



## **Introduction: Cinema and Migration since Unification**

Joanne Leal, London, and Klaus-Dieter Rossade, Milton Keynes

ISSN 1470 – 9570

## **Introduction: Cinema and Migration since Unification**

Joanne Leal, London, and Klaus-Dieter Rossade, Milton Keynes

The impetus for this collection of papers – and for a second which will appear as volume 3/2008 of this journal – was provided by the conference ‘Migrant Experiences in Post-Unification Germany’ held at the Goethe-Institut London, in April 2007 and organized by the Association for Modern German Studies (AMGS), with the support of the Goethe-Institut. One of the conference’s several points of focus was (post-)migrant cinema and this forms the subject of the contributions to this volume.

Three of the four essays focus primarily on the work of Turkish-German filmmakers. This is perhaps unsurprising given that it is precisely the output of this particular group of creative individuals that has aroused the most interest and received the most acclaim – both critical and popular – in recent years, to the extent that the (new) New German Cinema is claimed to be, in fact, a Turkish-German one (see Yeşilada in this volume). Several recent commentators have noted a shift in the nature of Turkish-German filmmaking in the post-unification period. Both Deniz Göktürk (2002) and Rob Burns (2007) have explored the nature of distinctions discernible in pre- and post-*Wende* Turkish-German cinema and, while each reads the posited shift slightly differently, both conclude that more recent films demonstrate a marked move in the direction of transcultural perspectives, or as Burns (2007: 375) has put it a ‘shift from a “cinema of the affected” to a “cinema of hybridity”’.

With reference to this critical perspective, Guido Rings, in the first contribution to this volume, surveys historical developments within Turkish-German cinema with a view to distinguishing between the different conceptions of culture that underpin films made before and after unification. He opens with an examination of the concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism as categories located between the two poles of ‘*Volkskultur*’ and a notion of transculturalism before exploring the relevance of these concepts to Turkish-German filmmaking at different historical moments. Rings identifies, in line with socio-political developments, a shift in the mid-70s from a portrayal in film of German cultural isolationism as the main threat to the peaceful co-existence of Turks and Germans in

Germany to a new cinematic focus on xenophobia and separatism as they manifest themselves within the Turkish community. What emerges is that, as a whole, this earlier period provides little evidence of an embracing within film of transcultural perspectives. In the post-unification period, on the other hand, Turkish-German film, while it might fail to deal with the issue of increased racism in the early 1990s, begins, at least in some cases (e.g. Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand* and Thomas Arslan's *Der schöne Tag*), to identify ways of exploring (post-)migrant experiences outside of the binary framework of 'host' culture versus 'Other'. However, Rings also notes – and posits reasons for – the continued existence of monocultural views (in the form of a concept of 'Kanak' culture) alongside what are often quite tentatively formulated transcultural perspectives in contemporary Turkish-German film and literature.

In demonstrating how more traditionally conceived concepts of culture can compete with transcultural perspectives in recent Turkish-German cinema, Rings could be seen to be making a case against the teleological tendencies which are certainly present in a number of critical assessments of Turkish-German film (cf. particularly in this respect Göktürk 2002: 23: 'Only recently, films have begun to challenge parameters of paternalist discourse and started exploring more playful and less miserabilist scenarios of contact and mutual mimicry'). In this respect his argument connects to one put forward by Tom Cheesman in relation to Turkish-German literature. While Cheesman (2006: 472) argues that 'ways of being a Turkish-identified, Germany-based writer have naturally changed over time', he views as potentially unhelpful a critical perspective that divides (post-)migrant writers into generations – e.g. 'exilic', 'ethnic' and 'diasporic' (see Cheesman 2006: 473f.) – and which views the work of one generation as always representing an advance over that of the previous one:

The dangers of such a perspective include the over-emphatic celebration of the latest work on the scene, and the over-hasty burial of what went before. The diversity of both past and current forms of writing resists a unilinear narrative approach. And paradoxically, a division by generations, within a framework of successive advance, risks masking a quite fundamental generational, or perhaps 'socialisational' divide: that between actual migrants, whose writing is based on an early life in a non-German language and landscape, and those who have (nearly) always lived in Germany. (Cheesman 2006: 475)

In an essay which grew out of work for her MA dissertation, Victoria Fincham also tackles issues that call into question the idea that the development of Turkish-German film must

inevitably be read as a narrative of ‘successive advance’. She examines the significance of what Cheesman calls the ‘socialisational’ divide for the representation of the experiences of young Turkish-German protagonists in three recent films – Fatih Akin’s *Gegen die Wand* (2004), Kutluğ Ataman’s *Lola + Bilidikid* (1999) and Anno Saul’s *Kebab Connection* (2005) – while at the same time exploring the validity of a critical view which insists that such films have replaced monocultural with transcultural perspectives. Particularly, she takes issue with the idea that the ‘between two worlds’ paradigm – a concept which implies that cultures are discrete, self-sufficient entities – used to define the experience of an earlier generation of migrants, has lost its relevance. Through a detailed and nuanced examination of the ways in which the three films deal with the interrelated issues of family, identity, sexuality and violence, she is able to demonstrate that each of them, while they more or less tentatively affirm the possibility of breaking down bi-cultural divisions in ways of seeing and representing the world, also demonstrate the continuing restrictions monocultural perspectives impose on personal and, to a lesser extent, creative freedoms.

Karin E. Yeşilada also explores transformations undergone by Turkish-German film in the last decade, relating them to developments within German television. Particularly she focuses on the way in which comedy – in the form of a genre she describes as ‘Turkish light’ – has spread from film (e.g. *Kebab Connection* and *Superseks*, 2004) to television (e.g. the TV-film *Meine verückte türkische Hochzeit*, 2006 and the two-part drama *Zeit der Wünsche*, 2005, as well as the ethno-comedy of Kaya Yanar amongst others). In contrast to the more tentative conclusions reached by both Rings and Fincham, she argues that a generational shift has meant that young filmmakers and television producers operate not with ‘traditional binary oppositions’ but with ‘transcultural characters and storylines’ and that it is this which has given rise to their popular, and sometimes also critical success. Again, Akin’s *Gegen die Wand* but also his most recent *Auf der anderen Seite* (2007) are offered up as examples of contemporary transcultural filmmaking at its best and the essay also explores the relative merits of the portrayal of multicultural issues in two TV series: *Alle lieben Jimmy* and *Türkisch für Anfänger* in the context of German television’s attempts to promote ‘Integration im TV’ in the face of hostile media reporting on migrant issues since the events of 9/11.

The volume's final contribution takes us away from the Turkish-German context, indeed even Germany, to explore the significance of migration as a theme in three of the films of controversial Austrian director Ulrich Seidl: *Good News* (1990), *Mit Verlust ist zu rechnen* (1992) and *Import Export* (2007). It is the first of these – a documentation of the experiences of Bangladeshis, Egyptians and Pakistanis working as newspaper vendors in Vienna – which, with its focus on the difficulties of acculturation and the hostility to immigrants of a 'host' community, comes closest to some of the concerns of Turkish-German cinema. But, as this article demonstrates, this film and the others explored here are located in very different cinematic territory to the Turkish comedies examined by Yeşilada, or Akin's mainstream dramas *Gegen die Wand* or *Auf der anderen Seite* (a film which at least one reviewer has compared unfavourably to Seidl's *Import Export*). Brady and Hughes demonstrate the indebtedness of both Seidl's documentary films – which blur the boundaries between fact and fiction – and his feature films – with their strong documentary characteristics – to a tradition of *cinéma-vérité* in general and the films of Jean Rouch in particular. Exploring the notion of 'shared anthropology' which underpins the films and investigating the shifting nature of the cinematic gaze in each, the authors show how Seidl moves in the two more recent productions towards an exploration of migration across the old Cold War border, a barrier between east and west, which while it may no longer physically exist, still determines the cultural assumptions and lived experiences of those migrating across it and those within the 'host' communities with whom they come into contact. If we read this contribution in the light of Ring's exploration of concepts of culture as they emerge within Turkish-German cinema, it becomes clear that within contemporary Europe – at least as it is represented by Seidl – transcultural perspectives – and the hopes associated with them by those who move between cultures – must still compete with firmly entrenched monocultural perspectives on the part of those firmly settled in the west for whom migrants are always assumed to be the Other(s).

## **Bibliography**

Burns, Rob (2007) The politics of cultural representation: Turkish-German encounters. *German Politics* 16, 358-78.

Cheesman, Tom (2006) Juggling the burdens of representation: black, red, gold and turquoise. *German Life and Letters* 59, 471-87.

Göktürk, Deniz (2002) Beyond paternalism: Turkish traffic in German cinema. In: Tim Bergfelder; Erica Carter; Deniz Göktürk (eds) *The German Cinema Book*. London: BFI, 248-56.

## **Biodata**

Joanne Leal is a Lecturer in German in the School of Languages, Linguistics and Culture at Birkbeck College, London. She teaches and researches mainly in the areas of post-war German literature and film, with a particular focus on gender. She is currently working on representations of masculinity in the aftermath of '1968' and is co-authoring a volume on the collaborative films of Wim Wenders and Peter Handke. She is Secretary of the Association of Modern German Studies.

Klaus-Dieter Rossade is Lecturer in German in the Department of Languages at The Open University in Milton Keynes. His research focuses on the history of scholarship and Higher Education with reference to German studies, memory and 'dealing with the past'. He has also presented and published in the area of technology enhanced language learning (TELL) and is currently involved in research projects on language learning at primary level. His book "‘Dem Zeitgeist erlegen?’ Benno von Wiese und der Nationalsozialismus" was published in 2007. He was convenor (until 2007) and is currently treasurer of the Association of Modern German Studies.