one thing is clear: they are all solidly masculine in the terms defined by the heteronormative sex-gender system, i.e., masculinity and femininity represent binary opposites that complement and attract each other. It is clear that Akin’s films investigate questions of national and ethnic origins in a way that encourages viewers to encounter them critically as complicated conundrums. Here, I shift the emphasis of analysis to gender, examining the construction of masculinities in Akin’s six best-known feature films to date in order to show how a predominantly conservative depiction of masculinity and a fatalistic understanding of the sex-gender system undergird heteronormative sex-gender and patriarchal paradigms throughout.

picts ethnically Turkish, Italian, or Greek men as men first and foremost, relying on a complementary depiction of women that foregrounds their sexuality and sensuality and their status as the object of a male heterosexual gaze. Nothing makes Akin’s men more masculine than their sexual attractions and relationships to women. We need only think of Nejat as the exception that proves the rule. A character who may well represent a self-critical intervention on Akin’s part, Nejat is the least patriarchal, most rational, educated, and middle-class Turkish-German male in Akin’s films. He appears to exist beyond, or to be completely unconcerned with, the issues of the heteronormative sex-gender system that lead other male characters such as Cahit, Gabriel, Costa, Ali, and Giancarlo into conflicts, personal and internal or other. In trying to create filmic worlds in which he can challenge the marginalization and negative stereotyping of ethnic minorities in Germany, in which he can suggest that a Turkish-German, for example, has as many potential points of intersection with a German-German as the latter has with another German-German, Akin resorts to a cinematic treatment of women that harkens back to the Hollywood of the fifties and sixties. In short, his construction of masculinity, even in those films that include interesting and important complications, is one that shores up cisgender and heterosexual imperatives.

*Kurz und Schmerzlos* (1999) depicts a milieu in which stereotypes of a criminal, underworld masculinity thrive and reads as a translation of the Italian male in the American context onto the immigrant in the German context. The stereotypes are complicated by the interjection of critiques of male behaviors by the two main female characters, Ceyda and Alice. Although the men, in particular Gabriel, are shown to have a soft side that comes out generally in their interactions with women and occasionally in domestic spaces in their relationships to each other, they nonetheless define themselves primarily in terms of their loyalty to each other as tough guys. Even Gabriel, who represents a site of negotiation between the hard, urban, sexist discourse preferred by Bobby and the correctives to that discourse offered him by Ceyda, his sister, seems unable to break from the performance of masculinity demanded of him by Bobby. In the end, he chooses a criminal, homosocial loyalty to Bobby over a conventional, heterosexual loyalty to Alice. In fact, the latter relationship contributes to his sense that he must privilege the former since, by sleeping with Alice, formerly Bobby’s girlfriend, he believes that he has betrayed Bobby. To avenge Bobby’s death and pay for his own betrayal, to reestablish the primacy of male-male over male-female relationships, Gabriel feels compelled to kill Bobby’s killer. He is therefore
forced to flee Germany for Turkey and to forfeit the promising relationship
to Alice. The narrative structure points to Gabriel’s entrapment, despite his
ability to understand alternatives, in a series of expectations, traditions, and
behaviors that ultimately drive him away from his Altona Heimat. The film
emphasizes that although he can comprehend intellectually that a woman
is more than her boyfriend’s property, he is emotionally tied into patterned
behaviors that deny that understanding.

Newly released from jail, Gabriel has resolved to stay on the straight and
narrow but gets drawn back into criminal behaviors because of his friend-
ships and an exaggerated insistence on a masculinity defined by both the
sexual availability of random women and the ownership of one’s own wom-
an. Bobby and Costa celebrate Gabriel’s release by buying him time with a
prostitute, and his first physical fight occurs because he finds Ceyda, Costa’s
girlfriend until recently, kissing another man. The performance of masculin-
ity demanded in this circle forces Gabriel to distinguish between two
categories of women, each of which sustains that performance differently.
Either a woman is paid for explicitly and is exchangeable or she is owned im-
plicitly and is untransferable. Bobby’s attempt to shame Costa («Deine Frau!
Willst du dir das gefallen lassen?») leads Gabriel to senselessly attack Sven,
Ceyda’s new boyfriend, and when he almost immediately regrets his actions
and storms off, Costa has to explain Gabriel’s behavior to Bobby: «Er will
erwachsen werden und wir hindern ihn daran.» Even Costa, who embraces
his environment and its demands, demonstrates by his word choice that the
concepts of masculinity and brotherhood that dictate their life choices and
relationships depend on the enactment of a childish and destructive mas-
culinity. He sympathizes with Gabriel’s frustration and recognizes that a
break from these behaviors would inevitably involve a break from Gabriel’s
friends. The male characters emerge then, like the women, as victims of the
problematic gender expectations that dominate in their milieu. Akin depicts
the misogyny of the milieu in a manner that points to it as endemic but that
also makes this misogyny visible as an ideology that, though mutable, shores
up honor codes and loyalties – with all their attendant systemic violence –
and makes change difficult. Interestingly, in Kurz und Schmerzlos, Akin
does not resort to the very predictable camera work associated with the het-
erosexual male gaze in his depiction of women – shot-reverse shot showing
the man’s perspective of a woman who then appears in soft focus, slow mo-
tion or a pan-up to emphasize her beauty and sexuality – as he does in both
Im Juli and Soul Kitchen. Thematically and formally, he invites us here to
see how traditional and harmful constructions of masculinity could be dif-
ferent but maintain a fierce grasp both socially and individually, whereas in
Soul Kitchen and Im Juli, he invites us to consent that a happy end involves a heterosexual union in which the roles are clearly and traditionally defined.

The tragedy of Kurz und Schmerzlos lies precisely in the fact that a crack appears in the façade of masculinity upheld in Gabriel’s milieu and offers hope that he might manage to relinquish the concept of masculinity that has defined him and his relationship to others and thereby escape its negative effects. Gabriel stands strong against Bobby’s attempts to involve him with the Albanian mafia and opts for the less exciting job of taxi driver. Although he attacks Sven in the frenzy of a male bonding moment, he later concedes Ceyda’s right to choose her own boyfriend when she admonishes him. Attempting to defend his actions, Gabriel tells her that she can’t just kiss some other guy on the street of the neighborhood and that she needs to go back to Costa because he needs her. But her subsequent question («Soll ich mich aufopfern?») changes his perspective, and he tacitly acknowledges that he has asked for more than he has a right to. Gabriel’s ability to empathize with others results in his falling in love with Alice too, something that promises a new beginning for them both, and it is therefore all the more tragic that he is unable to break free of a destructive ideology of masculine loyalty, murderous brotherhood, and homosocial bonds. Akin’s narration seems to at once acknowledge and lament the persistence of a problematic and underlying architecture of gender.

In Gegen die Wand, the main character, Cahit, drives his car into a wall in a fit of self-destructive depression that requires love, manslaughter, and a prison sentence to cure. Like so many of Akin’s other male characters, Cahit inhabits a kind of urban underworld in which people live unhealthy lives, are frequently exposed to violence, and take comfort in alcohol and aggressive or violent heterosexual sex. Like Illias, Zinos (until the end), Ali, Gabriel, Bobby, and Costa, Cahit has no stable financial footing in this urban center, no career, and nothing to anchor him other than an exaggerated but threatened masculinity. Everything implies, in fact, that it is the death of his wife, and thus the loss of a traditional, monogamous, heterosexual relationship, that motivates Cahit’s suicidal rage. Though it has more complicated twists and turns than traditional Hollywood melodramas, Gegen die Wand is essentially an updated melodramatic story of a good but extremely troubled man saved by the love of a good, if also very troubled, woman. To that extent, the character representations here are neither particularly liberating nor radical but are rather echoes of mainstream filmic reproductions of the sex-gender status quo. Even the basic concepts of identity construction circulating in the film tend toward uncomplicated models, but, as in Kurz und Schmerzlos, Akin leaves open the possibility that human beings’ entrapment
in gendered expectations severely limits their possibilities. If Bobby, Costa, and Gabriel fail to escape the confines of a violent urban masculinity and brotherhood in *Kurz und Schmerzlos*, then here it is Sibel who proves unable to escape a narrow definition of femininity that revolves around sex, reproduction, domesticity, and masculinity as its polar opposite. One particularly binding expectation for Sibel is the mother-daughter relationship. Early on, she explains to Selma that she couldn’t simply leave Hamburg to escape the life she despised because she couldn’t leave her mother. And in the end, the mother-daughter tie and a reasonably comfortable domesticity keep her in Istanbul. Although she has spent two days in a hotel rekindling her relationship to Cahit and packs a suitcase with the intention of leaving, the sound of her daughter’s voice from the next room interrupts her preparations and she chooses to stay. Sibel’s and Cahit’s journeys suggest that interpellation into prefabricated social structures, including a gendered architecture, is a survival strategy and that in general, it is simply a matter of where, when, and how, not if, that interpellation, with its necessary renunciations, occurs. To some degree then, these representations reproduce the ostensibly «natural» reality of the very sex-gender system Akin otherwise laments in both *Kurz und Schmerzlos* and *Gegen die Wand*.

One particularly ugly sequence supports the argument that Sibel, despite herself, is trapped both discursively and physically in the heteronormative sex-gender system. After she loses Cahit to a prison sentence and migrates to Istanbul to wait for him, Sibel descends again into a self-destructive phase, taking drugs, drinking too much, and eventually, after being raped while in a semiconscious state, attempting suicide by provocation. Although the men in the backstreet initiate this violent encounter, directing sexist comments at Sibel, she pushes all the right buttons to escalate them into a misogynist frenzy. As a result of asking them why they don’t go home and «fuck their mothers,» she suffers her first brutal beating. A low-angled camera emphasizes Sibel’s blood on the street in the left foreground while in the right background, she struggles back to her feet and calls them «Hurensöhne.» After a second attack and a warning from the men («Mädchen, zieh Leine!»), a mid shot of Sibel’s bloody and battered face, and her final insult («Ihr Schwuchteln»), one of the men stabs her and leaves her for dead. To incite the men and thus perhaps resist in the only way she knows how as a woman in this context, Sibel challenges their masculinity, resorting to the most stereotypically fraught phrases about women and gays that we can imagine. She insults their mothers by making them into a potential object of the men’s violent sexual desires («ficken»), then by implying the promiscuity of their mothers and its negative reflection on them («Hurensöhne»), and finally by calling their
heteronormative sexuality into question. This confused, violent, and repulsive scene offers a kind of caricature of the dilemma that is masculinity in the narrow confines of a persistently patriarchal world. Although «she was asking for it» is generally used metaphorically to impute guilt to an attacked woman who doesn’t conform to the societal expectations of the «nice girl,» it is rendered literal in this sequence as the stabber’s final address to Sibel suggests: «Verdammte Scheiße! Ich glaube wir haben die Kleine getötet. Ist es das, was du wolltest?» (my emphasis). His question suggests a compulsion to defend their masculinity, as if without it they would be nothing. The characters here become mere ciphers for a system of roles and expectations, losing their humanity. Given that this scene follows directly on the rape of Sibel by an acquaintance in an empty club, Akin might be seen to criticize a predatory masculinity that continues to exist (as in Kurz und Schmerzlos) because of conflicting cultural messages that make women both things to be revered in private (home: mother, sister, daughter) and to be reified in public (city: object of sexual desire, property, Other). And yet the end of the scene with the man’s sympathetic reference to Sibel as «die Kleine» seems to both rehumanize her attackers and diminish and infantilize Sibel. It reestablishes their masculinity (she is the little one) at the same moment in which it seems to exonerate the men for their role in the affair (the man shows remorse and transfers at least some blame to Sibel). This violent attack is then simply absorbed without further comment into the narrative by a significant temporal jump, suggesting a fatalistic understanding of the sex-gender system that regularly generates violence in mundane and innocuous as well as spectacular form.

It is worth lingering for a minute on the construction of femininity in Gegen die Wand since, as the other side of the essential sex-gender binary that Akin repeatedly invokes throughout his work, it offers insight into his construction of masculinity as well. Akin relies on the centrality of sexuality, sensuality, and emotion in the depiction of Sibel and of women in general. His female characters are either foils for the depiction of masculinity (Soflino, Soul Kitchen, and Im Juli), mothers, women driven by their sexuality to self-sacrifice, suicide attempts, self-destruction, and death (Gegen die Wand and Auf der anderen Seite), or some mixture of these characteristics. Sibel exists as a female double of Cahit, a «wild thing,» trying to escape the conditions of her existence through an active nightlife and sex. Confined to a traditional Muslim home and policed by her parents and brother, she even plays with suicide as a possible escape. What escape means to her, however, can be boiled down to one thing: sex whenever, wherever, and with whomever she wants. In her essay «Turkish Delight – German Fright. Migrant Identities in Transnational Cinema, » Deniz Göktürk criticizes the tendency in early
Turkish-German cinema and in German cinema to depict the «ghetto» and the misery of the life of the marginalized and imprisoned immigrant, and to focus on the problems and confinement of women in these marginalized communities:

Many films centred [sic] around the problems of Turkish women who were oppressed by their patriarchal fathers, brothers or husbands, excluded from the public sphere and confined in enclosed spaces. Helma Sanders’ *Shirins Hochzeit/Shirin’s Wedding* (1975), for example […], is a black and white film about Shirin (Ayten Erten) who leaves her Anatolian village, to search for her fiancé Mahmut in Köln. […] Shirin ends up on the street as a prostitute and is killed by her pimp in the end, her fate being commented on elegiacally by Helma Sanders’ voice-over, somewhat universalizing the suffering of womanhood. (7)

Göktürk is critical of what she reads as Helma Sanders’s (whether intentional or unintentional) affirmation of a widespread Western notion that women in traditional Muslim families are oppressed and confined, implying that Sanders merely solidifies an already pronounced sense of Western superiority. Akin’s depiction of Sibel from almost thirty years later does not seem that different except perhaps in its reduction of the confined woman’s struggles with these traditions to issues having to do solely with restrictions to her ostensibly natural, heteronormative, sexual desires. Although complex in a variety of ways and certainly strong, independent, and rebellious, Sibel is ultimately a sexual creature whose primary struggle after escaping the parental home is to learn to contain her naturalised sex drive.

Despite its compelling and thought-provoking twists and turns and Sibel’s and Cahit’s varied experiences and mindsets, *Gegen die Wand* does not ultimately question the heteronormative sex-gender system but merely the expression of masculinity that includes violence and intolerance. The depiction of Sibel in *Gegen die Wand* serves in part to simply distinguish Cahit from other men who appear domineering, base, crude, and entrenched in patriarchal ideologies. His difference becomes clearest in comparisons to characters such as Sibel’s father and brother, the barman who rapes Sibel, and the three men who brutalize her in an alley, but even someone like Seref, Cahit’s mild-mannered friend, serves to help differentiate Cahit. Seref blames Sibel for Cahit’s imprisonment both privately to her and later to Cahit and implies, when he chastises Sibel, that if women would simply toe the line (a parallel admonition to that of the three men who beat Sibel), problems such as those that Cahit is now facing could be avoided. He later tells Cahit too to forget about Sibel because she has done him enough harm. Cahit, however, like Gabriel in *Kurz und Schmerzlos*, signifies an updated masculinity and sets off for Istanbul to find her. Like the other men in *Gegen die Wand*, Cahit
has a rough surface, but his despair over the death of his wife, his desire to help and understand Sibel, and his annoyance at the other Turkish-German men in Sibel’s circle who talk about bordellos and take insult when he asks them why they don’t «fuck» their own wives set him apart. But setting Cahit apart in this way ultimately provides a kind of excuse for a heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity as long as it is gentle and for patriarchal structures as long as violence plays no role in them. If the problems of masculinity (violence, superiority over women, suppression of women, etc.) can be limited to just some males and primarily those who are older or have not «thrown away their Turkish,» to draw on a phrase used by Cahit when he asks for Sibel’s hand in marriage, then the heteronormative sex-gender system as a whole remains unchallenged. We are invited to identify with Cahit and to see in him a masculinity that is more acceptable, one that hides a soft core underneath a rough exterior. Gegen die Wand recovers a relatively conservative masculinity and points to the possibility – even the fatalistic necessity perhaps, to which the discussion of Nejat in Auf der anderen Seite below lends credence – of finding a still clearly identifiable cultural masculinity (a set of behaviors including heterosexual desire) that resides in a clearly identifiable physical male body (the material) that self-identifies as male (the ideal).

In Auf der anderen Seite, viewers encounter a world in which there is no originary root (biological, cultural, political, geographical or other) that is not illusory. The characters eventually abandon their ties to geographical, biological, and cultural roots, becoming free to shift about and to commit to each other in terms that are deliberate and reflective rather than predetermined and unmindful. As Claudia Breger notes in «Configuring Affect: Complex World Making in Fatih Akin’s Auf der anderen Seite,» the German title of the film points to, among other things, the existence of multiplicities, to other sides, spatially, intellectually, ideologically, culturally, and politically speaking. In a nice twist in this film, for example, Turkey becomes the space of liberation, a place where Nejat, Susanne, Ali, and Ayten can find more satisfying and less judgmental relationships to themselves and others. Each makes a conscious decision to open up to the Other in this space, to «take[e] up the problems of the Other» (Glissant 18). Recalling his father’s placing of his relationship to his son above that of his relationship to God when he was a child, Nejat decides to try to find him again and rebuild their relationship. Ali cries after reading Selim Öztegan’s novel The Blacksmith’s Daughter, gaining, we have to assume, new empathy for a woman whose life is determined and rendered desolate by a man and thus some insight into Yeter’s plight. Stricken by the connection between her actions and Lotte’s
death, Ayten invokes her right to remorse and seeks out Susanne who, for her part, enters into a mother-daughter relationship no longer based on a shared biological and cultural heritage. Susanne and Ayten choose each other. *Auf der anderen Seite*, then, is a film marked by «errancy» in the sense developed by Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation*. «Errancy,» he argues, is that phenomenon which «silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us» (18). Interestingly, it is within this context that we see Akin’s first developed representation of a same-sex relationship, suggesting, also for the first time in one of his films, the «destructuring» of compact sex-gender identities. Exploring cultural, geographical, and even biological essentialism, *Auf der anderen Seite* points to the possibility of an existential nomadism.

Despite its investigation of this existential nomadism and its more satisfying range of feminine identities, a range that at least partially undermines the heteronormative sex-gender system, the film’s two primary representations of masculinity (Ali and Nejat) neither challenge nor threaten traditional understandings of masculinity. Ali, the working-class, older Turkish immigrant to Germany, understands masculinity to involve toughness and a relationship to women based on conflicting desires to honor, protect, control, and own them. When Yeter praises him for having raised Nejat so well – Nejat is polite, discrete, willing to do house work and wait on Yeter at dinner – Ali responds that he raised him «like a girl,» revealing both his entrenchment in a set of strictly gendered identity discourses and at least a vague disappointment with his son.⁹ The terms of Ali’s relationship to Yeter consolidate his attitudes toward gendered identity for the viewer. Masculinity for him is intimately tied to a misogynist heterosexuality, so much so that when he returns from a few days in the hospital, he cannot imagine that his son has not slept with his girlfriend during his absence. Emotionally wrought and attempting to reassert his dominance over, and ownership of, Yeter, Ali accidentally kills her when she resists. Nejat’s emotional reserve, by contrast, is emphasized in his relationship to the literature to which he has devoted his life and his logical decision to fund Ayten’s education after Ali kills her mother: if his father killed her mother, then he must atone for the sins of the father by trying to replace that mother, at least in deed. The first crack in Nejat’s aloof exterior – he communicates primarily about practicalities throughout the film – appears when he and Susanne look out the window of his apartment in Istanbul at the men heading to the mosque and he recalls his father’s devotion to him as a child. Clearly moved by an all-male religious occasion and the memory of his father’s promise that he would choose
to make an enemy of God before conceding to sacrifice his son, Nejat decides on the spur of the moment to go find him. Like Daniel in *Im Juli*, he sets off on a real road trip that becomes the metaphor for an internal odyssey that, as viewers, we experience as a flashback narration. Nejat and Ali represent the two fairly extreme poles of masculinity between which all of Akin’s other male characters fall. On the one hand, we have the emotional, hypersexual male who indulges in the pleasures of the flesh – alcohol and sex – and believes he owns Yeter whose exclusivity he has purchased, and on the other we have the intellectual, unemotional, and seemingly asexual male who gives himself over to the life of the mind – books, logical decisions, and moderation – and takes in women who pay him for their accommodations. While Nejat’s rational, unemotional, sensitive brand of masculinity, his Victorian gentlemanliness if you will, contrasts with Ali’s and puzzles Ali, the polarization of the two characters combined with the evacuation of all sexuality from the character of Nejat offers, in the end, no disruption to the heteronormative sex-gender system and leaves the range of potential masculine identities limited and limiting. In fact, Nejat comes across as a hollow shell without a real identity, hardly offering a viable alternative to traditional masculinities. In the end, inspired by the story of the sacrifice of Isaac and his own father’s rejection of Abraham’s obedience to God, he has traveled toward the father, a traditional manifestation of masculinity, but is left waiting on the shore, unsure if what he is looking for will return.

Akin’s treatment of masculinity in these three films suggests the often unfortunate but de facto persistence of gender stereotypes within and across cultures even as it allows for some plurality arranged along a continuum from Ali to Nejat. In «A New Kind of Creative Energy: Yadé Kara’s *Selam Berlin* and Fatih Akin’s *Kurz und Schmerzlos* and *Gegen die Wand,*» Petra Fachinger concludes: «In all of Akin’s films, his male protagonists struggle with their masculinity because of a lack of suitable role models. The traditional patriarch has lost his legitimate function, and American pop culture heroes send them on a path of (self)destruction» (258). Fachinger’s emphasis on the «traditional» patriarch’s loss is important because the representations in these films neither particularly challenge nor threaten patriarchal structures as a whole. Akin’s characters represent, Mine Eren concludes (quoting Stephan K. Schindler and Lutz Koepnick), «existential nomads ready to leave a past of stifling conventions behind» (Eren 175). But the stifling conventions these characters seem ready to leave behind do not, in most cases, and particularly in the three comedies I will discuss below, include gender conventions. Whereas the elderly men appear at home in their performances of masculinity (at least until something goes very wrong), the younger gen-
eration is often adrift in a world in which the external expectations of masculinity seem primarily defined in terms of finance capital, independence, and career or class, and the internalized expectations continue to be issues of sexual desire, dominance, and honor. By displacing the problems of the patriarchy onto an earlier generation’s violence and intolerance toward women, however, Akin provides an accounting for patriarchy that locates its biggest problems in just a few bad seeds who are either of a bygone era or the vestiges of that bygone era. Against this backdrop, the younger generation tends to represent an acceptable form of patriarchy – softer, less rigid, and more sensitive – but the fundamental architecture of gender and the heteronormative sex-gender system remain largely intact.

Given Akin’s intriguing, if ultimately fairly conventional, treatment of gender in _Kurz und Schmerzlos, Gegen die Wand_, and _Auf der anderen Seite_, it is difficult to imagine the trajectories that led from _Kurz und Schmerzlos_ to _Im Juli_ and from _Gegen die Wand_ and _Auf der anderen Seite_ to _Soul Kitchen_. The dominant conceptualization of a new masculinity emerging from Akin’s comedies is one that combines elements of an intellectual, middle-class but rigid white German masculinity and a creative, working-class and flexible ethnic German masculinity. Whereas _Kurz und Schmerzlos, Gegen die Wand_, and _Auf der anderen Seite_ acknowledge questions of intersectionality – how ethnic and gender issues intermingle and both block and build on each other – and explore, it could be argued, masculinities (plural), _Im Juli, Solino_, and _Soul Kitchen_ establish a kind of masculinity (singular) that, while ostensibly progressive because of its consideration of class and race, seems utterly retrogressive in its construction of the relationship between masculinity and femininity. These films invite viewers into a consensus about a kind of immutable masculine/feminine binary. They depict a new man who needs the attitudes, grit, and urban toughness of the working-class, ethnic German but the economic resources, professional recognition, and the control over his own destiny of the middle-class white German. In _Im Juli, Solino_, and _Soul Kitchen_, the central male’s quest is for control. He must arrive at a position where he has power over himself, his partner, and his business or career. Akin’s body of work, then, cannot be seen to be as homogenous-ly challenging of narrow identity structures as it appears when he is listed among the German directors who do not make «cinema of consensus.» My goal here is to provide an alternative perspective to readings within transnational discourses that see _Soul Kitchen, Solino_, and _Im Juli_ as just more of what we get in _Kurz und Schmerzlos, Gegen die Wand, Auf der anderen Seite._11
Randall Halle argues, that «[t]ransnationalism entails a reimagining of community,» and points out that «[w]hile it affords new possibilities of belonging, it also entails new techniques of exclusion; it is a redefinition of borders, not a removal of them» (10). And, like many, he lauds Fatih Akin’s works for offering something complicated and intricate in terms of this reimagining. In his article «Großstadtfilm and Gentrification Debates: Localism and Social Imaginary in Soul Kitchen and Eine flexible Frau,» Halle discusses Richard Florida’s concept of the «creative class» and applies it to the two films he analyzes, concluding in the case of Soul Kitchen that Akin pits two kinds of gentrification against each other and celebrates one, namely the kind where someone who is committed locally, personally, and culturally is behind that gentrification. Halle’s analysis does not include gender, but in her essay «Beyond the Class Act: Gender and Race in the ‘Creative City’ Discourse,» Brenda Parker demonstrates the gendered nature of the discourse on the creative class, arguing that it «forwards a seemingly soft, contemporary version of hegemonic masculinity. Sometimes subtly and often opaquely, the discourse reflects and reproduces a number of gendered ideologies and practices. In doing so, it helps ‘fix’ and ‘naturalize’ a raced and gendered order in which privileged men have the most unambiguous access to and power in the creative city» (202). Soul Kitchen’s representation and celebration of the creative class similarly «reflects and reproduces gendered ideologies and practices» and naturalizes a «gendered order,» and the critique Parker levels at «the Creative Class discourse» extends to discourses on transnationalism as they surface in many discussions of Fatih Akin’s cinema because gender often proves absent as an analytic category and masculinist positions come, by default, to stand at the center of human experience. If the obviously gendered representation of foreigners’ successes in, and integration into, a creative urban class in a particular body of films goes unaddressed, then discourse here too forwards, unwittingly or not, a «soft, contemporary version of hegemonic masculinity» (Parker 202). My interest, then, is in tracing some of the exclusions that Halle alludes to in the introduction to his book German Film after Germany: Toward a Transnational Aesthetic in Akin’s films.

Soul Kitchen has received a lot of praise both in reviews and in film criticism. Halle’s article mentioned above reveals the film’s interesting commentary on the process of gentrification, and Hillman and Silvey highlight the creative and intelligent way in which music is used in Soul Kitchen. My argument that the gender politics of the film remain questionable, condoning male sexual aggression and universalizing a dominating heterosexual and partially violent masculinist perspective, ought not be taken as a contradict-
tion of Halle’s, Hillman and Silvey’s arguments but rather as an addition to them. The film focuses on Zinos’s struggle to become a successful man and suggests that in order to do so, he must assert his masculinity more forcefully. At the beginning of the narrative, Zinos is in a relationship with Nadine, and his own career is suffering. He attends a party with her family because she wants him to, feels outclassed, seems unable to stand up for himself among them, and so steps outside to take a break from the stress. The qualities of the cook at this restaurant, however, who ignores the normal dictates of his job and the upper-class milieu, intrigue Zinos. Rather than feel somewhat intimidated by the environment (as Zinos appears to be) and allow the wealthy German customer to impose his understanding of soup onto gazpacho, Shane confronts the customer, violently jabbing the knife into his table and denying his right to redefine a traditional Andalusian dish. When Shane is fired for his actions, Zinos follows him outside, compliments his work, and eventually hires him. At the end of the film, Zinos has shed Nadine and is now together with a woman who has nursed him back to health, is closer to his class origins, and who is softer and allows him to take control.

*Soul Kitchen*’s focus is clearly on Zinos and his personal odyssey, but it offers us depictions of four women, all of whom are cardboard figures important for what they tell us about the male characters: Nadine, Zinos’s girlfriend; Lucia, the waitress in his restaurant and later Illias’s girlfriend; Frau Schuster, the tax woman; and Anna, the physiotherapist and Zinos’s romantic interest at the end of the film. Zinos’s masculinity is tied to a fundamentally misogynist architecture. Nadine is a problematic girlfriend because she makes demands on him that interfere with his restaurant plans and travels to Shanghai for her work, thereafter being only accessible in virtual fragments when they skype (her face, her eyes, her torso and breasts during a failed attempt at virtual sex). Later, she is the disloyal, spoiled, rich girl who cheats on him but fails to tell him so that on his way to his flight to join her in Shanghai, he sees her walking through the Hamburg airport with another man. She functions negatively in his life, primarily because she puts her career as a foreign correspondent and her own wishes and desires above his and asks that he adapt somewhat to her familial and class environment. Nadine undermines rather than props up his masculine self. In contrast to her, he is economically and professionally unsuccessful, and even his attempts at sexual intercourse all fail: she falls asleep when he tries to have sex with her in person and when he hopes for virtual satisfaction, he knocks the camera off the laptop and ruins his chances then too. Nadine is only partially rehabilitated toward the end of the film when she lends him the money he needs to buy back his restaurant, a defining element of his masculinity. Lucia is sexu-
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alized from the beginning, the object of Illias’s (Zinos’s brother’s) gaze and can only be truly integrated into the community in which she works when she concedes to Illias’s advances and eventually becomes his lover. Anna, a foreign physiotherapist to whom Nadine refers Zinos when he has trouble with his back, is first and foremost the sexualized Other who causes Zinos to have an erection during a physiotherapy session, who, in other words, presides over the revitalization of his masculinity. Unlike Nadine, his first girlfriend, Anna accepts a more traditionally feminine role and conveniently understands Zinos from the first time they meet. She nurses him back to health, abandons another patient to help him, and is the only member of the «geschlossene Gesellschaft» invited to his restaurant for a special Christmas feast that he prepares himself. Whereas Nadine makes him laughable, Anna heals him, makes him strong, and cedes control to him. In order to assert his masculinity, Zinos must break from the more dominant and successful Nadine, find a nurturing woman who meets him in his environment rather than demanding that he come to hers, get his own back on the woman in a position of authority, and take control of the narrative. Thus in his investigation of masculinity in Soul Kitchen, Akin resorts to a series of banal, tired, and crude stereotypes: the cold and unfeeling blond career woman whose only saving grace is that she can be guilted into lending Zinos some money after having formerly undermined his masculinity; the dark-haired alternative would-be artist who sees past the criminal, gambler, womanizer to the nice guy inside Illias’s rough exterior; and the gentle, caring, non-German mother figure who understands, supports, and prioritizes Zinos and his needs. Economic integration combined with a personal, emotional, and sexual segregation makes Zinos a satisfied and whole man in the end. He goes from having a relatively unsuccessful business and a German girlfriend to a happy ending in which he has a promising business and a migrant girlfriend. Though obviously interesting and original from some perspectives, Soul Kitchen’s exploration of the emerging transnational urban and creative class obscures the fact that belonging fully to this class seems to require that one be a cisgender male.

The fourth and most disturbing of the crude stereotypes of femininity (with its implied relationship between masculinity and femininity) is to be found in the depiction of Frau Schuster, the blond woman in a position of authority – she is the tax collector – who can be put back in her place and humiliated through sex. Soul Kitchen includes a scene with Frau Schuster that is violent in its implications, grotesque, and misogynist and yet a scene that has received little or no critical attention in readings or reviews of the film. Given that this film follows Gegen die Wand by five years, it is hard to see
Akin depict another scene similar to the rape of Sibel (woman being taken with force of some kind from behind) as comedic, and it is perhaps because it simply does not fit our reading of the trajectory of Akin’s oeuvre that the scene in question has gone uncommented. In the latter third of the film Neumann «fucks the tax office,» to use Zinos’s language, during Zinos’s goodbye party. Frau Schuster had come to his restaurant earlier to collect taxes owed and had taken his music system because he had no money to offer. Zinos’s revenge when she returns this night is to give her a dessert laced with an aphrodisiac – and she is, importantly, the only person to whom he directly hands such a dessert – and watch as she spirals down into a sexual frenzy. Although others too consume this aphrodisiac dessert, they do so independently and not because Zinos hands it to them in an ostensibly friendly gesture. Eventually we see Frau Schuster bent over, hands against a pole, with Neumann penetrating her from behind, pulling on her hair like on a horse’s mane with one hand, and taking photos of her in a compromising situation with a smart phone in the other hand. Though conscious and standing, she is in an altered state and is, at best, a passive, possibly an unwitting, recipient of this sex act. A discussion in the parking lot the next morning emphasizes Frau Schuster’s diminished capacity the night before. She walks out of the restaurant to find Neumann and Zinos laughing at the photos, discussing her «tits,» and agreeing enthusiastically about how «geil» it all was. Frau Schuster’s sense of having been wronged is evident, especially when she asks for Neumann’s name, implying that she will seek revenge. Despite all of this, Zinos’s final comment to her is a tongue-in-cheek, «Gut geschmeckt?»

Zinos intentionally offers Frau Schuster an overdose and takes pleasure in her sexual humiliation both during and after it. The narrative arc is one in which the viewers are placed in an identificatory relationship with Zinos. We are expected to feel his pain, see through his eyes, and celebrate his victories even if one borders, as in this case, on the reprehensible. I read this scene, in fact, as a trivialized rape narrative. At the very least, we are dealing with a kind of sexual assault, compounded by the photographing of the act and the circulation of those photographs to which Frau Schuster did not consent. There is little doubt but that Frau Schuster’s bodily sovereignty has been violated. In fact, the comedy in operation here would not work at all if it weren’t for the existence of a violation. Presumably the act can be seen as humorous because of what Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren elucidate as the benign violation theory of humor in their article «Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny.» According to them, humor is elicited by benign violations: «moral violations that simultaneously seem benign elicit laughter and amusement in addition to disgust» (1141). They argue that three
conditions must coexist to elicit humor: «A situation must be appraised as a violation, a situation must be appraised as benign, and these two appraisals must occur simultaneously» (1142). The authors acknowledge that some violations are less clearly benign than others. Complications occur when «one norm suggests that the behavior is wrong but another simultaneously suggests that it is acceptable» (1144). Psychological distance from the violation also matters, the authors explain, as does the strength of one's commitment to the violated norm (1145–47). With regard to the sexual act represented here then, we would have to assume that Akin’s comedy would not function if there were not at least some implication that Frau Schuster is not completely conscious of what she is doing. This is Zinos’s revenge, after all, so if she were simply engaging completely consciously, entirely of her own volition, and with no external influence in a public, sexual act in which she would have engaged anyway, regardless of drugs, the orgy atmosphere, etc., there would be no potential to see a violation and thus no potential to celebrate Zinos’s payback. The laughter Akin attempts to elicit depends precisely on the fact that Zinos, by personally administering an aphrodisiac to Frau Schuster in the guise of a friendly dessert offering and against her knowledge, creates the conditions for a public, sexual humiliation of this woman. Even if rhetorically this is «just» a mechanism used to undermine the ethnographic gaze, employed to demonstrate how a member of an ethnic minority «sticks it to the man» (with, curiously, a woman having been chosen to represent that «man»), asserts himself, bonds with an ethnically German man who represents a business threat, and thereby becomes part of a more transnational fabric of masculinity, a masculinity which in late capitalism has more to do with economic interests and the heteronormative sex-gender system than national or ethnic origins, Akin’s contribution to the discourse is, in this instance, still misogynist. Even as it works to promote a new understanding of marginalized minorities who can be more organically tied to and interested in the development of the Hamburg Heimat than any purportedly more German German, Soul Kitchen becomes part of a cinema of identification that makes misogyny something for viewers to coalesce around and laugh at. Because Zinos is redeemed, shown in the gentle relationship to Anna to be nothing like Neumann with whom he shares this misogynist moment, his culpability is erased and this misogynist act is trivialized – just an understandable attempt on the part of the struggling nice guy to settle the score. Akin appears here to be trying to have his cake and eat it too. He implicitly critiques the kind of misogynist positions into which someone like Zinos could fall in order to avoid alienating the wealthy, white, successful businessman who is after his building but also
promotes that same misogyny in the name of a comedic sympathy for the underdog.

Halle’s analysis of the characteristics of *Heimat* in *Soul Kitchen* offers a further productive springboard for an analysis of the film’s conservative construction of masculinity: «Historically the term *Heimatfilm* has designated a sentimental film with a regional background. *Heimat*, home, is typically connected to an idyllic landscape and a German community rooted in ethnicized soil. Akin in effect turns the ‹home film› into a ‹hometown› film […]. With *Soul Kitchen*, *Heimat* is de-ethnicized and generalized to become simply that place wherever one lives, works, and loves» (175). What remains unspoken here is the fact that the «one» who «lives, works, and loves» is a cis-gender male. In terms of gender paradigms, *Soul Kitchen* reproduces and reifies traditional conceptualizations. Gender is not a contested site in this re-writing of the *Heimatfilm* but rather a site in which the familiar is affirmed. Gender serves as a constant across national and ethnic boundaries. The film may suggest that migration and the emergence of a new urban, ethnic, creative class promise positive shifts and changes that will not undermine but rather add strength and diversity to the Hamburg *Heimat*, but the gendered relationships intrinsic to its representation of successful masculinity return us to a very traditional notion of *Heimat* and the *Heimatfilm*. Indeed, the essentialism of soil and ethnicity seem transferred to the gendered body: in a film representing a world in which it is no longer possible or desirable to maintain traditional boundaries – ethnic, cultural, class, and other – gender provides a familiar cartography. While, as Halle concludes, «a narrative attempt to negotiate urban development and renewal» is central to *Soul Kitchen*’s plot and we can «understand the film itself, with its chaotic fast-paced narrative and comedic disruptions, as a part of this uncontrolled social imaginary that envisions a particular structure in urban space» (176–77), this particular narrative and its negotiations are not merely male-centered and male-driven but misogynous, depending, especially for its comedic disruptions, on a relegation of women to traditional sexualized and subordinate roles. So while *Soul Kitchen* may represent, in Halle’s words, «a de-ethnicized, de-racialized conception of *Heimat*/home,» it does not represent a de-gendered one (179). Because I agree wholeheartedly with Randall Halle’s insightful conclusion that «[i]magine communities made possible by film offer important interventions in quests for alternative social and economic organization,» I believe it is essential that, while recognizing and praising Akin’s films for their alternative imaginings in a variety of senses, we also remain open to a critical discourse that exposes those important aspects of an alternative social and
economic organization that are being overlooked, omitted, or even directly undermined (190).

In her essay «Cosmopolitan Filmmaking: Fatih Akin’s *In July* and *Head-on,*» Mine Eren summarizes Daniel’s physical and mental odyssey in *Im Juli* as follows: «As Daniel abandons his preconceived ideas and belief in rationality, he finds both his true love and his true identity» (180; my emphasis). As Eren’s summary suggests, the film reads as an adult Disney film. The very idea that a character has a submerged but authentic masculine identity that emerges over the course of a European odyssey leads one to suspect that the representation of masculinity in the film might not complicate questions of identity and its relationship to gender, ethnicity, and/or transnationalism. Indeed, *Im Juli* depends on an incontrovertible understanding of masculinity as the complement to femininity, as one side of an essential human binary that, among other things, overrides manifestations of class and cultural difference. Despite Daniel’s fundamental uncoolness, Juli falls for him, but her attempts to flirt with him fall flat because he appears hopelessly alienated from his basic drives and desires. Flashing forward to the conclusion of his journey in Istanbul, we encounter the confident, relaxed Daniel who has experienced the «real» world and to whom appropriate heterosexual flirtation is second nature – he pretends to not hear her when she says «Ich liebe dich,» so that she will have to repeat it a number of times and increasingly loudly. The factors that have brought about this seismic change in one week seem a bit puerile: a trip in which Daniel learns to fight, to spoon, to smoke pot, in which he is seduced, drugged, robbed, shot at, and forced to survive with nothing but the shirt on his back, all, of course, in order to get the girl. In this accelerated, heterosexual coming-of-age story, Daniel learns to be a man by casting off all of the middle-class, intellectual, uptight, asexual prissiness that makes him appear socially and professionally inept. He even gets rid of – apparently without any real consequence – the glasses he presumably needs to counteract his myopia since he wears them all the time in Hamburg. This return to a reliance on his own eyes can be read to symbolize his emergence from an overly corrective cocoon of civilization that, like the clothes, wallet, passport, habits, and affectations he loses, limits rather than supports his natural instincts and stunts his masculinity. In both *Soul Kitchen* and *Im Juli,* German hegemonic masculinity is transformed from an upper-class intellectual model to a working-class ethnic model, but the fundamental heterosexual paradigm whereby identity is defined by a series of masculine and feminine binaries goes unquestioned. As a «disnification,» *Im Juli* offers pleasure in the form of easily digestible solutions rather than insightful questions about transnationalism or conundrums of identity and its relationship
to ethnicity, nationhood, gender, and/or sexuality. It promises viewers that despite difficulties and twists and turns, if one persists, everything will work out right in the end within, of course, the hegemonic heterosexual paradigm.

While not invoking traditional narrative pleasure and problematically gendered binaries on quite the same misogynist level as Soul Kitchen, some of the same problems exist in Im Juli. Daniel’s masculinity, the masculinity of a young ethnic German, is what is at stake here, and it is ultimately won and affirmed by means of a journey east and south to unexplored territories in which he becomes the struggling Other until he manages to tell his story of heterosexual desire to another man. Although he is drawn out of his comfort zone, away from Hamburg and his Spießer existence, he is drawn not by an interest in other culture, but by the promise of heterosexual gratification. The exoticization of the Europe east of Germany occurs through the lens of Daniel’s heterosexual gaze, in particular his gaze at Melek. In the first scene in which we see her, the camera repeats, without irony, the objectification tactics associated with the male gaze so astutely analyzed by Laura Mulvey in the mid-seventies and, as this and other cases bear out, still relevant today. As Melek approaches Daniel for the first time, she is shown in fragments, rendered in soft focus and slow motion, and sexualized. It is not insignificant that the film is essentially Daniel’s narrative to Isa, one in which foreign countries are rendered difficult and treacherous and their men dangerous and corrupt. When Daniel does manage a transnational connection to another male, namely to Isa, it is because of a mutual understanding of a basic heterosexual male drive. Melek and Juli attract Daniel, not Turkey or any of the countries between Germany and Turkey. His primary Other is woman, and his quest has little to do with the pursuit or achievement of transnational understanding, an openness to difference and a variety of European cultures as some critics and reviewers have claimed. Instead, he is on a conventional, normative, and heterosexually inflected quest.

That the principal Other in this film is a gendered rather than ethnic Other is borne out by the bridging of Isa and Daniel’s differences by a hegemonic, heteronormative desire that diminishes all their other differences – it doesn’t even occur to either of them that they might be competitors. Once Isa understands that Daniel is in pursuit of a woman, he does all he can to help him get to the Bosphorus Bridge on time. The final pairings of the film emphasize the prominence of masculinity in the single transnational understanding that appears to occur between Isa and Daniel: a German travels across Europe and endures a variety of hardships in pursuit of a Turkish-German woman but realizes just in time that he is destined to be with Juli, a German woman, and that the Turkish-German woman is already in a rela-
tionship with his new Turkish-German friend. The end of Daniel’s explor-
ing, to invoke T.S. Eliot, is that he arrives where he started but knows that place (Juli and his masculinity) for the first time. The journey across Europe has not educated him about other cultures and peoples. It has «made a man» of Daniel, returning him to the roots he had, ironically, lost track of at home in Hamburg, namely to his instinctive masculinity and native culture, expressed as his always already predetermined role in this heterosexual Ger-
man-German coupling. Like Soul Kitchen, though «fun and entertaining» in accordance with the benign violation theory of humor and with cinematic archetypes created in the Golden Age of Hollywood, the film relies for its comedy on fairly stale fairytale structures and on both ethnic and gender stereotypes.

Solino also deals with displacements, transnationalism, and masculinity, offering the usual male suspects in the form of the older man (Romano) who is entrenched in his patriarchal ways, the younger man (Gigi) who is soft, gentle, understanding and indicative of the positive possibilities of an oth-
erwise conservative masculinity, and the younger man (Giancarlo) who is a chip off the old block, still a patriarch, and only able to relate to women as objects of his sexual desire and props for his performance of masculinity. Gigi is malleable and, unlike his brother Giancarlo, subordinates his own needs and desires to familial responsibilities. He serves as an example of the positive patriarchal demand that one honor one’s mother. Like Zinos and Daniel, Gigi too arrives at a sense of fulfillment through a return to and ac-
ceptance of modified origins. In Gigi’s case, the return to origins is most ex-
plicit. He finds himself when he commits to his mother, his motherland, his first love, Ada, and the small-town structures his father and Giancarlo (both seemingly dissatisfied at the end) fled. There are few heterosexual female characters in Akin’s films (even in those three films discussed earlier that I would not classify as among his consensus films) who are not excessively sexualized, not depicted as either driven primarily by their own sexual de-
sire or as the receptacle for straight male sexual desire, and the female char-
acters in Solino offer no deviation from this pattern. As in Soul Kitchen, they are hollow, cardboard figures, representing the opposite pole to masculinity in the heterosexual paradigm and complementing, shoring up, and/or high-
lighting the difference between Gigi’s sensitive and Giancarlo’s insensitive inhabitance of a heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity. Although Gigi, like Cahit in Gegen die Wand, departs from the other negative performances of masculinity around him, even he relates to women, with the exception of his mother obviously, based on the principle that for men, women exist pri-
marily as objects of desire who, ideally, subordinate their needs and wishes
to those of their male partner. The only woman who is fleshed out at all in Sollino is Rosa, Gigi’s mother, who, despite her foundational work on and commitment to the family business, turns out in the end to have been the long-suffering, self-sacrificing wife of the Italian philanderer and paterfamilias and more or less disappears after her return to Italy – although she does not die immediately of Leukemia as predicted. The problems of a depiction that singles Gigi out as the good, updated, gentle instantiation of a persistent, immutable, and practically universal masculinity have been discussed earlier in the case of Gegen die Wand and do not need to be repeated here. In short, the gender discourses and to some degree the discourses on transnationalism circulating in these three comedies are hackneyed, conventional tropes, and the films, much more so than the three films discussed earlier, naturalize male dominance, power, narrative control, and the idea of roots. These three films, I would therefore argue, fall into the category of an updated «cinema of consensus.» Akin is not a one-sided filmmaker with a constant political or ideological agenda, I would argue, but a filmmaker whose films run the gamut from mainstream conventional to unorthodox radical.

The transnational imagining of community that emerges from Fatih Akin’s work, then, is one that tends toward the universalization of a masculine, heteronormative position. In the article cited earlier by Göktürk, she praises a 1993 film, Berlin in Berlin, for offering a new approach by depicting a German man finding refuge inside a Turkish-German home. This little space in Kreuzberg becomes the safe haven for Thomas, and the external world is the limiting and threatening space. In her discussion of the innovative things this film does, however, Göktürk is forced to focus on the lives of the male characters. As she discusses Thomas, the German’s, adjustments to life in the Turkish family, she focuses on the relationships between and among the men living inside the apartment. And so while she can conclude that the film shows «more potential in exploring the pleasures of hybridity than previous attempts to portray German-Turkish encounters» and that the «reversal of the asylum situation and the resulting symbiosis open up possibilities of mutual humor and reflection, of traffic in both directions,» the new possibilities seem to be possibilities for heterosexual men (13—14). That is, except for when Thomas saves the sister-in-law in the family by leaving with her after the family begins to suspect her of having a role in her husband’s murder, it is only possible to call the traffic in both directions «German-Turkish» if we are satisfied with a universalization of the heterosexual male experience. The same goes for the discussions of Fatih Akin’s contributions to transnationalism and his ostensibly progressive exploration of the possibilities of
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new ethnic identities. There is little in his films that helps us imagine what a transnational imagining would offer for women, gays, or others. In fact, his entire transnational project seems predicated on the existence of a fundamental gender binary that informs identity at a more basic level than any other aspect of culture.

With this essay, I hope to have added to the valuable and necessary discourses of appreciation of Akin’s cinema a critical element that pushes for the acknowledgement of some of the significant omissions Halle alludes to when he explains that transnationalism redefines but cannot remove borders and thus includes as well as excludes. A more intersectional approach, one that incorporates elements of gender, feminist, and sexuality studies reveals that the redefinition of borders in Akin’s cinema does not include gender borders. Adding such discussions to the growing corpus of critical literature on Fatih Akin’s considerable cinematic contributions might aid in a further and positive complicating of transnational approaches to film analysis. It will at least help ensure that the reproduction of crass gender stereotypes in the service of a cinema that asks us to do the important work of thinking about the position of ethnically other men in contemporary Europe does not go uncommented in its promotion of a naturalized heteronormative sex-gender system. If, as Leslie Adelson proposes in The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature, Turkish-German narratives have become an increasingly large part of discourse in German history, culture, and politics, then it is important to examine what contributions, positive and negative, those narratives might be making to, among other things, discourses of gender and sexuality and their relationships to identity. The cinematic gaze Akin proposes in several of these films is one that returns to an objectification and sexualization of women, making them the object of the gaze, the locus of visual pleasure, and a threat, if not contained, to masculinity. In his comedies especially, but also in part elsewhere, Akin asks us as viewers to adopt the male gaze, to privilege the universal male position, and to align our sympathies with the male characters even when they commit misogynist acts. Rather than just celebrate the achievements of Akin’s films in certain areas, it is important to see them more completely and to point out shortcomings and blind spots. «Various scholars have suggested that the conventional structure of the melodrama requires a reading beneath the surface to unmask the hidden ideological tensions and contradictions in society,» Eren advises us (182). In the case of Akin’s films, I suggest that we need to reread the surface in order to remind ourselves of the ideological tensions and contradictions being ignored in plain sight.
To name but a few, critics who have praised Akin’s transnational aesthetic, his complications of issues of identity, and his injection of a refreshing twist on Turkish-German relations into German cinema include Barbara Mennel, Randall Halle, Mine Eren, Roger Hillman and Vivien Silvey, Kerry Dunne, and Petra Fachinger.

See, for example, discussions by Roger Hillman and Vivien Silvey, as well as by Randall Halle.

The Bechdel test, also known as the Bechdel/Wallace test, is common in popular feminist culture as a kind of gender bias litmus test for a piece of fiction, film or other. Alison Bechdel first introduced the idea in one of her comic strips entitled «The Rule» (from Dykes to Watch Out For) in 1985. In this strip, a character says she has three basic requirements of a film. It has to have at least two women and they have to talk to each other about something other than a man.

For important discussions of the construction of masculinity in Kurz und Schmerzlos, see Barbara Mennel’s «Bruce Lee in Kreuzberg and Scarface in Altona: Transnational Auteurism and Ghettocentrism in Thomas Arslan’s Brothers and Sisters and Fatih Akin’s Short, Sharp Shock» and Joanne Leal’s «American Cinema and the Construction of Masculinity in Film in the Federal Republic after 1945.»

This is not to say that discussions of gender are wholly absent from interpretations of Akin’s cinema. Critics such as Claudia Breger and Gözde Naibolgu, for example, have addressed gender in some amount of detail in the films Auf der anderen Seite and Gegen die Wand.

See, for example, Berna Gueneli’s review of Paul Cooke and Chris Homewood’s edited collection New Directions in German Cinema. She argues that Akin «would most certainly fall outside of a ‹consensus› category.»

Gary Schmidt has pointed out that this issue is complicated for the character of Nejat in Auf der anderen Seite, as I discuss a little further on, observing the interesting extra-diegetic fact that the same actor who played the gay Murat in Lola and Billidikid is cast here as Nejat.

Even the film Gabriel, Costa, and Bobby watch together is Scarface, indicating Akin’s conscious invocation of ethnic identity and integration in the American context. See Mennel for a more detailed reading of Scarface’s role here.

We see this disappointment too when Ali tries to discuss Nejat’s sex life with him outside the train station in Bremen only to have Nejat reject his inquisitiveness and rush off to catch a train.

Nejat bears further resemblance to the Daniel of the beginning of Im Juli. He is intellectually rather than sexually active, somewhat oblivious to women, clean-cut, and solidly middle-class. Im Juli makes clear that Daniel’s journey away from these things makes him more of «a man.» It remains unclear whether this will be the case for Nejat.

It is almost certainly the case that in trying to address a more general audience and make a film with wider appeal, Akin invoked a lot of common comedic tropes in Soul Kitchen. It seems to have worked. Soul Kitchen grossed over $10 million in Germany in 2009. Both Gegen die Wand and Auf der anderen Seite grossed just over $5 million each in their release years.

Some may object to the use of the word «rape» in this context. For a detailed discussion of rape, its definition, and the relationship of that definition to questions of con-
sent and lucidity, see «Feminist Perspectives on Rape» in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

1) At the risk of being called humorless (and anyone who knows me knows that I am not that), I feel compelled to add a personal anecdote here about how this scene summons aspects of the Steubenville High School rape and how I was troubled when I first saw this scene – shortly after the first reports on Steubenville emerged – with a group of about thirty young Americans (men and women) who guffawed and nudged each other in hilarity as we all watched. Of course, the film seeks to stimulate laughter, and everything frames this as comic. It is hard, therefore, to pass judgment on people for falling into the trap, but it does seem that we ignore something very fundamentally misogynist when we fail to question why and how this scene can be perceived as funny and when we fail to recognize the fundamentally flawed real and representational contexts that make this acceptable as just another funny little incident in Zinos’s life.

Works Cited


Muriel Cormican


