

# Introduction

---

New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film Volume 7 Number 1 © 2009 Intellect Ltd.  
Introduction. English language. doi: 10.1386/ncin.7.1.3/2

---

## Introduction: Turkish–German dialogues on screen

**Daniela Berghahn** *Royal Holloway, University of London*

The title *Turkish–German Dialogues on Screen* refers to the multiple dialogues recorded in this special issue. These include dialogues between Turkish and Turkish–German film-makers and the various cross-cultural exchanges that inform their work on the level of creation, production, distribution and reception, as well as dialogues between film scholars from different national and cultural backgrounds – Turkish, German, British and American – all of whom have extensively published on the cinemas under consideration here. It also pertains to the ‘dialogic tendencies’, theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin and Kobena Mercer, in Turkish–German film. With reference to black independent cinema in Britain, Mercer has identified these ‘dialogic tendencies’ as critical interventions of minority cultures, which open up the ‘possibility of social change [. . . through] the multiplication of critical dialogues’ (Mercer 2003: 254). And finally, there are the political dialogues and discourses within and between Turkey and Germany and which resonate in the countries’ respective film cultures.

What makes Turkish–German dialogues on screen, and beyond, particularly pertinent in the context of the political debates surrounding Turkey’s position in Europe, is that Germany is home to some 2.4 million Turks, that is, almost half of the Turkish diaspora in Europe. Berlin is often referred to as the third largest Turkish city after Istanbul and Ankara. Turks also constitute the largest ethnic minority in Germany. Most Turks came to West Germany between 1961 and 1973 as labour migrants – so-called *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers). Originally, they were expected to stay only temporarily, or as long as they could make a valuable contribution to the economy through their labour. But when in 1974 a law was passed that made it possible for their families to join them, temporary migrants gradually became permanent settlers.

Despite the fact ‘that no fewer than 15 million of the country’s current population of 82 million have a migration background’ (Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes 2007: xvii), until quite recently Germany did not perceive itself as an ‘immigration country’. Its citizenship law, based on bloodline and descent, made it extremely difficult for migrants to become naturalized. An amendment to this law in 2000, and the passing of a comprehensive immigration law in 2005, brought Germany’s immigration statutes in line with

- 1 See Göktürk, Gramling and Kaes (2007) for an excellent overview of the issues and debates surrounding immigration into Germany between 1955 and 2005.
- 2 Mani (2007: 30) reminds us that the German language has two words for the English 'representation', 'Darstellen' (aesthetic representation) and 'Vertreten' (political representation).

those of other European countries, resulting in an improved legal position for Turks and other ethnic minorities in Germany.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, continued debates in the media revolving around the contested concepts of a *Leitkultur* (guiding culture) (Tibi 2000), *Parallelgesellschaften* (parallel societies), a German core culture and 'the clash of civilisations' (Huntington 1996) suggest that better legal and institutional frameworks do not instantly translate into a harmonious multicultural, let alone, a cosmopolitan society. One of the key issues surfacing in the debates about the Turkish community in Germany and Turkey's accession to the European Union are fears and anxieties about ethnic, but especially, religious difference. Turkey would not only be the second largest EU member state (in populational terms) but also the only Muslim one. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, religion has moved up high on the agenda in discussions about identity and belonging, and Islam has all too readily become associated with Islamic fundamentalism.

Turkey's geographical position, spanning two continents, Asia and Europe, not only makes it a strategically important nation but has also, in the cultural sphere, given rise to the trope of the bridge between Orient and Occident. According to Leslie Adelson, the trope of the suspended bridge 'between two worlds' is one of the most frequently invoked rhetorical conceits to describe two 'ostensibly discrete cultures, religions and civilizations' (2005: 6). While some texts rather pessimistically imagine this bridge to lead nowhere, others conceive of it as a pathway to 'a shared future predicated on cultural difference and universal rights' (2005: 6). The latter is certainly the path pursued by Venkat Mani in his book *Cosmopolitical Claims*, in which he explores the interactions between Turkish and Turkish-German literatures, juxtaposing the two. He proposes that hyphenated and minoritarian literatures, films and other cultural formations negotiate 'multiple and simultaneous affiliations and disaffiliations' and, in doing so, make political claims 'that unsettle concepts of home, belonging, and cultural citizenship' (2007: 7). Thus, aesthetic representation inevitably translates into political representation.<sup>2</sup>

The music documentary *Crossing the Bridge: The Sound of Istanbul* (2005) is well suited to illustrate Mani's argument. The topography of the suspended bridge across the Bosphorus is the film's central conceit and used to underscore the multicultural heritage of Turkey as well as its important strategic position: '72 nations have crossed this bridge', one of the musicians remarks at the beginning of the film, thereby claiming that Turkey is by no means a country on the periphery of Europe but that it actually occupies a central position in terms of international relations and cultural exchanges.

However, rather than sketching the socio-political background of the Turkish-German dialogues on screen in detail here, I wish to make the case for considering Turkish and Turkish-German cinema in conjunction: like other cinemas of hyphenated identities, Turkish-German cinema can only be adequately analysed if its peculiar position at the interstices of two cultures is taken into account. This is reflected in the films' hybrid aesthetic strategies and their transnational circulation, which make 'watching across borders' (Iordanova, in press) the only viable reception position.

The present volume, then, seeks to complement the focus on Turkish–German cinema by a concise overview of trends in contemporary Turkish cinema. Not only is the latter a subject about which so far relatively little has been published in English, but – consistent with the dialogic approach taken here – it also seems essential to include a Turkish scholarly perspective on a discourse that involves Turkish national cinema and its multiple transnational connections with German film culture. Moreover, the articles on Turkish cinema will facilitate a more informed understanding of the cinematic traditions on which Turkish–German film-makers draw and highlight synchronicities in the revival of both film cultures during the 1990s.

How deeply intertwined Turkish and German film cultures have become over the past decade or so manifests itself in the heated debates about belonging, national identity and citizenship triggered by some of the films and their creators. For example, the Turkish–German director Fatih Akin has attracted considerable media attention in Turkey and Germany. In his contribution to this volume, ‘Star Director as Symptom: Reflections on the Reception of Fatih Akin in the Turkish Media’, Nezi̇h Erdoğan aptly describes the controversial media coverage surrounding Akin as a ‘discursive field of warring forces’. On the one hand, the Turkish press lays claim to Akin as being ‘one of us’ and tries to take ownership of his numerous prize-winning films. On the other hand, it chides their prodigal son for being a ‘traitor’, not loyal to his Turkish roots since he tries to avoid military service in Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the crossing of bridges and borders does not only relate to the creation and reception of Turkish and Turkish–German cinema but is also one of its prime thematic concerns. Rob Burns in his contribution ‘On the Streets and on the Road’, contrasts the claustrophobic spaces and images of captivity that dominated Turkish–German cinema of the 1970s and 80s with the heightened sense of mobility that characterizes contemporary Turkish–German and Turkish European (co-)productions. In this respect, road movies charting their protagonists’ journeys from Turkey to Germany or in the reverse direction are now a particularly prominent genre.

Both Turkish and German cinema experienced a revival roughly simultaneously in the mid- to late 1990s. As Savaş Arslan outlines in ‘The New Cinema of Turkey’, after the end of Yeşilçam, the golden age of Turkish popular cinema, in the early 1980s, domestic film production went through a severe crisis.<sup>4</sup> It was not until the end of the millennium that a new generation of Turkish film-makers came to the fore, producing both popular box-office hits and art cinema that attracted attention and won major prizes at international film festivals. Yavuz Turgul’s *Eşkiya/The Bandit* (1996) is often cited as the first film to signal the revival of Turkish popular cinema. Other feature films which enjoyed considerable success at the Turkish box-office, as well as amongst the Turkish diaspora in Germany, include *Vizontele* (2001) and *Vizontele Tuuba* (2004), the sci-fi film *G.O.R.A* (2004) and the controversial action-adventure film *Kurtlar vadisi – Irak /Valley of the Wolves Iraq* (2006), discussed in detail by Arslan in the above mentioned article. Meanwhile, Turkish art cinema began to make headlines when Zeki Demirkubuz’s *Yazgı/Fate* (2001) and *İtiraf/The*

- 3 The different spellings of a number of Turkish names in the contributions of Turkish, German, British and American scholars in this volume is deliberate and intended to reflect the contested belonging of film-makers such as Akin/Akin, Aladağ/Aladag and others.
- 4 Yeşilçam (literally ‘Green Pine’) is named after Yeşilçam Street in the Beyoğlu district in Istanbul, where most of the studios were based. For a book-length study of Yeşilçam, see Arslan (in press).

- 5 For an extensive account of New Turkish Cinema, see Suner (in press).
- 6 The working title of this film was *Alle Türken heißen Ali/All Turks are Called Ali*. However, the film does not feature a Turkish but a North African migrant.
- 7 For an account of earlier phases and the transition to new Turkish-German cinema, see Burns (2006, 2007), Göktürk (2000, 2002), Karpff, Kiesel and Visarius (1995), Leal and Rossade (2008), Löser (2004) and Schäffler (2007).

*Confession* (2002) were included in the *Un certain regard* section at the Cannes Film Festival in 2002 and when Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uzak/Distant* (2003) won the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes in 2003. Many of the new Turkish art films, including Yeşim Ustaoglu's *Güneş Yolculuk/Journey to the Sun* (1999) and her subsequent *Bulutları Beklerken/Waiting for the Clouds* (2003), one of the films Asuman Suner analyzes in her article 'Silenced Memories', revives the tradition of Turkey's politically committed cinema, associated in the West especially with the late exiled film-maker Yılmaz Güney. As Suner illustrates, many of these new art films excavate a traumatic or repressed past. Broaching taboos such as the erasure of the multicultural identity of the Ottoman Empire after the foundation of the Turkish Republic and the oppression and marginalization of ethnic minorities undoubtedly contributes to the interest international critics and audiences are showing in these features.<sup>5</sup>

It may be more than just a coincidence that the revival of German cinema during the late 1990s was in no small measure due to the 'Young Turks'. After the demise of New German Cinema in the 1980s, German cinema had lost its critical edge. The artistically innovative and politically committed *Autorenkino* was replaced by what Eric Rentschler has called the 'cinema of consensus' (2000), consisting of inconsequential, derivative comedies that were utterly conservative in terms of their aesthetic and political agenda. Following the critical and commercial success of Fatih Akin's melodramatic love story *Gegen die Wand/ Duvara Karşı/Head-On* (2004), the first German film in eighteen years to win the Golden Bear at the International Film Festival in Berlin in 2004, 'Young Turkish-German Cinema' was being promoted with the ironic slogan 'The New German Cinema is Turkish' (Kulaoglu 1999). As this reference suggests, German film-makers of Turkish origin such as Fatih Akin, Ayşe Polat, Yüksel Yavuz, Thomas Arslan, Züli Aladag, Sülbiye Günar and several others are being perceived as the next wave of *auteurs* whose films are anticipated to win the international acclaim that was hitherto reserved for the *auteurs* of New German Cinema in the 1970s and early 80s.

Given that Fatih Akin is currently one of Germany's most internationally renowned directors, it is easily forgotten that Turkish-German cinema did not start with him. In fact, the first films about Turks and other migrants in Germany were made by New German Cinema's celebrated *auteurs* and included Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf/Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974),<sup>6</sup> Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Shirins Hochzeit/Shirin's Wedding* (1976), Werner Schroeter's *Palermo oder Wolfsburg/Palermo or Wolfsburg* (1980) as well as Hark Bohm's successful coming-of-age film *Yasemin* (1988). Several of these features as well as Tevfik Başer's *40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland/Forty Square Metres of Germany* (1986) and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies/Farewell to a False Paradise* (1989), adopt a 'social worker approach' (Göktürk 2000: 68) to ethnic relations, expressing compassion for the plight of guest workers and the oppression of Turkish women in Germany. While this first phase of Turkish-German cinema is dominated by narratives which perpetuate predictable binary oppositions and the cliché of living 'between two worlds', the next generation of Turkish-German film-makers initiated a shift from miserabilist social dramas to a cinema that celebrates the pleasures of hybridity.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the ‘Young Turks’ were either born or grew up in Germany. For them, the experience of migration is no longer accessible through personal recollection but is mediated through family photos, personal anecdotes and cultural practices preserved by the parent generation.<sup>8</sup> ‘Home’ for these film-makers tends to be Hamburg or Berlin, rather than Ankara or Istanbul. A significant number of films made by second-generation Turkish–German directors engage with issues of identity and belonging, but there are also some that cannot be categorized as *Migrantenkino* (migrant cinema) because they eschew the identity politics typically expected of ethnic minority film-makers. Mennan Yapo’s *Lautlos/Soundless* (2004) is a thriller about an assassin that emulates the French *cinéma du look*; Bülent Akinci’s *Lebensversicherer/Running on Empty* (2006) and Thomas Arslan’s *Ferien/Vacation* (2007) feature the existential conflicts of German protagonists. Still, the majority of the ‘Young Turks’ play an important role as cultural brokers, and their status within German and Turkish cultures often rests on them being mediators of marginality and alterity. As Graham Huggan argues in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, cultural and ethnic otherness has become part of a ‘booming “alterity industry”’, making ‘marginality a valuable intellectual commodity’ (2001: vii–viii). Responding to this market opportunity, some of the Turkish–German directors considered in this volume skillfully deploy strategies of ‘self-othering’ in the attempt to shift their films out of the ‘ethnic niche’ into the mainstream.

A further reason for analyzing Turkish and Turkish–German cinemas alongside each other is that much of contemporary Turkish–German cinema is characterized by a ‘dialogic imagination’, briefly referred to earlier. These films critically appropriate and hybridize ‘elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture’ (Mercer 2003: 255), thus creating a new visual language borne out of the filmmakers’ multiple cultural affiliations and their familiarity with Western and non-Western styles and traditions.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the ‘monologic tendencies’ inscribed in dominant discourses and cultural formations which ‘homogenize and totalize’ (Mercer 2003: 254) the experience of ethnic minorities, the dialogic structures that can be identified in many recent Turkish–German productions refrain from this kind of ethnic essentialism, offering more individualized and differentiated portrayals of the ‘other’.

In his contribution ‘Experiments in Turkish-German Filmmaking’, Randall Halle explores experimental shorts, documentaries and video installations that employ precisely those hybridizing aesthetic strategies. He suggests that some of these recent productions are indicative of ‘a new self-assertive consciousness in Germany’s minority communities’. For instance the critical interventions of Kanak TV invert the typical voyeuristic representations of Turks by directing the ethnographic gaze at members of German majority culture. Similarly, as Daniela Berghahn illustrates in ‘From Turkish Greengrocer to Drag Queen’, Züli Aladag’s controversial TV film *Wut/Rage* (2006) exposes the inadequacies of Turkish as well as German father figures. Berghahn investigates to what extent contemporary Turkish–German coming-of-age films overcome the ‘monologic tendencies’ of earlier films by presenting a more nuanced

8 For a discussion of the relationship between migration, memory and generation, see Berghahn and Sternberg (in press).

9 For a discussion of hybrid generic templates and musical traditions in Akin’s *Head-On* (2004) see Göktürk (in press).

image of Turkish patriarchy, instead of perpetuating old clichés and thereby reiterating 'discourses of domination' (Mercer 2003: 258).

That the multiple dialogues documented in this special issue are not merely the projections of scholarly minds but are, at least occasionally, the expressed intentions of the film-makers themselves is perhaps most evident in the casting of Hanna Schygulla and Tuncel Kurtiz in Akin's *Auf der anderen Seite/Yaşamın Kıyısında/The Edge of Heaven* (2007). Schygulla, who has starred in numerous films directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, is one of the most prominent screen icons of New German Cinema while Kurtiz has been referred to as a Turkish screen legend (Akin 2008). By casting Schygulla and Kurtiz, Akin wanted to pay homage to the two film histories that have had the most profound impact upon his *oeuvre* and draw attention to the productive dialogues between these two film cultures.

This special issue of *New Cinemas* is one of a number of publications that have grown out of an international Research Network investigating 'Migrant and Diasporic Cinema in Contemporary Europe' ([www.migrantcinema.net](http://www.migrantcinema.net)). The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain and was part of the AHRC's strategic initiative *Diasporas, Migration and Identities* ([www.diasporas.ac.uk](http://www.diasporas.ac.uk)). Some of the papers included in this volume were first presented at a conference in Oxford in July 2006, others at a panel on Turkish-German cinema at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Philadelphia in March 2008, subsidized by the British Academy.

## References

- Adelson, L.A. (2005), *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration*, Houndmills, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Akin, M. (2008), *Fatih Akin – Tagebuch eines Filmreisenden. Ein Film von Monique Akin*, Bonus Disc, Special Edition of *Auf der anderen Seite*, Pandora Film.
- Arslan, S. (in press), *Hollywood alla Turca: A History of Cinema in Turkey*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Berghahn, D. and Sternberg, C. (in press), 'Locating Migrant and Diasporic Cinema', in D. Berghahn and C. Sternberg (eds.), *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*, London and New York: Wallflower Press.
- Burns, R. (2006), 'Turkish-German Cinema: From Cultural Resistance to Transnational Cinema?' in D. Clarke (ed.), *German Cinema Since Unification*, London and New York: Continuum, pp. 127–150.
- (2007), 'The Politics of Cultural Representation: Turkish-German Encounters', *German Politics*, 16: 3, pp. 358–378.
- Göktürk, D. (2000), 'Turkish Women on German Streets: Closure and Exposure in Transnational Cinema', in M. Konstantarakos (ed.), *Spaces in European Cinema*, Exeter: Intellect, pp. 64–76.
- (2002), 'Beyond Paternalism: Turkish-German Traffic in Cinema', in T. Bergfelder, E. Carter and D. Göktürk (eds.), *The German Cinema Book*, London: British Film Institute, pp. 248–256.
- (in press), 'Sound Bridges: Transnational Mobility as Ironic Melodrama', in D. Berghahn and C. Sternberg (eds.), *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*, London and New York: Wallflower Press.

- Göktürk, D., Gramling, D. and Kaes, A. (eds.) (2007), *Germany in Transit: Nation and Migration 1955–2005*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Huggan, G. (2001), *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Huntington, S. (1996), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Iordanova, D. (in press), 'Migration and Cinematic Process in Post-Cold War Europe', in D. Berghahn and C. Sternberg (eds.), *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*, London and New York: Wallflower Press.
- Karpf, E., Kiesel, D. and Visarius, K. (eds.) (1995), *Getürkte Bilder: Zur Inszenierung von Fremden im Film*, Marburg: Schüren.
- Kulaoglu, T. (1999), 'Der neue 'deutsche' Film ist 'türkisch'? Eine neue Generation bringt Leben in die Filmlandschaft', *Filmforum*, 16, pp. 8–11.
- Leal, J. and Rossade, K.-D. (eds.) (2008), *Cinema and Migration since Unification*, special issue of *German as a Foreign Language*, Vol. 1.
- Löser, C. (2004), 'Berlin am Bosphorus. Zum Erfolg Fatih Akins und anderer türkischstämmiger Regisseure in der deutschen Filmlandschaft', in R. Schenk and E. Richter (eds.), *apropos. Film 2004. Das Jahrbuch der DEFA-Stiftung*, Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, pp. 129–146.
- Mani, B.V. (2007), *Cosmopolitical Claims: Turkish-German Literatures from Nadolny to Pamuk*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Mercer, K. (2003), 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain', in J.E. Braziel and A. Mannur (eds.), *Theorizing Diaspora*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 247–260.
- Rentschler, E. (2000), 'From New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus', in M. Hjort and S. MacKenzie (eds.), *Cinema and Nation*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 260–277.
- Schäffler, D. (2007), *Deutscher Film mit türkischer Seele. Entwicklungen und Tendenzen der deutsch-türkischen Filme von den 70er Jahren bis zur Gegenwart*, Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag.
- Suner, A. (in press), *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- Tibi, B. (2000), *Europa ohne Identität: Die Krise der multikulturellen Gesellschaft*, München: Bertelsmann.

Copyright of *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.