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Sound Bridges: Transnational Mobility as Ironic Melodrama

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Sounds can be superimposed just like images. Contrast and similarity bring out deep, subconscious connections and resonances in meaning. Just like in images.

Béla Balázs, *Der Geist des Films* (1930)¹.

Genre and irony

In a memorable scene in his cross-Balkan road movie *Im Juli/In July* (Germany 2000), the director Fatih Akin cast himself as a gum-chewing, chess-playing customs officer at a makeshift Hungarian–Romanian border, who would not let his protagonist Daniel pass the toll-gate: ‘No passport, no Romania!’ At this moment, Daniel’s lost travel companion Juli surprisingly appears out of a little hut on the other side of the border. Their unexpected reunion culminates in a strange rite of passage. The border guard/director conducts a wedding ceremony at gunpoint, declares them married, and opens the toll-bar – not before acquiring Daniel’s vehicle as a ‘present’. In this absurdist enactment of border control, the director’s cameo appearance and mockery of his own role introduce a moment of authorial self-irony, implying a tongue-in-cheek complicity with an initiated audience. Such ironic moments have become a trademark for Hamburg-based Turkish German director Fatih Akin’s film style. For his award-winning film *Gegen die Wand/Head-On* (Germany 2004), he also acted in a short cameo scene as a drug dealer in Istanbul, but he ultimately decided to cut the scene,² as he wanted to avoid replicating the brief role that he had previously played in his debut feature *Kurz und schmerzlos/Short Sharp Shock* (Germany 1998). In the following, I will argue that dramatic irony in *Head-On* operates on a different level than authorial self-insertion. My focus will be on cinematic structure and form, on the play with genre conventions, and on the use of music, particularly on the enigmatic musical interludes, which Akin’s subsequent music documentary *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (Germany/Turkey 2005) further illuminates.

Like their director, the characters in *Head-On* have multilocal affiliations and frequently travel across borders. They show little concern with problems of acculturation; instead they briskly defy social expectations and resist incorporation into any community. *Head-On* proposes a dynamic perspective on traffic in and out of a 'Germany in Transit' – fundamentally reshaped by transnational migration, European integration and economic globalisation (Göktürk *et al.* 2007). Turkish popular culture provides an equally important source of inspiration. The question whether *Head-On* is a German or a Turkish film is not of interest here, however, nor is the yellow-press scandal around the lead actress and her subsequent nose job, or the critique of stereotyping along the lines of how this film fails to present a true picture of Turks in Germany.³ Narrative structure as well as acting and staging in *Head-On* signal a self-confident mobility that transcends conventional migration stories of leaving home and arriving in a new land. The interchangeable use of German, Turkish and English underscores the sense that these characters/actors have multiple codes at their command. In the improvisational dialogue in a five-star hotel high above Istanbul, for example, the conversation between Cahit and Selma switches into English at some points, including the famous line 'She gives me love', borrowed from a 1978 Grateful Dead song. Already the article in the name of the hotel 'The Marmara', a real site and favourite meeting place at Taksim Square, signals that English is the language of international tourism and business. Along similar lines, *Head-On*'s critical and commercial success epitomises a new trend in European cinema, namely a shift of some transnational directors out of the niche of 'exilic' or 'diasporic' cinema, aptly described by Hamid Naficy as an 'accented cinema' (2001), into mainstream popular cinema or the international festival circuit.⁴

Head-On is genre cinema in the era of air travel, appropriating global pop music as well as locally specific references, along with Turkish, German and American conventions of melodrama. Historically, melodrama reaches back to late seventeenth-century Italian opera and eighteenth-century French theatre, where it marked the beginning of a more popular stage entertainment for the urban proletariat and bourgeoisie, competing with official theatres linked to the aristocracy. Departing from the formal rules of classical French tragedy, melodrama corresponded with a new post-revolutionary class-consciousness, where expressive excess served as a means to unsettle hierarchies. The definition of 'melodrama' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) highlights the important role of music in the theatrical roots of the genre:

Originally: a stage play, usually romantic and sensational in plot, and interspersed with songs, in which the action is accompanied by orchestral music appropriate to the various situations. Later (as the musical element ceased to be regarded as essential): a play, film, or other dramatic piece

characterised by exaggerated characters and a sensational plot intended to appeal to the emotions. Also in Music: a dramatic work, or a part of one, in which the dialogue is spoken over a musical accompaniment.

Melos is the succession of musical tones constituting a melody. Consequently, Thomas Elsaesser, in his seminal article titled 'Tales of Sound and Fury', states that melodrama in cinema is about 'putting melos into drama' (1987: 50). His emphasis on 'style and articulation' is crucial for our context, as it helps us to resist the all-too-easy collapsing of actor and role, fiction and social reality – equations that are common in critical or celebratory approaches to migrant or minority cinema, where staged and enacted representations tend to be read as mimetically representative of the experience of a disenfranchised group. If we resist the assumption of social realism, *Head-On* can then be read as a rehabilitation of melodramatic form and structure by reviving the stage tradition of interspersing the dramatic action with musical performances.

Head-On: Music, interruption and time-space compression

Head-On opens with music. As the title of the film appears, we hear a voice counting: 'bir, iki, üç, dört' (one, two, three, four). Music sets in along with the first image of the film: a medium long shot of an orchestra of six, facing the camera. The musicians, dressed in black suits with bow ties, are seated in a row on chairs, centred by a standing female singer in a red dress who sings about going down to the stream to watch the fish while being ignored by Saniye with her waving hair. The musicians are located on the northern shore of the Golden Horn with a view across the water of the Süleymaniye Mosque and the fire observation tower in Beyazıt (first built in 1749, today located on the grounds of Istanbul University), architectural landmarks which might be read as emblematic of the proximity of religious and secular spheres in Turkish society. Boats are arriving and departing on the opposite shore. Luxurious red carpets, arranged asymmetrically on top of each other as in a carpet shop, fully cover the ground the orchestra is set on and appear to extend beyond the frame. The carpets create a stage for the open-air performance of the ensemble and unsettle the opposition between indoors and outdoors, suggesting also a conflation of public and private spaces, a fusion between theatrical stages and 'real' locations.

Three subsequent close-ups of lights switched on with a harsh sound follow immediately after this scene, drawing attention to light as the source of projected images, and setting an altogether different stage where Cahit is clearing away beer glasses after a concert. The abrupt cut and switch in music, mood and language unsettle the spectator's sense of place and geographic orientation. Chances are that this drama will not adhere to classical unities of action, place, and time. Subsequently, Cahit drives agains

the wall that lends the film its German and Turkish titles: *Gegen die Wand* or *Duvara Karşı*. Despite the head-on collision, he is quickly resurrected in a psychiatric ward – the place where Cahit and Sibel meet. Their crazy love story begins with her proposal of a sham marriage contract, shortly after she set eyes on him and heard his Turkish name. Does Sibel, whose wrists are bandaged after attempted suicide, recognise a kindred spirit in this self-destructive punk wearing a neck support? Does he seem like the right choice on her libertine path because her family would accept him as a fellow-Turk? The startling first encounter leaves these questions open. Such comic moments add to a dynamic pace of plot and character development, especially in the first half of the film.

If the performance of the orchestra only occurred once at the beginning of the film, we could take it as an overture, an enticing establishing shot of Istanbul, signalling from the start that this is the place where the film is headed. However, the same intriguing and enigmatic tableau, showing the musicians on the shore of the Golden Horn, is repeated five more times at different points in *Head-On*, with the exact same framing of the orchestra, although in changing light, indicating different times of the day. The dramatic action spans at least four years, guessing by the age of the child at the end, but the six framing and interlude performances appear to occur within one day, adhering to a different logic of unity in place and time. While the camera remains static in these inserted sequences, the orchestra's performance varies.



Figure 10.1 Musical interludes in *Head-On* (2004)

The fourth interlude, a short clarinet solo by Selim Sesler with some orchestral accompaniment, conveys temporal and spatial transition in a highly condensed fashion, namely Sibel's journey from Hamburg to Istanbul. The fifth orchestral interlude, which follows when Sibel has hit rock bottom, picks up on the same clarinet solo and parallels the fluid transition between Istanbul and Hamburg. At the beginning of the sequence, Sibel is lying on the street in the foetal position, badly beaten up and stabbed. Sesler's clarinet sets in for an 'ağır roman' (slow Roma melody), with perfect synchronisation, just at the moment when light hits her bloody face. A cut reveals the source of the light – a taxi has stopped, and the driver gets out, pausing for a moment with a look of disbelief, before he discards his cigarette and starts to run – presumably to Sibel's rescue. Without delving further into her fate at this highly dramatic point in the narrative, the next shot cuts back once again to the orchestra on the shore of the Golden Horn where Sesler is standing, playing his clarinet. The sky has turned a light pink, the shadows are growing longer, and the sun is about to set, signalling closure. The singer remains seated during this orchestral piece without lyrics. The next shot cuts to Cahit as he is leaving prison in Hamburg. The camera first captures him from behind, then at odd angles in two observational mirrors placed on the ceiling, and finally goes into a frontal close-up of his face, which is suddenly lit up with bright light as we hear the heavy door opening (and cutting into the other level of diegetic sound still continuing from the orchestra on the shore of the Golden Horn). The sudden lighting creates a visual match to the light that fell on Sibel's face as she was lying in the street. A cut reveals Cahit's friend Şerif, who is waiting for him on the other side of the street. The next cut back to Cahit's face shows him lighting up with a smile. Subsequently, the sound switches to diegetic folk music playing in the kebab restaurant, where Şerif takes Cahit for a meal. Music is used in these sound bridges to forge a connection between the two separated lovers and seamlessly stitch together their different locations. The interludes thus audiovisually enact the experience of 'time-space compression', which, according to cultural geographer David Harvey (1990) is a central feature of our technologically mediated postmodern world.

Particularly in these two instrumental sequences, Alexander Hacke's sound recording increasingly foregrounds its electronic manipulation and mediation of the orchestra. As the film progresses, their tunes sound increasingly synthesised with echo, adding to an eerie distancing effect. The fourth and fifth orchestral interludes are masterpieces in narrative economy, each only about one minute long. In both sequences, sound continues across two shots that depict action in different places, thus providing a transition between two scenes. Sesler's clarinet sets in before the image of the orchestra appears on the screen and continues into the next scene. But at this point we already know where the music is coming from. The brief



Figure 10.2 Wedding in Hamburg: Sibel (Sibel Kekilli) and Cahit (Birol Ünel)



Figure 10.3 Brief reunion in Istanbul: Sibel (Sibel Kekilli) and Cahit (Birol Ünel)

appearance of the orchestra signals an ironic interruption, a different level of awareness, inviting the spectator to step out of the illusionist enactment of the personalised story. In Thomas Elsaesser's words:

irony or pathos, [...] both in tragedy and melodrama is the response to recognition of different levels of awareness. Irony privileges the spectator vis-à-vis the protagonists, for he registers the difference from a superior position. [...] highly emotional situations are underplayed to present an ironic discontinuity of feeling or a qualitative difference in intensity, usually visualised in terms of spatial distance and separation. (1987: 66)

Some reviewers have described the effect of the musical interludes in *Head-On* as Brechtian, a reference that also serves to establish Akin as a successor to Fassbinder in reconfiguring melodrama (Suner 2005). While I agree that the interruptions have the effect of distancing the spectator and inviting him/her to reflect on the dramatic action, I would also like to suggest two other frames of reference here. One is the music video aesthetic, globally popularised by MTV. Many of the songs in the soundtrack of *Head-On* were previously released not only as singles, but also as memorable music videos, self-contained short films, which have become highly influential for filmmakers of Fatih Akin's generation. Some sequences in his film could be seen as an appropriation and re-illustration of classics of pop music, for example in the scene where Sibel is riding on the merry-go-round to Wendy Rene's 1964 song 'After Laughter (Comes Tears)'. Another complementary source of inspiration for the aesthetic of switches and inserts might be Indian cinema, aptly described by Lalitha Gopalan as a *Cinema of Interruptions* (2002), where the dramatic action is frequently interspersed with song-and-dance sequences that provide emotional relief, and underscore or counterpoint the narrative.

It is in this sense that *Head-On* evolves as an ironic melodrama. The fusion of strategic distancing and emotional underscoring becomes especially evident in the interludes, which interrupt the excessive mobility of the dramatic action with static shots that allow contemplative moments. The direct address of the musicians introduces a different mode of performance by actors who stand in no relation to the dramatic fiction. Throughout the film, music is used very pointedly, reaching from major international hits such as Depeche Mode's 'I Feel You' and Sisters of Mercy's 'Temple of Love' to pieces by Turkish stars such as Sultana's 'Kaymak', Sezen Aksu's 'Yine mi Çiçek', Mercan Dede's 'Nar-I-Ney' and Orhan Gencebay's 'Dönmeyen Yıllar'. This soundtrack underscores the emotions of the characters and generates affective responses in the spectator, comparable to the ways music was used in classical Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s. In the orchestral interludes, however, the recurring frontal arrangement of the

orchestra playing diegetic music breaks up conventions of mimetic realism. By putting the orchestra on the screen and showing us the source of the music, Akın stages and exposes the apparatus of melodrama. The repeated interruption of the linear narrative by the same tableau with significant variations reminds the viewer of the staged nature of the film as spectacle and provides a sense of distance and elevation onto another, maybe more universal, plane. Suspense is momentarily suspended, and the audience is put into a position of cosmic irony – as in Greek mythology when the fates amuse themselves by watching the mortals. But, of course, the spectators are mortal, too.

The sixth and last piece played by Sesler's orchestra sets in at the end of the film, as we see Cahit's face from the outside of the bus that is pulling out of the station. Cahit is leaving Istanbul on his way south to Mersin alone because Sibel did not join him at the bus station. Whether he will settle at his birthplace or continue his journey is another question – the film as a whole does not support any reading of this scene in terms of going back to his roots.⁵

As the bus pulls out to the road, the voice of the singer sets in for one last time. The song addresses loss and longing: 'I lost my love, blinded by my enemies, I am in despair, let the mountains be happy.' The sun has set. The orchestra stands up, bows. The show is over. Has the audience watched a film with orchestral interludes, or a concert with cinematic inserts? The film cuts to the credits, accompanied by the closing song, a cover of Talk Talk's 1986 hit 'Life's What You Make It', performed by the Hamburg-based band Zinoba. This cover version was first introduced diegetically earlier on in the film when Cahit was sitting in the lobby of the Büyük Londra Hotel, waiting for Sibel to call, playing this tune on the piano. In both scenes, the idea of agency and free will claimed in 'Life's What You Make It' serves as an ironic counterpoint to Cahit's passive condition. The film has offered the spectator a few glimpses of these two people's lives; their meeting, their sham wedding, their unintended love, their separation, their reunion and their subsequent parting. At the end, the spectator is invited to zoom out mentally from absorption in the enacted personalised story, and remember that there are many more stories out there – for those who migrate and those who stay put. The last shot of Sibel in particular, as she packs her suitcase and then sits down to stay in a small room, encapsulates the ambivalences of a mobile and a settled life, the ultimately irresolvable tension between desire, which drives perpetual movement, and responsibility, which requires at least provisional grounding. Visually, the narrative does not reach any closure, no image of a happy family is assembled in one frame, and we merely hear the sound of a musical clock, which accompanies the soft-spoken voices of a man and a child playing in the background and carries over into the next scene at the bus station where Cahit is waiting.

We understand that – at least momentarily – responsibility weighs in more heavily than desire, or perhaps desire has faded. Otherwise, the film's ending remains open.

'Life's what you make it' also picks up on the earlier conversation between Cahit and the well-meaning psychiatrist in the clinic who quotes a line from a song, allegedly by The The: 'If you can't change the world change your world.' Cahit pronounces his superiority by claiming to own that record already. His dismissive response to the doctor's culturalist assumptions about the beautiful meanings of Turkish names and his reformist suggestion of going to Africa as a developmental aid worker is a good example of talking back at institutional paternalism (Göktürk 2002: 248–56). As the patient concludes the conversation by declaring that it is, in fact, the doctor who is stark crazy, guest and host switch places and forcibly reconfigure their power dynamics. The irony of Cahit's rebuttal resonates broadly with a younger post-migrant generation's aversion to the patronising liberal rhetoric of multicultural relativism and integration, a critique that has been sharply articulated by the trans-ethnic activist network Kanak Attak since the mid-1990s. Their manifesto states:

Kanak Attak also distances itself from a definition of the 'political' that naively suggests that all that is needed is 'dialogue' and the peaceful 'cohabitation' between Kanaks and the majority of society via the Day of the Foreign Fellow Citizen and displays of folk culture and humanistic campaigns. When the weather is good and the conscience is bad, liberal Germans decorate their cars with stickers with messages such as 'Foreigners, never leave us alone with the Germans!' Kanak Attak is not a friend of such multiculturalism. (in Göktürk *et al.* 2007: 261)

Head-On stages a similar critique of multicultural benevolence, incidentally in a conversation on English pop music, implying that shared points of reference can be found in the realm of travelling tunes rather than self-contained traditions.

***Ağır Roman*: Heavy novel, slow melody**

A further contextualisation of the music used in *Head-On* requires an explanation of the phrase 'ağır roman'. When Cahit is arrested after accidentally killing Nico in a jealous bar fight, Sibel comes home and puts the soundtrack of the film *Ağır Roman/Cholera Street* (Turkey/Hungary/France 1997, dir. Mustafa Altıoklar) into the player. Her tears respond to the tune of 'Ağla Sevdam' (Cry My Love), evoking a cult phenomenon from Istanbul. The DVD of *Head-On* features this song even more prominently as the title tune for the menu. 'Ağır roman' can be translated in two ways: as 'heavy novel'

as well as 'slow Roma (Gypsy) melody'. *Cholera Street* (the film's English title) is based on a novel of the same title by Metin Kaçan (1990); it tells the love story of the prostitute Tina, characterised by her name and accent as a non-Muslim, Rum (Greek) citizen, and the barber's son Salih, a young and sympathetic gangster. The story is set in Kolera Street in Dolapdere (in the lower parts of Beyoğlu) – a shady neighborhood known for its numerous Roma population as well as musical entertainment and prostitution. As depicted in the novel, inhaling paint thinner or nail polish affords momentary escapes in these poverty-ridden streets where knives are carried loose and death lurks around every corner. Incidentally, it is near these perilous alleys that Sibel in *Head-On* ends up smoking opium, getting raped, beaten and stabbed. In *Cholera Street*, the crazy love, passionate intensity and self-mutilation of the two main characters ends with both committing suicide. The language of the book and its heavy use of street slang emulate this sub-cultural milieu. The prominent use of gypsy music in the film *Cholera Street* (with several interspersed song-and-dance sequences featuring Balık Ayhan, playing his *darbuka* – goblet drum – on the street) is clearly a major source of inspiration for *Head-On*. In fact, it is most likely this film that Fatih Akin had in mind when he claimed, in a conversation with Feridun Zaimoğlu, that he draws the inspiration for the proximity of comedy and tragedy from Turkish cinema: 'Tragedy is much more painful if there is an element of comedy' (Zaimoğlu n.d.). This confirms Akin's strategy of mode switches and interruptions, which provide the spectator with moments of diversion and relief, thus making melancholia and violence more bearable. In addition to the choice of setting and the use of sound, the non-sequential narration in some sequences of *Cholera Street* as well as the interruption and lyrical commentary provided by a chorus-like trio of poets (the director Mustafa Altıoklar playing one of them) constitute further formal correspondences with *Head-On*. The reference to *Ağır Roman* thus programmatically sums up the formula for *Head-On* – the fusion of a heavy novel and a slow Roma melody.

Cholera Street, a Eurimages-funded co-production, presents itself a nostalgic restaging of Beyoğlu, which draws on an older tradition of melodrama in popular Turkish cinema of the 1960s and 1970s with its specific practices of dubbing and frontal staging rather than point-of-view shots. As Erdoğan states, 'Yeşilçam was a hybrid cinema; it produced a cinematic discourse blending Hollywood-style realism with an unintentional Brechtian alienation effect' (1998: 266). The oscillation 'between non-illusionism and classical realism', including a 'flatness of the image' reminiscent of the Turkish shadow play *Karagöz* (Erdoğan 2002, 235–6) is characteristic of production techniques and stylistic conventions of popular Turkish cinema. *Head-On* feeds on this tradition, mediated through the re-enactment of such conventions with new production values in *Cholera Street*.



Figure 10.4 Film poster *Cholera Street* (1997)

Global gypsies?

In 2005, one year after *Head-On*, Fatih Akin completed a documentary about the diverse music scene in Istanbul, which played successfully in cinemas in Berlin and Istanbul, and in the summer of 2006 also opened in some theatres in New York and Los Angeles: *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul*. This film can be read as a companion piece to *Head-On* and complements my analysis of the musical interludes. *Crossing the Bridge* captures the music scene of Istanbul through the narration and mediation of Alexander Hacke from the experimental band Die Einstürzenden Neubauten. Hacke had previously collaborated with Akin on the sound in *Head-On*. In *Crossing the Bridge*, he acts in front of the camera as a bass player and sound engineer who sets out to explore and gather the sound of the city. He records musical performances, comments on them in a voice-over that adopts the mode of a travelogue, and at times plays along with the bands, seemingly enjoying himself. The documentary presents a diverse cross-section of performers reaching from the hip-hopper Ceza to long-time screen heroes such as Orhan Gencebay, a virtuoso *bağlama* player and star of *arabesk* music, himself an icon of migration as he brought folk music to an urban setting (Stokes 1992). Aynur Doğan sings in Kurdish and powerfully fills the space of an old bathhouse with her voice.

Crossing the Bridge introduces the performers of the interludes in *Head-On* as the Roma clarinetist Selim Sesler and his orchestra, consisting of friends and family members. His son Bülent Sesler plays the *kanun*, a kind of zither. They are filmed in their living room, chatting and performing together with the Canadian singer Brenna MacCrimmon, who talks about retrieving these 'Roma songs' from old records found in Bulgarian villages, compiling a selection to perform with Sesler, and recording them on a CD titled *Karşılama* in 1998. In the same year, she also organised a Canadian tour for the group. *Crossing the Bridge* pays belated tribute to Brenna MacCrimmon, who had not been credited in *Head-On*, although all the interlude songs were chosen from her compilation. The songs were re-recorded for *Head-On*, performed by the same ensemble, but with a different singer, Idil Üner, an actress from Hamburg, familiar from several recent Turkish German films, including the role of charming Melek in Akin's *In July*.⁶

Another CD of Roma or 'Gypsy' music, co-produced by ethnomusicologist Sonia Seeman in 1999 by the same label as MacCrimmon's *Karşılama*, focused on the ethnic and musical diversity in Selim Sesler's hometown Keşan in Thrace (Seeman 1998 and 1999). Roma are numerous in this town near the Greek border; in *Crossing the Bridge*, Hacke claims that they constitute about two-thirds of the town's population. Roma people in this border zone were initially relocated in the population exchanges of 1923–4 from the area around Thessalonica and brought their music with them. 'Ağır roman' and other kinds of Roma melodies are characterised by a 9/8 rhythm

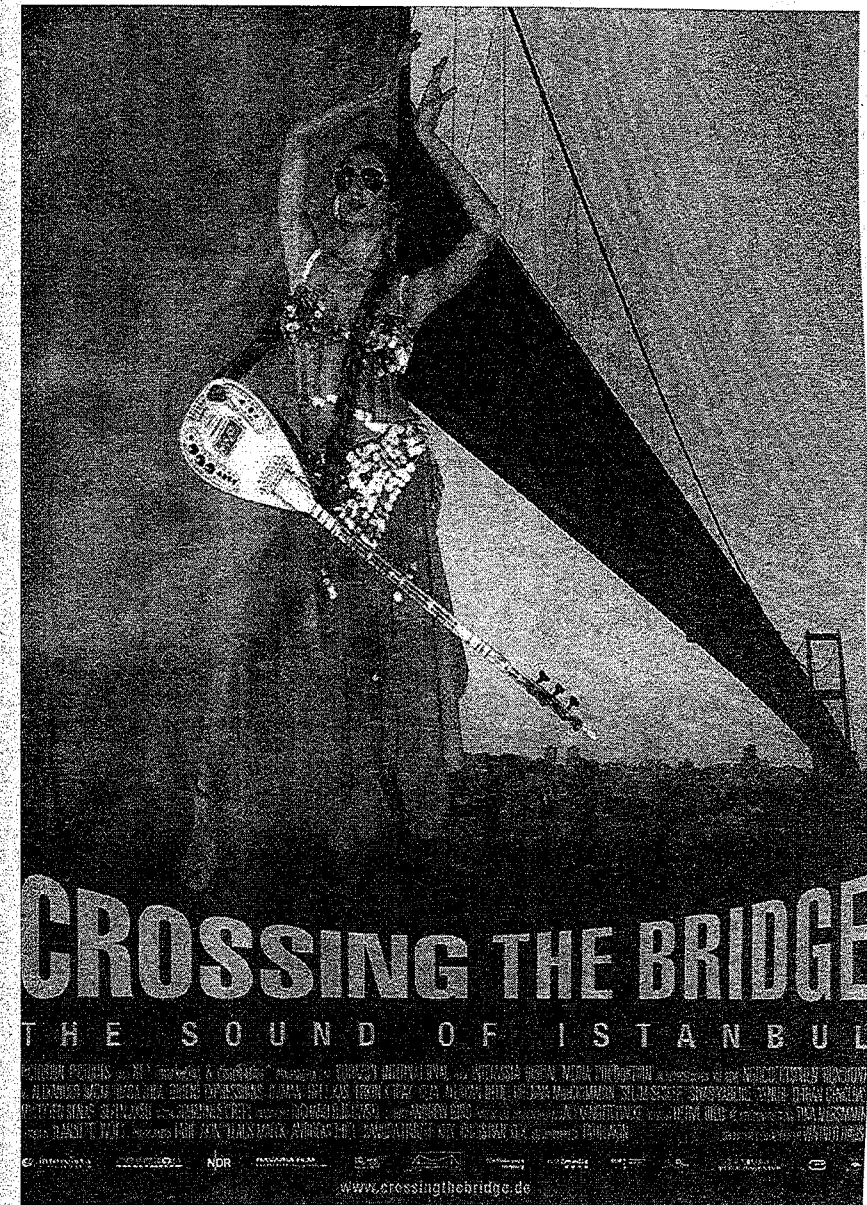


Figure 10.5 Film poster *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005)

and typically performed by improvisation (*doğaçlama*) in a *fasıl* (drinking and playing session) (Duygulu 2006). Thracian 'Gypsy music' incorporates a rich mix of Turkish, Greek, Roma and Bulgarian influences. This music serves as a case in point to demonstrate the cross-Balkan mobility and the hybrid fusion of multi-ethnic influences at the core of what is commonly considered Turkish music or culture. In *Head-On*, the songs of Roma origin played by Roma performers in the interludes epitomise the mobile spirit of this melodrama.

How are we supposed to read the subliminal representations of Roma in *Head-On*? Are they once again exoticised as vagrant figures and perpetual migrants, as a stand-in for the German Turks who have transcended ethnic identification? Throughout the history of cinema, gypsies on the screen have tended to fulfil the projective needs of settled folks (Iordanova 2001: 213–32). Music has been one of the markers of Gypsy identity ever since Franz Liszt praised the pure musicality, the depth of emotion, and the virtuosity of improvisation in the Gypsy fiddler (1859). In his study on 'Gypsiness' in music and film, David Malvinni (2004) argues convincingly that these ideas of natural musicality were inflected early on with discourses of nationalism. While Liszt claimed Gypsy music as Hungarian music, Béla Bartók contested these claims of authenticity by pointing out that Gypsy music originated in urban cafés and, unlike Hungarian peasant music, could not be considered true folk music (Malvinni 2004). Adorno picks up on this critique in his controversial essay 'On Jazz':

The relationship between jazz and black people is similar to that between salon music and the wandering fiddle players whom it so firmly believes it has transcended – the gypsies. According to Bartók, the gypsies are supplied with this music by the cities; like commodity consumption itself, the manufacture [*Herstellung*] of jazz is also an urban phenomenon, and the skin of the black man functions as much as a coloristic effect as does the silver of the saxophone. (2002 [1936]: 477)

Instead of taking offence at racist stereotyping, as many readers of Adorno's essay do, we may want to consider that what is at stake here is the deconstruction of folklorist romanticisation, an interrogation of assumptions about what is commonly considered natural, primitive and traditional.

Akın and his crew might be inclined to second Adorno in his resistance to staging ethnic and national identity in folkloristic guise. They included the Roma performers in *Head-On* and *Crossing the Bridge* in a celebration of diversity, emphasising the multi-ethnic mix within Turkish music. Unlike the magical realism with which Emir Kusturica renders the Gypsies in his films *Dom za vesanje/Time of the Gypsies* (Yugoslavia 1988) and *Crna mačka, beli mačor/Black Cat White Cat* (France/Germany/Yugoslavia 1998), however, Akın stages Selim Sesler and his orchestra not as exotic, folkloristic figures,

but as distinctly urban musicians in costume who appear to most spectators at first glance to be indistinguishable from performers of classical Turkish music. Who is the Gypsy here, or how Turkish is it? Turkish music appears to be Gypsy music and *vice versa*. It is precisely this convergence of intertwined traditions that challenges any nation-based definition of music and, more generally, of culture. At a time when European integration has provided a platform for the articulation of minority identities in Turkey, *Crossing the Bridge* projects upon Istanbul a utopian vision of polyphonic fusion and contingent coexistence. This localised celebration of sonic hybridity emphatically transcends binaries of an enlightened, civilised West versus a pre-modern East, commonly claimed in the rhetoric of 'the clash of civilizations,' to quote a mantra that has tended to breed the conflict that it predicts (Huntington 1993). The film *Crossing the Bridge* might have been one little element in the larger process of image-making that led to the European Commission's 2006 designation of Istanbul as the European Capital of Culture in 2010 (Göktürk *et al.* 2010).

In a non-exoticist way, the Roma performers thus become desirable figures in a play on stereotypes and multiple ironies of identification. Incidentally, the French Algerian director Tony Gatlif, 'the only well-known cineaste of Romani origin' (Iordanova 2003), who presented Gypsy music as world music in his itinerant documentary *Latcho Drom/Safe Journey* (France 1993), decided to cast Birol Ünel in his latest film *Transylvania* (2006). Publicity material from the Cannes Film Festival describes Tchango (Birol Ünel) as 'an enigmatic character, free, with no borders nor house, a man who speaks several languages with his own particular accent'. Perhaps it has become an appealing trajectory for migrant film-makers and actors to inscribe themselves into 'the uniquely transnational phenomenon of the Gypsy films' (Iordanova 2003). In a documentary titled *We Have No War Songs* (Netherlands 1995, dir. and prod. Izzy Abrahami and Erga Netz), one of the Reyes brothers, known as The Gypsy Kings, sums up the utopian idea of nomadic freedom associated with Gypsies in the popular imagination by pointing out their non-attachment to territory, flags or other symbols of nationalism: 'Our songs are about love, and about joy. They are never about war.' It is worth mentioning here that eight to ten million Roma constitute the largest minority in Europe, but due to their lack of territorial affiliation they rarely figure in the nation-bound rhetoric about immigration, integration and multiculturalism.

Another film by Tony Gatlif, *Gadjo Dilo/The Crazy Stranger* (France 1997), which in many ways conforms to the standard formula of interracial melodrama, 'a pure and spontaneous liaison between a Romani girl and a man from the main ("white") ethnic group' (Iordanova 2003), also complicates exoticist fantasies and ironically stages the role of music in ethnographic representations of gypsy culture. Stéphane travels to Romania in search of Gypsy music, specifically in search of the singer Nora Luca, who his father

used to listen to. As he goes around asking for her and making people listen to his cassettes with recordings of her voice, he meets Izidor and winds up in his Gypsy village. Nora Luca is not found, but music abounds. Izidor turns out to be a virtuoso fiddler who plays at weddings and funerals, and beautiful Sabina, who initially behaves in a very prickly way, eventually reciprocates Stéphane's passion and even sings a Nora Luca song for him. In the end, the village is destroyed in a pogrom, and the two of them find themselves on the road, most probably to France. Stéphane gets out of the car, and, in an act of iconoclasm (or rather audioclasm), destroys his cherished cassettes. He smashes and buries them at the roadside, thus performing a funeral for his own idealisation of Gypsy music. As he has seen the reality and found Sabina, he no longer needs his archive of inherited recorded memories – he opts to live for the present moment.⁷

The Crazy Stranger enacts a quest for pure authenticity, and tradition is bound to run into multiple mediations. As Brenna MacCrimmon points out in *Crossing the Bridge*, the Roma musicians told her that they had previously not really valued the music they played, until she came along as a stranger from afar who took a keen interest in their songs and learned to perform them. Alexander Hacke plays a comparable mediator role in *Crossing the Bridge*. In fact, the film as a whole provides an international stage for some previously unknown musicians alongside big stars who were only known to a Turkish audience. Subsequently, the music of many of these performers became readily available on CDs in stores across Istanbul and globally on the Internet.⁸ Through mediations of this kind, local diversity is revalorised in the realm of world music, world cinema and the global culture industry (Roberts 1998: 62–82). In this broader horizon, multilingualism and hybridity are not necessarily a result of recent migration to Western Europe, but can also grow out of much older regional histories of contact and circulation. As artists from migrant backgrounds, such as the director Fatih Akin, increasingly tap into global networks, they discover polyphonic diversity, borrowings and reinscriptions, not only in so-called host societies, but also at the heart of supposedly contained homelands.

Travelling tunes, moving bridges

Migration is commonly framed as a monolinear narrative of leaving one's home, surviving the hardships of a journey and settling in a new country. Consequently, the focus in social analysis and cultural policy has been on fitting migrants into the parameters of one nation state, either the 'host' country or the country of 'origin'. Regimes of ethnicity and diversity tend to be underwritten with ethnocultural identifications about belonging to a nation of indigenous people who have some organic attachment to their land. The Berlin-based writer Zafer Şenocak, who publishes in both German and Turkish, distances himself from this territorial conception of identity

in his essay 'Beyond the Language of the Land': 'I am not in between, for I have lost my sense of direction' (Şenocak 2000: 67). Decentred multidirectionality might indeed be a more appropriate constellation to capture the complex dynamics of circulation and mediation staged in Fatih Akin's ironic melodrama *Head-On* and the companion music documentary *Crossing the Bridge*. Narratives of migration as loss of home, dislocation and suffering are reframed in these films by a multi-sited, cosmopolitan consciousness that destabilises the dichotomy between the native and foreign. To this 'bird's-eye view' of the stranger (Simmel 1971 [1908]: 146), *Heimat* can appear as unfamiliar, both enticing and alienating, as *Fremde*. While institutions such as public broadcasting channels and film funding boards have tended to promote patronising disdain and victim talk in the representation of migrants, relying on preset assumptions of cultural difference, tradition and authenticity, cultural productions by transnational artists complicate the rhetoric of being trapped or lost 'between two cultures'. Yoko Tawada, another translingual writer who has acquired star status in both German and Japanese national literature, claims: 'I did not want to build bridges' (1997: 416), refuting the logic of ties and hyphens, which implicitly reinstates separation.

In his essay 'The Bridge and the Door', Georg Simmel pointed out already in 1909 that relating and separating always precondition each other – we can only relate things that we perceive as separate:

Things must first be separate in order to be together. [...] The bridge becomes an aesthetic value not only because it in reality achieves the inter-relation of what is separate, and because it achieves practical purposes, it becomes an aesthetic value because it makes the interrelation immediately visible. The bridge encourages the eye to inter-relate parts of the landscape just as in practical reality it encourages bodies to relate with one another. (1994 [1909]: 408)

Simmel's relativist epistemology is germane to current discussions about cultural contact. His essay about sites and figures of transition – the bridge and the door – and their aesthetic value carries seeds of a dynamic conceptualisation of encounter, interaction and representation. Simmel's focus on relativity, mobility and process in the idea of bridging resonates with my analysis of time-space compression and sonic fluidity in the musical interludes in *Head-On*, a film that imagines Europe as a space of proximities and entanglements, transcending territory-bound conceptions of national (German or Turkish) identities.

The emphasis in the title *Crossing the Bridge* must therefore lie on the 'crossing' rather than on the 'bridge', on mobility and flux across borders. A bridge implies two stable shores. In a metaphoric sense, it posits distinct self-contained continents and cultures, Asia versus Europe, the East versus

the West. While this binary rhetoric is picked up in several conversations with musicians throughout the film, it is repeatedly deconstructed by foregrounding the mix of musical influences, which make up the sound of the city. As a polyphonic portrait of Istanbul, *Crossing the Bridge* demonstrates the mediated production of vernacular specificity and the interdependencies between local stakes and global circuits in cinema and music. The medley of music in an improvisational *fasıl*, as in the performance of Selim Sesler and the other musicians in the pub in Keşan, embraces Balkanisation as fusion in a positive sense and transcends scenarios of ethnocultural tribalism. As the rhetoric of exclusive group formations has grown more virulent than ever over recent years, in Europe and elsewhere, learning to live in a state of 'double occupancy' and 'mutual interference' might be a way to avoid the dead end of identity politics (Elsaesser 2005: 108–30). The strategic interruption of dramatic conventions of empathy by moments of ironic distancing invites the spectator to continuously rethink his or her categories of identification and localisation. In 'shifting landscapes' (Christensen and Erdoğan 2008), travelling tunes may hold more promise than stable bridges.

Notes

An earlier version of this chapter was published in Christensen and Erdoğan (2008: 153–71). Also D. Göktürk (2008) 'Sound Bridges and Traveling Tunes', in *Congress Book, XVIIth International Congress of Aesthetics*. Ankara: SANART, 423–36.

1. My translation with help from Rodney Livingstone.
2. The scene is nonetheless included as an extra on the DVD release of *Head-On*.
3. Documentary film-maker Hatice Ayten (n.d.) proposed a pointed feminist critique of stereotyping in the film and its reception.
4. Commercially speaking, Akin is the most successful among Turkish German film-makers, and succeeds in raising the highest budgets (about 10 million Euro for *Head-On*). *Head-On* was the fourth dramatic feature film he directed, and it was also the first German film in eighteen years to win the top prize at the Berlin Film Festival and at the European Film Awards. Akin's critically acclaimed film stayed among the top twenty new releases in Germany between March and May 2004, attracting about 780,000 spectators in Germany, a figure that does not include international and DVD release. In the German box-office charts in 2004, *Head-On* was No. 50, No. 1 being the *Star Trek* spoof (*T*)*Raumschiff Surprise* (*Dream/Space Ship Surprise*), followed by 7 *Zwerge – Männer Allein im Wald* (*Seven Dwarfs*), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Shrek 2* and *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*).
5. See, however, Berghahn (2006) and Burns (2009), who both interpret Cahit's return to Turkey as a journey of redemption.
6. In one scene of *In July*, Idil Üner sings a Turkish song to a captive audience on a beach in Hamburg. In his commentary on the DVD, the director claims that this musical interlude in the film was inspired by Indian cinema.
7. Dina Iordanova reads the ending of this film as a declaration of no return: 'Back on the road, accompanied by Sabina, he [Stéphane] destroys his tapes and performs a ritual dance on top of them, thus erasing the link to the Western world to which he will not return. He will remain where he is, in the forlorn lands of Valachia, with the Roma' (2001: 225).

8. Aynur Doğan recently gave a concert at a Kurdish festival in San Francisco (Gilbert 2006).

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