

The Cut (2014)

Claudia Breger

dir. Fatih Akin; prod. Fatih Akin, Kari Baumgartner, Reinhard Brundig; screenplay Fatih Akin, Mardik Martin; photography Rainer Klausmann; music Alexander Hacke. 35mm, color, 138 mins. Bombero International et al., distrib. Pandora Film Verleih.



Fatih Akin's 2014 drama on the Armenian genocide and its aftermath, *The Cut*, received mixed reviews as an (in some critics' eyes) unfortunate turn to genre on the part of the award-winning contemporary Turkish German arthouse director. Citing the director's avowed reference to classical Hollywood forms and intertexts, they characterized *The Cut*, for example, as »a narrative of almost archaic simplicity« (Kothenschulte) and »big, ambitious« but »a little simplistic emotionally« (Bradshaw). However, the film is anything but simple (Breger). In addition to Hollywood forms of both family and spectacular melodrama (via traditions of Western and historical epos), *The Cut* draws on the aesthetics of European, including Turkish, independent art cinema. At the intersection of these diverging intertextual vectors, we can situate *The Cut* as a transnational adaptation of the melodramatic mode for a specific artistic-political project: Akin's creative search for a cinematic language to mourn the Armenian genocide.

As recent scholarship has emphasized, melodrama deploys »the power and value of feeling« (sensation, pathos etc.) to facilitate »empathy as a [...] site of social cohesion« (Gledhill and Williams 1; Gledhill xv). Rather than by way of »abstract morality,« melodrama develops its meanings via »felt affect, the visceral language of embodiment, gesture« (Gledhill xv, xxii). In creating »pathos« for its protagonists overcome by more powerful forces, melodramatic representation issues a call for »justice« in relation to their suffering (Williams 42, 48). In this spirit, Akin embraced melodrama's high-affect aesthetics specifically with the goal of a counter-hegemonic intervention into the contemporary Turkish public sphere, where the Armenian genocide has remained unacknowledged by the government and more or less taboo (see Akin). His primary aim, the director states, was »that Turkish viewers watching the film can identify fully with the main character« (Akin qtd. in Kürten and Glasenapp). With its clear-cut embrace of the

victim's perspective, *The Cut* aims to facilitate a public process of unqualified mourning for and with a political »Other.«

With its audience address thus explicitly designed as polar, *The Cut* nonetheless complicates the prototypical economy ascribed to melodrama both aesthetically and ideologically. »[M]oral polarities of good and evil« (Anker 2) are attenuated through the character of a Turkish soldier who becomes the Armenian protagonist's (short-term) flight companion after saving his life (although not his throat and voice) in the genocide. The overall film also emphasizes the institutional dimensions of genocide more than individually developed perpetrator figures. Furthermore, there is a sequence set at the end of the war, in which the protagonist, Nazaret Manoogian (Tahar Rahim), is invited to join an angry group of Armenians throwing stones at Turkish soldiers and refugees in the street. With his hand already raised to throw, Nazaret interrupts his gesture after he sees a child get hit in the face. Rather than validating the »bloodlust« aroused by a despicable »villain« (Singer 40), Akin's adaptation of the melodramatic mode thus displaces the villain target with a reminder of precarious humanity across groups.

More interesting than these diegetic elements, however, is the film's cinematography. Creatively adapting the widescreen (CinemaScope) technology associated with 1950s Hollywood cinema, *The Cut* counterintuitively develops affective intensity through an aesthetics of extreme spatial distance. On a first level, this aesthetics of distance operates as an ethical safeguard insofar as it develops what we might call an anti-sensational variation on the »sensational melodrama [...] of spectacular diegetic realism« (Singer 53). Designed to respect the »dignity« of the victims, in particular in the depiction of violence (Akin), this aesthetics of spatial distance also qualifies the director's goal of facilitating identification (or empathy as feeling *with*) by discouraging facile audience claims that we could ever fully understand a historical experience unimaginable to most of us.

But there is yet more to this aesthetics of distance. In line with dominant early Hollywood use of CinemaScope's technology, the first part of the film deploys its potential for »ensemble staging« (Bordwell 294) in showing collective imprisonment and labor. After the execution sequence that severs the (wounded but surviving) protagonist from his collective, however, spatial distance is not attenuated towards more classical individual engagement. During Nazaret's lonely travel through various desert and desert-like landscapes that dominates the second half of the film, the audience sees him, again and again, as a minuscule figure in bare surroundings. This dramatizing of the individual's separation from his—and in fact any—community performed by the (material and metaphorical) cut of genocide is in tension with prototypical melodramatic alignments of the individual with the collective. Akin's cinematography also performs a thoroughly de-heroicizing intervention into the ideologies of spectacular melodrama (in dialogue with Williams, Anker). Radically exposed to an overwhelming, hostile environment, Nazaret is both *deserted* and, in the film's visual assemblages of human and desert, *desertified*. Inviting an intense affective response that exceeds immediate character relation, *The Cut*'s spectacular vistas align us less with Nazaret's perspective than they challenge us to endure a co-experience of radical isolation in the projected immensity of the desert.

On the plot level, Nazaret's ongoing wanderings throughout the second half of the film serve the goal of reuniting him with his two daughters who emigrated to the U.S. via Cuba. In intertwining the affective economies of the spectacular melodrama with that of the family melodrama, *The Cut* personalizes its drama, albeit not to the degree

of privatizing the underlying social conflict (in dialogue with Williams). Rather, the haunting cinematography combined with plot reminders of Nazaret's loss of religious or cultural identification and capacity for broader solidarity encourages us to read his relentless familial quest as indicative of the radical reduction of collective belonging effected by genocide. Finally, the film does not melodramatically resolve this radical loss of collective orientation on the level of the family: Even the protagonist's eventual reunion with his surviving daughter does not significantly change the film's iconography of desertion. In the very last shot, the camera slowly pans sideways to trace Nazaret and his remaining daughter walking out into the bare steppe, further and further away from us, to become a minuscule double figure before the credits start rolling. This visual permanence of isolation counteracts any temptation of reading *The Cut*'s epic quest in terms of an ideology of the family. Rather than indexing the director's resignation vis-à-vis the neoliberal revival of these ideologies in the film's 21st century moment, *The Cut*'s spectacular family melodrama forcefully urges its audiences to make room for the process of mourning genocidal violence.

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