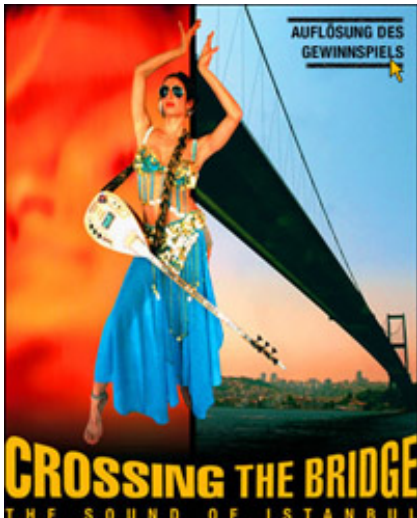


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Special Issue: "Alternative Perspectives on Turkey's Cinematic Landscape"



TRANSISTANBUL: IMAGING THE 'MULTICULTURAL' CITY

By M. Zeynep Dadak

Is transnationalism necessarily a study of multiculturalism? Or is it a case of translating the transnational structures of nation, self, and community into "translational," as Ackbar Abbas puts it? Here I offer a comparative approach to the representation of the so-called blossoming, multicultural Istanbul, particularly its relationality with the rising 'transnational' interest to it. Suggesting that this interest is correlated with a certain type of representation in films, which has become a trademark sense in between the spaces of 'negotiated language, borderland being and bicultural ambivalence,' I will mainly focus on two documentary films, *In Transit* (Berke Bas, 2005) and *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (Fatih Akin, 2005). Both films can be analyzed within the framework of a transnational traffic, nevertheless, while in Fatih Akin's film Istanbul is revisited in terms of its promising multicultural qualities, a melting pot of all the sounds, and vibrations, *In Transit*, deals with the downsides of such a promise. Whereas the former celebrates the idealized multicultural variety that is prevalent in today's Istanbul, the latter focuses on the anxieties and fears of illegal migrants, who in fact are constitutive of such a dream place. Moreover, unlike *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul*, which flows almost like a travel account, *In Transit* focuses on the personal stories not only the appearances.

In 2005 Istanbul has been lauded and recommended as a tourist destination in more than a few international magazines and newspapers. According to this appeal, Istanbul is "[the] city of many pasts [which] embraces the future."⁽²⁾ Most probably *Newsweek's* August 2005 front cover has been the 'most assertive' one amongst all.⁽³⁾ It portrays a young, fiery couple, dancing in trance to the beats of music, wearing poor-quality latex outfits of 'belly dance meets S&M'. As if this photo has anything to do with 'cool'ness, the caption claims the city as "Cool Istanbul: Europe's hippest city." The related article's headline is even more passionate about disseminating the positive image of the city:

Turkish Delight:⁽⁴⁾ After so many decades of trying to become Western, Istanbul glories in the rediscovery of a very modern identity. European or not, it is one of the coolest cities in the world.

Another article in the *New York Times* similarly emphasizes that Istanbul might not need Europe after all. What is particularly striking, here, is the dim reminder of the debates over Turkey's European identity. Even though mere words are of little consolation, at



times when Turkey's possible EU membership is at stake, these articles promote Turkey's authenticity against the idea of a homogenized Europe:

Europe may yet balk at admitting Turkey to its Union. Yet the world won't end if it does. All signs suggest that Istanbul will continue to re-create itself, perhaps even more energetically. Remember the sounds of Istanbul's streets--European and Turkish and Balkan and Middle Eastern, all coming together in a strange but beautiful harmony.⁽⁵⁾

Obviously one should approach this interest in the allure of Istanbul, as a part of a larger scenario: as diverse forms of "selling Istanbul."⁽⁶⁾ One of Turkey's prominent sociologists, Caglar Keyder uses the term of 'selling Istanbul' to discuss the infrastructural and superstructural projects (communications, transportations, hotels, services) as a need in the early nineties, in order to transform Istanbul into a global city of transnational flows of the capital commodity. Yet conjuring is always culturally specific, the cultural ambiance, *per se* is at play in terms of this 'sale'. And recently the cultural ambiance echoes the sounds of Istanbul. The sounds of today's Istanbul become first a metaphor for the harmony of diverse cultures of a city at the crossroads, and second a marketing tool for the selling of this multiculturalism. *New York Times* excerpts follow:

The sounds of today's Istanbul convey something important. They're evidence of a cultural revival that's helping the city reclaim its heritage as a world-class crossroads. After decades of provincialism, decay and economic depression--not to mention the dreary nationalism mandated by a series of governments dominated by the military--Istanbul is re-emerging as one of Europe's great metropolises. "Istanbul is experiencing a rebirth of identity," says Fatih Akin, director of "The Sound of Istanbul," an odyssey through the city's rich musical traditions. Akin grew up in Germany but during the past decade has rediscovered his Turkish roots. "There's such richness," he says. "So many people have crossed Istanbul and left their culture here."

After all, it is not surprising that the recent articles on Turkey have overlapping contents: Beyoglu as the multicultural corner of the city, a few restaurants, famous with their fusion kitchens and high-style clubs with homey comfort playing 'world music' and Fatih Akin as an internationally acclaimed filmmaker, who tells stories of troubled characters, haunted by their class and identity lines. With the emphasis on the rich cultural heritage of the city, Akin in his *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* also 'sells' Istanbul; he traces the sounds of the city through the fascination of a German bassist, not in a very different manner than of the international press. Nevertheless, the film is indeed a musical banquet.

The film follows a "maverick in Istanbul."⁽⁷⁾ Alexander Hacke a member of the German avantgarde band Einstürzante Neubauten for more than 20 years, first comes into contact with the city and its music while producing the score for the movie *Head On* (Gegen Die Wand, 2004). In Istanbul he meets the members of the neo-psychedelic band Baba Zula. When their bass player drops out, he is asked to sit in for her. But "he didn't just bring his bass guitar, but also a complete mobile recording studio, including his 'magic mike,' which he has used to capture exotic sounds from all over the world."⁽⁸⁾ Hacke calls his approach to collecting sounds "street recording," and it allows him to make professional recordings just about anywhere. And so he sets out to capture the musical diversity of Istanbul onto his hard drive. His aim is to expose western ears to the broadest possible spectrum of Turkish music, ranging from modern electronic sounds, rock and hip-hop, right down to classical "Arabesque" music. Fatih Akin accompanies him with his camera and shoots a portrait of Istanbul's lively music scene, whose music suffuses every part of the city, and which is dearly loved by all of its inhabitants. Hacke's home base is the venerable Büyük Londra Oteli (Grand Hotel de Londres) in Istanbul's district of Beyoglu, probably the most "European" spot in all of Turkey. From here he wanders through an alien, contradictory, lively, and seductive world, collecting impressions and tracks, drifting along in the unstoppable stream of this mega city of myriad facets. But no hard drive or film can do justice to the diversity and overwhelming force of musical and visual impressions this city generates. With this experience he finally returns home, a musical treasure in his baggage, which now needs to be sifted and presented to the world. Like a real travel writer from the colonial era, where the western eye would set out on a journey, to provide its people with the knowledge of the 'uncivilized'...

However in contrast, one should consider Berke Bas' *In Transit*, another documentary on Istanbul from 2005, as a site of the 'uncivilized' for struggle over fixed meanings and identities regarding not only people but also Istanbul itself. *In Transit* is not simply an individual work produced by authorial vision (of Akin) and generic conventions (of documentary and travel writing), it ushers a critical gaze to image/imagine the city. Yet similar to *Crossing The Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul*, *In Transit* can be analyzed within the framework of the transnational traffic. Therefore several things inform my reading of *In Transit*: (1) What happens when Istanbul becomes the limbo, the middle stop in a journey? (2) What kind of cultural interaction is possible, when a city is a final destination for some and a waiting room for others? Istanbul famously stands as the bridge between Asia, Africa, and Europe, and it is situated at this geographical crossroads. In *In Transit* three illegal migrant families' stories intersect in this waiting room, namely Istanbul. Far from the glorious Ottoman architecture and the glamorous Bosphorous nightlife, *In Transit* shows the tough life of transients stuck in Istanbul caught between their war-torn or impoverished past and their imagined and elusive future. This thoroughly engaging video tracks an Iraqi Arab family, an Iraqi Kurdish family, and a Nigerian couple for a full year, witnessing their struggle to adapt to life on the margins of an unforgiving city while awaiting visas and work permits that never seem to come. Rather than giving an account of migration and the reasons for them to flee their countries, it aims to give a glimpse of their life in Istanbul as they adapt to the city and to a new culture.

Istanbul of the Ottoman Empire is usually referred as "the political, cultural and educational capital of a multi ethnic empire where various Balkan, Arab, Anatolian, and Caucasian groups organized, intrigued, attended schools, and published broadsheets."⁽⁹⁾ Needless to say, Istanbul's multiculturalism should not be solely ascribed to its contemporary overtones. Yet the modernization project of Turkey, in the wake of creating a secular nation state, prompted the denial of the empire, denunciation of all the polycentric cultural habits and its artifacts attached to 'this sick man of Europe,' namely the Ottoman Empire. Any multicultural legacy, henceforth, was inevitably disrupted. Following the homogenization of this young nation state, even the capital city was moved to Ankara, leaving Istanbul, the multicultural and extravagant capital of the empire deserted. Istanbul's journey from a national to a recent transnational imaginary, then inevitably reflects a multicultural obsession, a mythic idea of hybridity, which was prevalent long ago. Obviously, Istanbul has almost always been a transit space for many coming from the 'east,' who happen to be on their way to the West, and vice versa. Similarly the illegal migrant movement to Europe has made Istanbul a port city, for the circulation of people. This circulation, particularly during the 90s challenges the homogenizing edifice of the nation state, leaving bare Istanbul's disrupted multiculturalism. Today Istanbul serves as a waiting room for displaced individuals. One example that portrays Istanbul in such a fashion is Michael Winterbottom's *In This World*, which depicts a very different view in comparison to Istanbul's multicultural positive image. The city is portrayed as a grimy and cold midpoint for those in transit. In *In This World*, Istanbul is nothing but a lifeless transit space. In *In Transit*, however even though Istanbul is a gloomy place akin to *In This World*, it is also a space of experience, where real people live.

The Badawi family (Iraqi Arabs) of *In Transit* expresses their disappointment about the city when they first arrive in Istanbul. Mr. Badawi, who is an engineer in his country, says that they "were expecting something like Rome." In Istanbul they have to experience the horrible living conditions and the severe drawbacks of being an illegal transient. Since the Badawis cannot see "anything like Istanbul," even though they live in the city for quite a long time, the film mirrors the family's restrictions in experiencing the city, and, thus, the film never represents any admirable corner of the city, which may "look like Rome." Yet still we feel that this dark part of Istanbul is still a living habitus. *In Transit* keeps a distance from locals and establishes an isolated life in rundown housing with informal self-employment or as illegal labor force in dire conditions. It places them in the wider picture of a migrant community, as thousands of displaced people from the underdeveloped or politically unstable countries leading a life devoid of basic rights. In the final analysis, whereas *In Transit* defines its space as an ephemeral, chaotic transit space, *Crossing The Bridge: The Sounds of Istanbul* over-praises this chaos due to its capacity to bring different sounds together.

Should we step back for a second and realize that we are eyewitnessing real lives of a transnational traffic allowing us to discern between reality and fiction? Robert Stam and Ella Shohat argue that "the fiction film inherited the social role of the nineteenth century

realist novel in relation to national imaginaries.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Shohat and Stam discuss that cinema helped cement both a national and an imperial sense of belonging and an opening of identification among many disparate peoples. “[It] has offered the spectator a mediated relationship with imaged [and imagined] others from diverse cultures.”⁽¹¹⁾ What about documentaries? Have they inherited the social role of travel writings? It can be argued that documentaries are possible followers of a 19th century travel writing tradition. Since “one is always a participant observer somewhere,”⁽¹²⁾ and after watching these two documentaries, we must ask the question: to what extent do you dare to become a participant? This is the very question that Fatih Akin fails to answer, if not fails to consider.

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1. Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
2. Rick Lyman, “A City of Many Pasts Embraces the Future” in *New York Times*, Late Edition, East Coast, September 25, 2005, 7.
3. Owen Matthews and Rana Foroohar, “Turkish Delight ; After so many decades of trying to become Western, Istanbul glories in the rediscovery of a very modern identity. European or not, it is one of the coolest cities in the world” in *Newsweek*, International ed., August 29, 2005, 30.
4. Paul Verhoeven’s *Turkish Delight* is the janus face of Alan Parker’s *Midnight Express*. While Turkish Delight embodies all the authentic, positive connotations of Turkey, *Midnight Express* is the nightmarish trope.
5. Lyman, 5-7.
6. Caglar Keyder, “Istanbul’u Nasil Satmali?” in *Istanbulu* 3, 1992, 80-85.
7. http://www.bavaria-film-international.de/htmls/filmpages/f03_067syno.html, November 10, 2005.
8. Ibid.
9. Caglar Keyder, *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local* (Oxford: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 10.
10. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “From the Imperial Family to the Transnational Imaginary” in *Globallocal Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Rob Wilson and Dissanayake Wimal, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 154-156.
11. *Globallocal*, 155
12. James Clifford. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997).