

*Will Brady*

## Alamanci

‘We are brought up in two cultures, we are the new Germans.’ This pronouncement from Fatih Akin, a filmmaker born in Germany of Turkish parentage, points to an interesting contemporary phenomenon: the increasingly ambiguous role of nationality in the process of identity formation.

Immigrants of Turkish background comprise Germany’s largest ethnic minority. They arrived first as *Gastarbeiter* (‘guest workers’) in the 1960s, to meet the demand for cheap labour during Germany’s postwar economic boom. Most came from rural Anatolia, were housed in hostels, given only short-term contracts and minimal access to social services. They remained on the fringes of German society as temporary residents, assuming that they would, one day, return home to Turkey.

In the 1970s the economy faltered and the German government responded by banning further recruitment of foreign labour. Workers already in the country were permitted to stay and to bring their families into Germany. Yet as Wolfgang Seifert has observed, ‘The guest-worker system was abandoned; however, the ideology of temporary migration survived.’ So while pragmatic responses to changing socio-economic conditions led to gradual modification of policy, public discourse today largely refuses to recognise Germany as

the country of immigration that it has become, tending instead to frame the issue as the 'problem' of an ethnic community failing to integrate into German society.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of East and West Germany, there followed intense public debate around notions of identity and citizenship, including the place of minority ethnic groups in the future of a united Germany. This debate was concomitant with expressions of xenophobia and ethnic violence targeted at the Turkish population, particularly in the former eastern states of Germany, which underwent profound social and economic transformation during the reunification process. The anti-immigrant sentiment was exacerbated by the fact that Germany, according to Sabine Milz, 'bases its national self-understanding on the *jus sanguinis* – the law of citizenship according to blood that delimits the non-German immigrant from most civil and political co-determination.' Katherine Pratt Ewing concurs: 'citizenship laws that establish eligibility according to place of birth rather than according to descent have been slow in coming and restrictions on dual citizenship are still onerous.'

Significantly, the term 'ethnic' (in German, the etymologically equivalent *ethnisch*) has connoted marginalisation or marginality since its earliest use – and to this day, suggests cultural groups that are not traditionally identified with the dominant national mythology of a country or other social grouping. This binarisation in the conception of national identity fosters the preservation of the myth of the ethnically and culturally homogenous nation-state, located in what Milz terms 'the landscape of the mind':

The ideal of the multicultural nation-state on equal ethnic-cultural terms is far from being practice let alone fact; rather, it is the collective invention and idealisation proclaimed by the dominant discourse in order to preserve its superiority.

This hierarchical conception of multiculturalism betrays a paradoxical ideal of cross-cultural understanding and amounts to a working policy of 'exclusion by inclusion', and the emergence in a number of German cities of a 'parallel society', which assigns individuals to membership of an essentialised cultural category, imposing labels of identification that distinguish between the originary German and the foreign 'other.'

During the 1970s, literary and cinematic depictions of Turkish immigrants in Germany tended to focus on the oppressive living and working conditions endured by the male, first-generation guest-worker. By the Eighties, attention had shifted to the cultural differences and the plight of Turkish wives and daughters who eventually followed these men to Germany. Ewing writes:

The young woman who is deprived of her freedom and rights by her family was a central figure in the limited repertoire of images of Turkish immigrants constructed by filmmakers in the 1980s... [The] dominant theme was a clash of cultures.

In Tevfik Başer's 1986 film *40 Quadrameter Deutschland*, Dursun, a Turkish guest-worker, brings his new bride, Turna, from his home village in rural Anatolia, to live with him in his three-room flat in a Hamburg tenement. She is charged with transforming the space into an oasis of Turkish culture: a refuge for Dursun after he has worked long hours at the factory, and a means of protecting his wife from the moral depravity pervading German society. Turna endures endless days of domestic drudgery and sexual servitude – quite literally imprisoned in the apartment, since her husband keeps the door permanently locked – and finds herself, ultimately, struggling against both her husband and her culture. Though the film concentrates almost exclusively on Turna's suffering, Dursun is, according to Başer, just as much a prisoner as his wife, in that he is 'helpless, unable to adapt, and fearful in a society that is foreign to him.' We are encouraged to see Dursun's actions as arising from the patriarchy of rural Turkish culture, and exacerbated by a threatening German world.

However, as Rob Burns reports, *40 Quadrameter Deutschland* has elicited the criticism that 'far from helping to promote a better understanding of a different culture, such representations of alterity serve only to reinforce existing patterns of prejudice... perpetuat[ing] the stereotypes of aggressive (male) villain and passive (female) victim.' While Başer and other practitioners of the New German Cinema – Fassbinder, for example – made important contributions to the public discourse on the experience of migrants in Germany, they invariably depicted these characters as victims of xenophobia and racism, even when attempting to handle sensitively the complexities of intercultural conflict. As one German reviewer writes of the director of

*Yasemin*, another film from this era: ‘Without taking sides, he deals with the seemingly irreconcilable differences between traditional, patriarchal Muslim values and those of contemporary German society.’ Such an analysis, as Ewing points out, ‘unquestioningly reproduces the dichotomy’ maintaining as inevitable the parallel society.

In recent years, both cultural producers and critics have tried to loosen the dichotomy’s hold by concentrating on the points of cultural convergence. Maxim Biller, for example, claims that the common experience for second and third generation Turks in Germany is that they are more German than they would like to admit, yet at the same time, they are not always accepted as German. They constitute what he terms a ‘*dritte Ethnie*’: an ambiguous position at once on the periphery of German culture yet thoroughly suffused by it. There is an irony here: many first-generation designation migrants, upon returning to Turkey, find that they are no longer considered Turks – they have become *Alaman*ci – not Germans, but *like* Germans.

This ambivalent sense of belonging need not be seen in terms of existential loss, however; indeed, it is this very ambivalence which, according to Biller, creates a bond among the artists of this new generation. Their work is imbued with – as Petra Fachinger puts it – ‘a new kind of creative energy,’ derived from being ‘at the margin and... attempting to make it to the centre, or, in an oppositional move, proclaim[ing] the margin as the centre,’ a process which disrupts the conventional parameters of self-definition and extols the virtues of heterogeneity in identity formation.

A slightly different approach is taken by the postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha. Though also acknowledging the emergence of a new cultural form, he sees this as occurring not in the tension between a ‘pure’ cultural nucleus and its periphery – an arguably ethnocentric perspective – but rather, in the ‘contact zone’ of any and all intercultural relations, at what he is fond of calling the ‘interstices’: the ‘cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between*’. Any cultural identity in this ‘contact zone’ is, Bhabha claims, constructed in a hybrid ‘Third Space of enunciation’.

A recent wave of films, depicting the lives of second- and third-generation Turkish immigrants in Germany, has elaborated an increasingly fluid space of integration. Deniz Göktürk traces in these films a conscious shift from the social realism of a ‘cinema of duty’ towards the ‘pleasures of hybridity’. Of the directors who have rewritten the strategies and objectives of New German

Cinema into a manifesto of ‘transnational’ practice – the so-called ‘neo-neo’ German Cinema – Fatih Akin is perhaps the most successful exponent. As Petra Fachinger writes:

[Akin] playfully undermines persisting stereotypes of Turks as well as of what ‘ethnic’ filmmaking is supposed to be about, by reversing character roles, using space subversively, and undercutting audience expectations and genre conventions.

*Gegen die Wand*, which won the Deutscher Filmpreis for best film in 2004, is particularly deft in its handling of ethnicity and gender within the Turkish-German context. Crucially, Akin chooses to dramatise conflicts not between the Turkish minority and the dominant German culture, but instead, within the Turkish community itself: between the generations, between men and women, as well as within the characters themselves. In so doing, Akin breaks with the convention of portraying Turkish protagonists as cultural outsiders and perpetual victims, situating them confidently within the ‘Third Space’.

*Gegen die Wand* is ostensibly a film about the individual’s fight for – or with – autonomy. Sibel, the film’s female protagonist is born in Germany, but into a traditional Turkish family; we are tempted, encouraged even, to perceive her as a victim of patriarchal oppression. So desperate is she to escape the constricted life expected of an unmarried Turkish woman that she attempts suicide; later, in a psychiatric clinic, she meets Cahit, and an alternative solution proposes itself. Also a second-generation Turk, Cahit would, as far as Sibel’s parents are concerned, make a tolerable husband, and a marriage of convenience will allow her to enjoy the sexual freedom for which she has been longing. Neatly subverting the conventional doctrine, marriage permits sex – with multiple partners, none of whom are her husband.

While Sibel’s liberation is contingent upon her undermining the traditional values of family, Cahit’s predicament is more or less the opposite. Growing up in Germany without family or any connection to relatives in Turkey, he has almost entirely jettisoned his heritage. Asked at one point why his spoken Turkish is so rudimentary, he replies: ‘I dumped it,’ a sentiment that seems to apply not only to language, but Turkish culture in general. Though once married, his (apparently German) wife died in tragic circumstances, and we find Cahit, as the film opens, floundering: an alcoholic nihilist prone

to violent outbursts, without any direction or apparent pleasure in life – indeed, we witness him trying to end it, by driving full speed against a brick wall.

Cahit's miserable introspection is tangibly represented by the cramped, filthy apartment from which he rarely emerges. While in several Turkish-German films of the earlier generation – *40 Quadrameter Deutschland*, for example – women are associated with claustrophobic domestic space, Akin depicts his male characters as trapped in it. Cahit's freedom is sanctioned not by an overbearing father figure, but by a lack of *any* suitable role-model. We might even interpret Cahit's predicament as an indictment of Western tendency to emphasise the importance of individual liberty. Though he has appropriated an essentially 'Westernised' identity, he seems unable to make anything of the opportunities supposedly commensurate with modern democratic society.

Significantly, Cahit's relationship with Sibel gives him a renewed sense of purpose. As he says in a unique moment of reflection towards the end of the film, during which, notably, he speaks in English: 'When I met Sibel the first time, I was dead. I was dead even a long time before I met her... Then she come and dropped in my life. She gives me love. And she gives me power.' Such is the depth of companionship that develops between them that it comes as no great surprise to us – even if it does to them – that their pretence of love should eventually yield to sincerity – or that once acknowledged, both Cahit and Sibel play out the stereotypes of their roles. When, after months of sharing Cahit's apartment but sleeping apart, they finally end up in bed together, Sibel is suddenly aware of the gravity of their situation: 'If we do it, you are my husband and I am your wife,' she says, invoking – and fully intending to honour – the conventions of marriage. So when Niko, one of Sibel's former lovers, attempts to coerce her into a further tryst, she retorts: 'Don't touch me! I'm a married woman! A married Turkish woman, and if you come too close my husband will kill you.'

As indeed he does: the killing is accidental, Cahit having been provoked by a drunken and embittered Niko into an act of violence more brutal than intended, but the prospect of a 'happy-ever-after scenario' is thus shattered. Cahit is imprisoned for manslaughter; Sibel's family, in protecting their honour, disown her; fearing for her safety, she flees to Istanbul. Though she has promised to wait for him, she slowly carves out a new life for herself there.

She has a daughter with another man. On his release from prison, Cahit travels to Istanbul in an attempt to reconcile with Sibel, and while briefly tempted to leave her partner and follow Cahit to Mersin, his hometown, she ultimately resolves to stay in Istanbul. Though we might read this decision as a sacrifice she chooses to make for her daughter's sake, it also serves as evidence of her newfound autonomy – she is, at last, able to conduct her life on her own terms.

The return to the 'homeland' offers Cahit also the opportunity for a new beginning – though as the film closes with him departing, alone, for Mersin, we are left to speculate as to what kind of future, if any, he can make for himself there. Akin's refusal to offer resolution attests to his awareness of a plurality of viewer perspectives and for the need to challenge the assumptions of a dichotomous cultural difference. We are encouraged not to conceive of the 'Third Space' as a solution to intercultural conflict, but rather, as a framework in which to reconceptualise altogether the nature of the obstacles that face immigrants and the meaning of the word 'multicultural'.

### **Further Reading**

*Stolen Honor: Stigmatizing Muslim Men in Berlin* by Katherine Pratt Ewing. Stanford University Press,