Souls in Transit
Exilic Journeys in Fatih Akin’s
The Edge of Heaven (2007)

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Overview

In Fatih Akin’s film The Edge of Heaven,\(^1\) the main characters engage in various exilic journeys on their way to self-discovery. Departing from death/pain, their travels take them to new places both outwardly and within. Foreigners to others and to themselves, they live in limbo, outside the mythical circle of life, a state viewers of the films are able to experience because of the space and time configurations of Akin’s film text, which invokes in them the notion of diaspora (Zerstreuung). Through the characters’ criss-crossings and other spatial and temporal markers, The Edge of Heaven heightens the very space of transit and transition. Typical of many films including the genre of the road movie, from which Akin borrows, this film does not emphasize the female traveling experience, but it does underline women’s souls transitioning and arriving at a new “home,” something denied the male protagonist, Nejat Aksu, who, as the foreigner, never arrives.

Many exiles are not exiles by choice but refugees who migrate as a result of natural catastrophes or persecution; there are also those who leave their homes voluntarily. They depart to be with loved ones or to leave or return to their past, or they may depart to (re)discover
themselves. Whereas there are many motives and explanations as to why people undertake exilic journeys, the outcomes of their travels are often very similar. According to Susan L. Roberson, who has written extensively on the anthropology of travel writing, “[f]or those who travel or do not experience the trauma of being violently uprooted, travel can facilitate more positive self-transformations. Indeed, it is an axiom of travel theory that with journeying one’s sense of self changes, transforms as the wayfarer finds inner resources and matures” (Roberson xvii). Traveling, then, frequently leads to character transformations that bring about a more developed “I,” and nowhere is that more visible than in The Edge of Heaven, one of the latest films by the German-Turkish filmmaker Fatih Akin. In this film, German and Turkish migrants cross the borders that separate Turkey and the Federal Republic of Germany many times.

The results of these criss-crossings are closely examined in this chapter, along with the causes for the inner and outer journeys that impact and inform the characters’ personal development. While my main discussion focuses on Nejat Aksu (played by Baki Davrak), the lead role in this film, it is the female characters, and among them especially Susanne Staub (Hanna Schygulla) and Ayten Oztürk, also known as Gül (Nurgül Yesilçay), who change and grow and ultimately become part of their new environment. I argue that their exilic journeys lead them to a new beginning. Unlike Nejat, the endlessly traveling male, they eventually arrive.

**The Edge of Heaven: Summary**

Fatih Akin’s film opens outside a gas station where the main character, Nejat Aksu, pulls up to buy gas, food, and water before heading back onto the road. In the next shot, we find ourselves in the city of Bremen, Germany, in which a protest march is taking place. It is May 1, International Worker’s Day. Ali Aksu (Tunkel Kurtiz), Nejat’s father, is walking by, smiling. Ultimately he ends up in a red-light district in which he makes first contact with Jessy, alias Yetêr (Nursel Köse). Yetêr eventually moves in with him, which comes as a surprise to his son, Nejat, an academic and scholar of German literature at the University of Hamburg. During Nejat’s first and second visits to his father’s apartment, as well as during their visits to Ali in the hospital, Nejat and Yetêr get to know and grow fond of each other. Nejat, for example,