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The Cut

Director: Fatih Akin

Germany, France, Italy, Russia, Poland, Canada, Turkey and Jordan, 2014

Reviewed by Anna Batori

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Shifting his focus from the German-Turkish question to one of the biggest taboos in Turkish history, Fatih Akin continues digging deep in the racial-ethnic world-narratives. By honouring the memory of those died during the infamous and often forgotten Armenian Genocide, *The Cut* challenges the current ostrich policy to the Turkish ethnic cleansing that caused the death of about 1,5 million Armenians between 1914 and 1923.

After more than hundred years, the mass murder, deportation and systematic torture of thousands of Armenians still form a less-known territory in the official historio-political European discourse. The historical falsification and distortion causes a deep division between Turks and Armenians, and builds tension between those countries that recognize the Genocide and those who deny it. It is most probably because of this political tension that Akin decided to focus on the emotional perspective of the genocide and avoided to put any emphasis on the socio-political and historical context that embraces the tragedy.

The Cut follows the Armenian Nazaret Manoogian (Tahar Rahim) on his eight-year long transatlantic journey from Mardin through Aleppo and Cuba to as far as North Dakota. The story begins in 1915, when the blacksmith Nazaret, the father of two young twin-daughters, is forced into slave labour by Ottoman command. Together with his Armenian mates, the family man must build roads in the scalding desert, where they often witness Armenian groups marching through the squally, dry landscape. Although it is unclear whether Nazaret is aware of the systematic extermination of his folk, he tries his best to persevere and help his dying and tortured fellows. One day however, he and his mates must meet their end and the small Armenian working group gets executed. Luckily, Nazaret's executioner is incapable of cutting the man's throat, and only wounds his neck, in this way helping the family man to survive the massacre. Although Nazaret gets rescued by the Turkish soldier and later by a soap-maker from Aleppo, his wound makes him mute, which only exacerbates his already hopeless and depressing situation. When he accidentally learns that his daughters might be still alive, he gains new strength and, sparing no effort to reunite with his family, goes on an endless journey to find his twins.

While trying to communicate via writing into his small notebook, Nazaret always finds Turks and Armenians that help him on his journey. Thanks to this, he soon learns that his daughters got married and moved to Cuba. In Cuba then, it turns out that the twins work in the United States, which urges Nazaret to travel there as soon as possible. Despite his endeavour however, he eventually loses track of his family and starts working at a railway construction in North Dakota. We are in year 1923, when Nazaret overhears some Armenian songs coming from a small cottage and learns that her twins might be in Ruso, some miles away. In the end, he mysteriously finds his daughter on the icy-cold streets of the village, but the long-awaited reunification has a bittersweet aftertaste for Nazaret soon learns that only one of his daughters survived the eight-year long ordeal.

As the story illustrates, *The Cut* is an ambitious, cosmopolitan production that was shot in more than five countries with an international crew from all over the world. What Akin created this way, is a global road-movie that, by using the Armenian Genocide as core of its narrative, depicts a historical tableau of the early 20th century. Although the costumes, the design and the landscape of the movie provide a spectacular glimpse into the era, the vision often annihilates the personal motivation of the protagonist, who is illustrated as absolutely lost amidst the spotless

historical design. The more the story progresses, the more unclear it is how Nazaret feels about his own roots, own history, the death of his folks and the people who caused the massacre. Thanks to this blurry mental map, the blacksmith gets absolutely objectified in the story, a part of the historic design who, while walking great distances in the film sets, gets lost behind the beautifully choreographed images.

Akin tries to stress the transformation of Nazaret through the man's turning away from Christianity, which constructs the very core to his Armenian identity. However, he keeps this line too much on the surface, without explaining what Nazaret might think of his Saviour in the context of the tragedies he witnessed. In the first sequences of the film, Akin depicts the man as deeply religious who confesses his sins, prays before eating and stands for his Christian convictions when the Turks ask them to convert to Islam. After contributing to the death of his sister-in-law in the death camp of Ras-al-Ayn, Nazaret angrily throws stones in the air – as if aiming at Jesus – and hopelessly tries to erase his cross-tattoo from his wrists with a stone. His endeavour to get rid of the sign marks a turning point in the story and, together with the stone-motif, forms a metaphoric structure in the film. Later, at the Turks' march of shame in Aleppo, Armenian survivors throw stones on the walking crowd but Nazaret, similar to his Turkish executioner, is morally incapable of the act. Instead, being shocked of the image of a bleeding young Turkish boy, he quickly leaves the march and returns to his shelter.

With representing the crimes and cruelty, as well as the helpfulness of both the Armenian and Turkish folk, Akin tries his best to communicate a neutral standpoint in the film, thus urging *both* sides to take moral responsibility for the happenings. Also, with the stone-motif, he often refers to the Biblical message to throw back bread instead of stones, in this way to emphasize forgiveness and moral compassion. Unfortunately, Akin's mainly neutral point of view that is based on mercy, erases the personal perspective of Nazaret to religion, who never talks about his relationship with God. It is only in Cuba, where it becomes clear that the blacksmith has reckoned with his Christian past. The father does not wait for his hosts' pre-dinner prayer in Havana, nor is he willing to go to church anymore. However, these smaller signs of Nazaret's atheism are not exploited in depth, which is most probably due to the very episodic narrative formula of the film that embraces too many places in a time being way too short. Thanks to this structure that focuses on movement and visuals instead of the very personal world of Nazaret, the film turns into a road-movie halfway, thus shifting the emphasis from the Armenian genocide to a long flaneuring in the American landscape.

Another point that makes the identification with Nazaret and his journey rather problematic, and exacerbates his objectified position in the narrative, is his muteness that does not leave the man any space for any verbal-emotional communication. This Biblical motif – God rendered Ezekiel mute for seven and half years, which also corresponds to the length of Nazaret's journey – emphasises the already excluded position of the man. On the one hand, the blacksmith is member to one of the ethnic minorities of the Ottoman Empire that puts him at the margins of the society – existing outside the hegemonic power structure. In this Spivakian subaltern position, the only way of Nazaret to be heard is to convert to Islam which, however, would mean to give up his Armenian identity. He thus rejects the only opportunity to leave the camp and, such as Ezekiel, gets muted by God. Nazaret thus takes on a double subordinated position. First, he is the Other in the narrative, the inferior Armenian who is governed by the Turks who relocate him into the desert. This dispossessed position is exacerbated by his muteness that puts him in an ever more vulnerable and oppressed situation. He communicates by using Arabic, Turkish and English language and completely ignores Armenian, the other pillar to his very identity. Deprived of his language, home and religion, Nazaret becomes an absolutely homeless person and even more marginalized when he travels to Cuba. In Havana, he does not know the language while, because of his muteness, he cannot get a visa to the States. He drifts as a second-class citizen from one city to the other without any stable identity and legal status.

Nazaret's in-between position recalls the marginalized position of the German-Turkish director, which might be one of the reasons why Akin's attention has shifted to the Armenian question. Similar to Nazaret – his alter-ego – the director is subjected to the German law, while he himself has a constant longing for the land of his parents, Turkey. In his fatherland, however,

he is treated as an outsider for his German background, which results in an in-between, fractured and torn identity-structure, depriving him of a full identification with Germany or Turkey. The only way to acquire a pseudo-stable identity is to become a true cosmopolitan, constantly drifting in space and time – a fluid position where Akin locates Nazaret. This might be an explanation why all the Armenians speak English in the film. Avoiding the Armenian language and using a very accented English throughout the film is most probably the biggest shortcoming of *The Cut* that, only accelerates to the subaltern position of the characters and makes the identification with Nazaret difficult.

His muteness, together with his minority-and-cosmopolitan position and the loss of his religion, deprives Nazaret of his very Armenian identity that transforms the movie into a pseudo-blockbuster cinema whose narrative reflects the aimless journey of a lost soul. In this Homeric wandering, the landscape and its capturing in wide shots get special attention. Nazaret is often portrayed against the barren, rocky and windy scenery of the desert and the icy, inhospitable hills of the States. On the one hand, his long walks in the empty, austere landscapes signify his outsider position – the wanderer who is rejected by the virgin environment – while the extreme long shots that capture his stranger position put him into an even more isolated place. Nazaret's physiognomy and gestures that could help to understand his inner journey, and could overcome his muteness, thus remain hidden from the spectator whose attention shifts to the landscape instead of the man's personal tribulation.

The beautifully choreographed images, the very detailed historic settings and the breathtaking sceneries of Jordan, Malta, Cuba and Canada are linked by a recurring Armenian folk-music motif that accompanies the whole film. Together with the extended use of extras and the very episodic structure that is built on textual references to signal the exact time and space of the happenings, Akin's story becomes a grandiose attempt to mimic the Oscar-winning Hollywood-formula. Unfortunately, the most important message, the Armenian Genocide gets scarified on the altar of this ambitious experiment. Despite its shortcomings however – the pseudo-Hollywood aesthetics, a huge lack of historical references and possible identification – *The Cut* deserves critical attention for it is one of the first and bravest efforts to touch upon a taboo that deeply divides nations. While there were attempts to represent the Armenian Genocide on screen, most directors used the documentary genre (Eric Friedler's *Aghet, a Genocide*, 2010) or only referenced the massacre in feature films (Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*, 2002), which makes Akin's production a historical-political milestone in the representation of the systematic extermination of Armenians. *The Cut* and the recently released American production, *The Promise* (Terry George, 2016) illustrate that the collective remembrance on the Armenian Holocaust has just started, and the historical falsifications and speculations can be finally addressed not only in literature, but in the cinema as well.

Title of the Film: *The Cut*; Director: Fatih Akin; Screenplay: Fatih Akin, Mardik Martin; Producers: Fatih Akin, Karl Baumgartner, Reinhard Brundig; Music: Alexander Hacke; Cinematography: Rainer Klausmann; Editor: Andrew Bird; Sound Designer: Zubin Sarosh; Cast: Tahar Rahim, Simon Abkarian, Makram Khoury, Hindi Zahra, Kevork Malikyan, Bartu Küçükçaglayan; Country: Germany, France, Italy, Russia, Poland, Canada, Turkey and Jordan; Year of Release: 2014; Production Companies: Bombero International, Opus Film, Pandora Filmproduktion. Duration: 138 minutes.