

“HEAD-ON”

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Woody Guthrie, in an old song, said: “There are millions of folks with just two empty hands”. The world has forgotten it. We live in a wonderful world. There is not place for the losers. Well, the movie *Gegen den Wand* (in English *Head on*)¹ of the young Turkish director Fatih Akin deals with the losers and reminds us that Lucifer was the first of the losers and the people with just two empty hands are under his protection. It is a story about a lonely man and a still-lonelier woman, fighting against their worlds and what often seems like their own best interests. The film has caused a stir in Germany for the gloomy, worrying light it sheds on the lives of the country's Turkish immigrants.

Cahit (Birol Ünel) and Sibel (Sibel Kekilli), are both Turkish and living in Hamburg. They meet in a mental hospital, where they have landed because of suicide attempts. Cahit drove a car into a brick wall; Sibel slit her wrists, and probably not for the first time. Cahit is about 40 and fighting past demons. Sibel is half his age and fighting present demons – i.e. a traditional father and brother who insist she wed a Turk. Upon meeting Cahit, Sibel asks, “Would you marry me?”

What Sibel needs more than anything else, more than a nip or a prescription for Zoloft, is a Turkish husband. The only daughter in a strict German-Turkish family, Sibel has a broken nose and scarred arms, and is living a life

¹ Written (in German and Turkish, with English subtitles) and directed by Fatih Akin; director of photography, Rainer Klausmann; edited by Andrew Bird; artistic director, Andreas Thiel; produced by Ralph Schwingel, Stefan Schubert and Wüste Filmproduktion; released the 21. 1. 2005. Running time: 118 minutes.

WITH: Birol Ünel (Cahit), Sibel Kekilli (Sibel), Catrin Striebeck (Maren) and Güven Kirac (Seref). and Meltem Cumbul, Zarah McKenzie, Stefan Gebelhoff, Francesco Fiannaca, Sabine Bredy, Ralph Misske, Philipp Baltus, Hermann Lause, Karin Niwiger, Demir Gökgöl, Cem Akin

of everyday brutality. Sibel's father happens to be a conservative Muslim. Yet for Fatih Akin, the son of Turkish guest workers who immigrated to Germany and ended up in Hamburg, where he was born, religion is not specifically, or at least exclusively, the problem. The problem is how faith becomes dogma, a prison sentence and worse. For Sibel, the solution to that problem is a husband who can pass muster with her father, which is how she and Cahit end up under the same roof: Cahit's apartment, the kingdom of the anarchy and of the smell of stale beer and cigarettes that Sibel, slowly, change in a idyllic room. Cahit gains a housekeeper (since Sibel is good at cooking and cleaning) and she gets a Turkish husband.

The couple enter the arrangement with no illusions, their relationship developing in reverse of the typical romance: they start off steeped in cynicism and doubt, and in separate beds. Cahit, who's on a long downward spiral, betrays little interest in Sibel and the world from which she comes. Sibel seems more gentle and kind, but, in the end, wants to be free and alone, avoiding any relationship true relationship.

The two live simply as roommates, getting their sex elsewhere – he with a sometimes girlfriend, and she with any guy who suits her fancy. Then slowly the two begin to fall for each other. Cahit is jealous and frustrated by Sibel. Defending her he kills a man and ends up in jail. Sibel falls in love of his brave and unlucky husband. She decides to wait for him and flees to Turkey: her heart, mind and soul remain with him – but for how long? I will not reveal the end of the movie: the only thing I can say is that is a dramatic one, not a happy end.

Ünel and Kekilli both bring a strong force of personality to their roles, which makes the wide variety of situations both impressive and charming. And there's a brilliant range of side characters who add strength to the film-- Cahit's girlfriend (Striebeck) and his strict Muslim pal (Kirac); Sibel's divorced cousin in Istanbul (Cumbul) and her madcap brother (Cem Akin).

Set principally against the grimy neighbourhood of working-class Hamburg, in dirty and spoiled apartments, the film has an excellent sense of place. Germany, it emerges, is no more hospitable to Cahit and Sibel than the couple's own family and background. The city's squalid atmosphere works a

bright contrast to the visions of Turkey that shine unsteadily throughout the film. Istanbul looks stunning and gorgeous, but unreal as in a magic tale. The only real life is the everyday life, full of despair and pain.

This severe and pitiless story about two damaged lovers, is very heavy and depressing yet a very impressive film that shows the annihilation of a man and of a woman by their own hands. But is only this is meaning? We can try to understand its deep implications with the help of the psychoanalysis.

First of all, we have to consider both the characters. It is very difficult to define them from a psychoanalytical point of view. Their actions are so strange and unusual, their behaviour is so erratic and unpredictable, that we are astonished: for them drug use, violence, suicide attempts, cruel actions are “normal”; and normally their very bad fellows are very nasty brutal and aggressive as well: they could rape a woman or wound her with a knife without problems.

It is hard to say who really are Cahit and Sibel and what are their true difficulties: to make “a diagnosis” if you wish. Certainly, you can call them “borderline”, but this is just a way to explain that they are not the usual patients of a classical psychoanalysis. What does it mean, actually, that they are “borderline”?

Following Kernberg², we can say that their behaviour is a “borderline” one, but that the structure of their personality is more complex than their behaviour. In the case of Sibel we can speak of a narcissistic disorder: the traumatic wounds she received they have provoked a block in the so-called base area. In the case of Cahit we have a man full of guilty for the death of his first wife, depressed and unable to work, who is fallen into the chains of drug and alcohol, victim of a trauma that his compulsive personality cannot sustain.

Cahit and Sibil, with their artificial married life, are able to create something new: a double False Self, a conjugal False Self. It could seem strange to call False Self the marriage: but we know that a couple is not only a couple, but a new identity, shared by the members of the couple. The members of the couple build a common way of life, as well as a new personal life into the marital life. In the case of Cahit and Sibil we can speak of False Marital Self both for the life of the couple and for the personal life of each one. Cahit and Sibil play the role of husband and wife, but deny it in any moment: at the beginning it seems only a mask that they can wear and take off without

² O. Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, New York 1975.

problems. As a matter of fact the mask is so tight to the visage that practically is the visage.

The problem is that their False Self is what I can call a False True Self! As Winnicott wrote: "This false self is no doubt an aspect of the true self. It hides and protects it, and it reacts to the adaptation failures and develops a pattern corresponding to the pattern of environmental failure. In this way the true self is not involved in the reacting, and so preserves a continuity of being. However, this hidden true self suffers an impoverishment that derives from lack of experience."³

This is the situation of the strange couple who we are speaking: they must conceal their inner life because they must protect themselves from the difficulties of the normal life. Their protection is represented by the artificial marriage, that is for each one a False Self and at the same time for both them a common False Self. But this structure is actually poor of experience: is a kind of anaesthesia to avoid the pain, but when the narcotic ends its effects, the pain seems stronger and harder than in the past. Cahit and Sibil need love: so they want to get rid of the comedy they have written and played and to change this comedy in a real experience. But they cannot do it, because they are too weak to do what they actually want.

What both Cahit and Sibil don't understand is that their failure is necessary to grow up. The failure of the False Self is a part of the process of development and we should accept it. The transformation of the comedy of the wedding into a true wedding must be difficult and painful. If you try to avoid it you cannot go on. "One has to include in one's theory of the development of a human being the idea that it is normal and healthy for the individual to be able to defend the self against specific environmental failure by a *freezing of the failure situation*. Along with this goes an unconscious assumption (which can become a conscious hope) that opportunity will occur at a later date for a renewed experience in which the failure situation will be able to be unfrozen and reexperienced, with the individual in a regressed state, in an environment that is making adequate adaptation. The theory is here being put forward of regression as part of a healing process, in fact, a normal phenomenon that can be properly studied in the healthy person."⁴

³ D. W. WINNICOTT, *Clinical Varieties of Transference*, 1955-56. in D. W. Winnicott (Ed.), *Through paediatrics to psychoanalysis*, New York 1992, pp. 295-299.

⁴ ID., *Metapsychological and Clinical Aspects of Regression within the Psychoanalytic Setup*, in "International Journal of Psychoanalysis", 36 (1955), pp. 16-42.

In spite of it, the couple of *Gegen den Wand* is unable to survive to the transformation: the failure of their double False Self is the way to grow up for each one, alone, not for the couple.

Maybe it could be useful to remember that Masud Khan, who was friend and pupil of Winnicott, outlined that Winnicott's formulation of the True and False Self is problematic affirming that we can recognize the existence of the True Self by its absence: it is difficult to realize what a True Self could be and easier to say that the life of a man is not authentic at all.

From this point of view, the difficulties of both Cahit and Sibil, even different for each one, are the difficulties of people looking for an inner life that has been lost and that seems lost for ever. Cahit and Sibil are unable to love in the right way each other, because they have lost their capacity of taking care of the other. As Winnicott wrote: "With the care that it receives from its mother each infant is able to have a personal existence, and so begins to build up what might be called a continuity of being. On the basis of this continuity of being the inherited potential gradually develops into an individual infant. If maternal care is not good enough then the infant does not really come into existence, since there is no continuity of being; instead the personality becomes built on the basis of reactions to environmental impingement."⁵

We can say that both Cahit and Sibil suffer of the return of the repressed: the past ghosts came again during their married life and prevent and stop the possibility of an evolution. We don't know how was the childhood or the adolescence of Cahit, but we know something of the Sibil's ones: certainly she had a very disturbed relationship with his parents. As regards Cahit, we can say that he was certainly victim of the terrible trauma of the death of his first wife and that he was victim as well of his depression and of his alcohol dependence following this trauma. The both seem victim of what Masud Khan has called "a cumulative trauma". "Introducing his notion of cumulative trauma, Khan⁶ draws attention to the traumatic quality of events which are not just that when taken into account one by one, but become traumatic only cumulatively and retrospectively, silently working and building up through childhood and adolescence. These events result from failures of the maternal protective role, involving not only meeting the baby's anaclitic needs, but also defending him from the mother's unconscious love and hatred."⁷ Sibil and Cahit are slaves: a chain of silent traumas tighten and

⁵ ID., *The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship*, in "International Journal of Psychoanalysis", 43 (1962), pp. 238-239.

⁶ M. M. R KHAN., *The privacy of the Self*, London 1974.

⁷ L. GRASSI, *Infant-parent psychotherapy: relevance of psychoanalytic theorizing on the therapeutic process*, in EEPP (European Federation for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in the Public Sector) Texts, 2001-07-25):

strangle them. How is possible for them to grow up and became a true couple of lovers instead of a couple of comedians?

This is the dramatic question of the movie: a question without an answer. And without a real conclusion: the only possible conclusion is a poetic cry, that we perceive through the words of the turkish folksong sung at the end of the movie. Love is pain. Man is without comfort or aid on the hearth. Only the hawks of the mountains can fly in the sky, far away from human misery.