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Transcultural Space and Music: Fatih Akin’s *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005)

*This article explores Fatih Akin’s 2005 film Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul, a music documentary, as a multi-dimensional image of Istanbul that resists the “German” optic of Turkishness. That is to say, the images in Crossing the Bridge collide with binary configurations and a mono-dimensional understanding of culture that have entrenched themselves in earlier representations of Turks in Germany. Consequently the film promotes a new cultural imagination. As the title suggests, Crossing the Bridge implies traversing and connecting disparate spaces, and simultaneously defying categories of national cinema. Indeed, the thematization of traversal, transnationalism, and transculturalism challenge the primacy of nationally defined territories. Akin relies on an architectural structure to serve as a metaphor for cultural, ethnic, and national exchanges. The film celebrates Istanbul as a heteroglossic, transcultural imaginary space that beckons a personal journey.*

> “Music makes the people come together
> Music makes the bourgeoisie dance together”.
> *Sertab Erener’s adaptation of Madonna’s song “Music”*

In traveling across a plurality of spaces, in reading an unfolded multiplicity of maps, we need to lose ourselves as we go from one space to the next, from one circle to the next, from one map to the other.

Michel Serres, *Jouvences sur Jules Verne*

Acclaimed as one of Germany’s most important contemporary filmmakers, Fatih Akin has created a substantial oeuvre, which includes his films *Kurz und Schmerzlos* [*Short Sharp Shock*, 1998], *Im Juli* [*2000*], *Solino* [*2002*], *Gegen die Wand* [*Head On*, 2004], *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* [*2005*], and most recently *Auf der anderen Seite* [*The Edge of Heaven*, 2007]. This article examines Akin’s 2005 film *Crossing The Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* as a poetic travel journal that projects emotion onto the geographical space of Istanbul. *Crossing the Bridge* explores said space through Istanbul’s rich soundscape, while the city’s different spaces function to frame various identities.¹ Akin’s documentary features music ranging from traditional Turkish love songs to classical Turkish music, to jazz, grunge,

¹ Fatih Akin: *Crossing the Bridge: The Sounds of Istanbul*. (2004). (DVD, 183 minutes). All quotes taken directly from the DVD.
rock, and rap, along with the music and performances of whirling dervishes, Sufis and break dancers; it is a range as diverse and complex as the urban space it represents. When characterizing the film’s structure, film critic Ali Jaafar refers to it as a mosaic of musical sounds that evoke images of Islamic art. The heteroglossic, multilingual, transcultural, and transnational acoustic pieces of the film, as Sam Davis writes, exhibit “the infinite possibilities offered by cross-fertilization.” Indeed, the film is an assemblage of sounds and sites that pays tribute to Istanbul as a hybrid space. The film was conceived with Alexander Hacke, who scored Akın’s award winning 2004 film Gegen die Wand, while working on the portion of the film set in Istanbul. Hacke serves as the film’s protagonist; he is best known as the bassist for the experimental industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten. In fact, Crossing the Bridge begins where Gegen die Wand leaves off: with the performance of a Romany band led by Selim Sesler, and the Canadian ex-patriot singer Brenna MacCrimmon on the banks of the Bosphorus.

The insistence on place is asserted visually, acoustically, and orally from the outset of the film. A bird’s eye view in one of the establishing shots provides a panorama of Istanbul. The aerial shot at the beginning of the documentary draws together the disparate elements of the urban space, while shifting camera perspectives create a dynamic sense of urban space that suggests selective and subjective projections onto the concrete space. The relationship between the space and various subjects is emphasized in the prism of viewpoints that follow and that betray a certain (dis)passion about the urban space. The city is both contested and revered. It is characterized as a space of stark contrasts (beautiful, ugly, cold, hot, rich, poor), of multiple bridges, and as a product of legendary Byzantine grandeur. A clip from an early Orhan Gencebay film shows him from a low angle proclaiming imperially, “Oh Istanbul, you depraved city, you vainglorious city”. A taxi driver wryly notes, “There is bread here, otherwise you can forget Istanbul”, while another driver boasts his knowledge of Istanbul’s countless labyrinthine neighborhoods (Bâgalar, Bakirköy). For one taxi driver, the space is mappable, for the other driver it is

2 Ali Jaafar: Eastern Vista Social Club. In: Sight and Sound 16, 3 (2006). P. 5. Interestingly, the appearance of the Dervish references Sufism and the call of the muezzin can be heard faintly in the scene of Hacke looking out of the hotel window, and veiled women briefly appear in one scene, but apart from these almost incidental representations, Islam plays a remarkably minor role in the film, even in its visuals.

3 Indeed, the film does shy away from “orientalist” fantasies that feminize the oriental space; the image of a belly dancer on the cover of the DVD, mysterious, exotic, contemporary (wearing sunglasses), and self-reflexive serves as a provocative entrée to the film. The visual stereotype teases the audience, but it is undermined. See Sam Davies: Crossing the Bridge: The Sounds of Istanbul. In: Sight and Sound 16.1 (2006). P. 52.