



Fragmented identities – characters in Fatih Akin’s award-winning *The Edge of Heaven*

Corazón International – Films of displacement and identity

Fatih Akin is one of Europe’s most prolific young directors.

In 2007, his film, *The Edge of Heaven*, was shown in competition at the Cannes Film Festival to a rapturous reception. It went on to win the coveted Best Screenplay award. Four years before this consecration, Fatih’s feature debut, *Head On*, had won the then 32 year old director a Golden Bear statuette at the Berlin Film Festival.

Born of Turkish immigrant parents in Hamburg, Germany, Fatih has had a foot in both cultures since childhood and the dramatic tensions of this bi-culturalism have been at the thematic centre of his work as a director.

In *The Edge of Heaven*, events in the family life of a young Turkish-German compel him to explore his own cultural roots and confront his ambiguous impressions of contemporary Turkey and the iniquity of German immigration law. In *Head On*, a man and a woman of Turkish origin seek freedom from depression and family pressures; they appear to find it by getting married, before tragedy strikes. Their personal journey is punctuated by travel between Germany and Turkey in search of peace and a stable identity.

Whilst Fatih’s own identity may fluctuate peripatetically between the two worlds, there is little ambiguity about where his creative hearth is. Corazón Films is the company he founded in 2003 with friend Andreas Thiel and Hamburger Klaus Maeck. *Corazón* is the Spanish word for heart and the symbolism is not fortuitous; under this dynamic partnership, the three men have made films that have won them prestigious awards and peer recognitions throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

Corazón was first launched as a vehicle to produce *Head On*, Fatih's seventh film. "The lead actor was not easy to work with," recalls Maeck. "Fatih and our late colleague Andreas Thiel established Corazón as a structure to take some of the financial risk on the production of the film, because the original production company was nervous about him not being able to complete the film". Together they managed to finish the film which went on to Berlin awards glory. Maeck can still remember that moment when Hollywood actress Frances Mc Dormand handed the Golden Bear statuette to the filmmakers. "She beamed and said 'It's rock n'roll!' We couldn't not have dreamt of a cooler praise than this!"

The cultural bind between Fatih and Klaus was cemented very early on by a common passion for music. "I was the music supervisor on *Head On*. The film was complex musically and I was excited by Fatih's way of writing the screenplay with specific music in mind. Thanks to his approach, I was able to clear most of the music before we'd even shot a frame!" Maeck credits Fatih for broadening his musical horizon by introducing him to the rich range of Turkish music.

Maeck enthusiastically immersed himself in those new sounds for the making of *Crossing the Bridge*, a feature-documentary exploration of Turkish fusion music which combined local contemporary punk and rock with traditional music. Similar musical syncretism was at work in the complex soundtrack of *The Edge of Heaven*.

Klaus and Fatih also share an appetite for cultural displacement, a theme which they like to explore through their films. For Klaus, that displacement was within his own culture when, as a young man in the Hamburg of the early 1980s, he became a luminary of the punk-rock scene. "I owned the first punk shop in Hamburg," Maeck fondly recalls. "It was aptly called 'Rip-Off Records' and I think it really helped launch a movement. For a time, there was an explosion of small labels and the shop became pivotal in the distribution chain for German and international punk. This, was my education." A film enthusiast since youth, Maeck also wrote the screenplay for a bold counter-cultural punk film about the power of 'bad music' in people's lives. The film, *Decoder*, a very low-budget affair made cooperatively by Maeck and members of the "commune" he then lived in, disappeared without a trace. But it's enduring claim to fame is a cameo by maverick American author William Burroughs.

Maeck sees a direct continuity between his involvement in the punk rock scene and his partnership with Fatih. "We're not interested in big, flash movies. It is very important to us to make those films which really say something about the way we are today and where we're going. That's punk ethics, for you."

Anyone watching *The Edge of Heaven* or *Head On* could be forgiven for mistaking Fatih and Klaus for earnest 'social problem' filmmakers. But a closer look reveals layers of humour and irreverence. In the film they were producing during summer 2008, *Mamarosh*, Corazon makes a more emphatic leap from drama into comedy. Directed by the Serbian director Moma Mrdakovic, *Mamarosh* is based on the autobiography of a Serbian man who takes asylum in America while the US air force is busy bombing Belgrade. The premise becomes an opportunity for a robust green card comedy of cultural displacement and political ironies. Comedy is also a strong component of *Soul Kitchen*, Fatih's new project as a director.

“While comedy was already apparent in his previous films, especially *Head On*, in his new film he takes it as a challenge,” observes Klaus. “Cross-cultural themes don’t have to be preachy and earnest. It’s human material and has to be told in a way that people everywhere can relate to. After all, this is the century of migrations and cinema needs to be about this if it wants to remain interesting.”