



**Negotiating Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity in Fatih
Akin's and Thomas Arslan's Urban Spaces**

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Negotiating Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity in Fatih Akin's and Thomas Arslan's Urban Spaces

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This essay explores the relationship between the representation of gender, sexuality and ethnicity and the negotiation of urban space in the post-migrant 'city films' of two of the most prominent Turkish-German filmmakers working today, Thomas Arslan and Fatih Akin. It aims to identify whether stereotypical representations of ethnically-specific gender relations of the sort to be found in the so-called 'cinema of duty' of the 1970s and 1980s have been abandoned in contemporary filmmaking in favour of more complex and diverse versions of the interaction between male/female identities and ethnicity, or whether, in fact, more recent films produce a new set of stereotypes in this regard. It investigates representations of Turkish-German masculinities and examines the ways in which female identities have been imagined on screen, before turning briefly to representations of gender/sexual dynamics which fall outside the binary logic underpinning all of the films discussed here, exploring the consequences of these for their construction of Turkish-German identities.

Introduction

In a much cited argument, Deniz Göktürk has set out the extent to which Turkish-German cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as films by West German directors from the same period about the lives of the *Gastarbeiter*, focused primarily on the female experience of migration and did so in ways that perpetuated certain stereotypical views of gender relations amongst Turkish migrants to Germany and their offspring. Films such as Helga Sanders-Brahms, *Shirins Hochzeit* (1975), Tevfik Başer's *40m² Deutschland* (1986) and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies* (1988) and Hark Bohm's *Yasemin* (1988) 'centred around the problems of Turkish women who were oppressed by their patriarchal fathers, brothers or husbands, excluded from the public sphere and confined in enclosed spaces' (Göktürk 2000: 67). Moreover, common to these films is a plot line which nurtured 'a popular fantasy' of a 'liberation of poor Turkish women from enclosure, oppression, subordination or even prostitution' (Göktürk 2000: 69), one normally effected by German men.

These films, regarded by Göktürk and others (see also Burns 2007a and Rings 2008) as representative of a migrant 'cinema of duty', can therefore be seen to set up a pair of parallel binary oppositions: male and female experiences and identities are different to the point of irreconcilability, while German and Turkish experiences and identities are also equally, although not similarly incompatible. In doing so, however, they also

allow for the possibility of potentially new but ultimately problematic alliances across gender and ethnic divides: Turkish women are allied to the German men who save them, while Turkish men and, albeit in a different way, German women are marginalized and/or denied agency. It should also be noted that within their ultimately binary frameworks these films are resolutely concerned with heterosexual relationships with no room for alternative sexualities.

The 1990s, on the other hand, are identified as a period in which at least some of these stereotypes are overcome, and a wider variety of migrant and post-migrant experiences explored, in films which focus primarily on second- or third generation Turkish-Germans or those of other ethnic origin.¹ Here binary divisions are problematized, at least as far as ethnic identities are concerned. No longer do Turkish and German experiences and identities have to be singular and incompatible. They can be multiple and lived out in a variety of ways by those who identify themselves with more than one culture. This development in representation reflects significant changes noted by Eva Kolinsky to the way Turkish and Turkish-German identities are constructed by different migrant and post-migrant generations in contemporary Germany:

While the first generation shared the experiences of migration and arrival and constructed their identity as Turks in Germany around these key events in their biography, the second generation has no such shared experiences and no such common core. Instead, their identities have been constructed with reference to personal experiences of growing up in Germany, of encountering Turkish and German culture, and selecting from these cultures those aspects, practices and values that matter most to the individual. For the third generation, parental expectations point to high educational and achievement motivation, a determination to utilise the choices offered within German society, and also an early disillusionment that Turks remain disadvantaged and frequently stereotyped even if they blend into their German environment in terms of appearance or language. (Kolinsky 2002: 215)

In Kolinsky's diagnosis there would seem to be two factors of particular importance to the construction of younger Turkish-German identities. The first is what might be regarded as a positive sense of the 'individualization' and diversification of notions of national and/or ethnic identity: 'second generation Turks have made Turkish culture more personal and multifaceted as they chose which aspects to build into their perception of identity, and this in accordance with their biographical experiences and individual preferences' (Kolinsky 2002: 206). The second is the wholly negative

¹ For a detailed account of these developments see Rings 2008.

experience of prejudice and exclusion within the German environment, a 'persistence of inequalities' which younger generations reject 'more ardently [...] than their parents had done' (Kolinsky 2002: 214).

The question of the extent to which these influences on identity formation form part of the self-understanding of the young Turkish-Germans portrayed within contemporary migrant cinema will provide one point of focus for this paper. What is interesting about Kolinsky's conclusions, however, is that they do not distinguish between male and female migrant and post-migrant experiences and identities, as both the older Turkish-German cinema did, and as more recent 'hyphenated' filmmaking continues to do, albeit in different ways.² In this context, it should be noted that since the mid-1990s there has been a marked move away from a primary focus on representations of female experience and towards an exploration of Turkish-German masculinities.³ The effect this has had on representations of the interrelationship between gender, sexual and ethnic identities will be a further point of concern in this essay.

Closely related to its interest in gender and sexuality, a focus on the experience of the urban environment has been identified by a number of critics as a further feature of 'hyphenated' filmmaking. The ways in which city spaces have been negotiated has in fact been a key marker of gender difference in the cultural representation of the migrant experience. This is signalled in the title of Tevfik Başer's *40m² Deutschland*, a reference to the home as a space of confinement to which only the female protagonist, and not her Turkish husband, is restricted in the film. It is also a key dimension of his second feature, *Abschied vom falschen Paradies*, a film set largely in the literal confinement of a female prison and one which Göktürk describes as illustrating more metaphorically 'the cinematic imprisonment of immigrants within

² We use the term 'hyphenated' here to refer to directors/films whose roots lie in more than one culture because it is, generally speaking, less evaluative and more inclusive than some of the other available terms. It allows us to avoid those which imply that there is not only a generational but also a teleological trajectory to the work of hybrid filmmakers/writers. This is intimated, for instance, in the distinction between 'exile', 'ethnic' and 'diasporic' cultural production critically evaluated by Tom Cheesman (2006) in relation to Turkish-German literature.

³ This is at least the case in the works of those male Turkish-German directors who have received the most visibility, like Fatih Akin and Thomas Arslan. It does not take into account the work of female directors like Ayşe Polat, Aysun Bademsoy or Seyhan Derin.

the parameters of well-meaning multiculturalism feeding on binary oppositions and integrationist desires' (Göktürk 2000: 68).

In this essay we intend to explore the extent to which the negotiation of urban space is still significant for an understanding of the intersections between gender, sexuality and ethnicity as they manifest themselves in the post-migrant 'city films' of two of the most prominent Turkish-German filmmakers working today, Thomas Arslan and Fatih Akin. The two have in common 'hyphenated' cultural origins, which impact on the subject matter of their films, and a close association with markedly 'ethnic' areas of two of Germany's major cities – Berlin Kreuzberg in Arslan's case and Hamburg Altona in Akin's. It could be argued, however, that there is more divergence than convergence in their filmmaking practice. The contemplative, often languid focus on the everyday in Arslan's films has led to his identification with filmmakers like Angela Schanelec and Christian Petzold as a chief proponent of the 'new realism' of the so-called 'Berliner Schule'.⁴ By contrast, Akin's is a sometimes sexually and violently excessive genre cinema which mixes the entertainment aesthetics of Hollywood with knowing references to New German and Turkish cinemas. It is precisely this similarity in thematic interest combined with a fairly fundamental difference in style which makes a comparison of their work potentially illuminating in relation to questions about the development of the representation of identity formation in Turkish-German cinema. Our aim in exploring the relationship between gender, sexuality, ethnicity and the negotiation of urban space in six of Arslan's and Akin's films made between 1996 and 2007 is to identify whether stereotypical representations of ethnically-specific gender relations of the sort found in 1970s cinema have indeed been abandoned in contemporary filmmaking, in favour of more complex and diverse versions of the interaction between male/female identities and ethnicity, or whether, in fact, more recent films produce a new set of stereotypes in this regard. We will focus first on their representations of Turkish-German masculinities before turning to the way they have imagined female identities on screen. We will then briefly examine representations of gender/sexual dynamics which fall outside the binary male/female logic underpinning all of the films to be discussed here, exploring the consequences of these for their construction of Turkish-German identities.

⁴ Schanelec in fact plays a minor role in Arslan's *Dealer*.

Masculinities

With reference to ways in which younger Turkish-Germans define their identities, Kolinsky reaches the following conclusion:

Instead of 'integrating' in the manner the German government and the majority of the German population appear to desire, that is, by becoming invisible as Turks, these young Turks insist upon visibility and upon an acceptance of their Turkish identity. Since this is not easily forthcoming, the distance from German society and to Germans remains considerable. (Kolinsky 2002: 214)

It is precisely this decidedly undialectical dynamic of an ethnic visibility that produces social exclusion which is at the heart of a number of Arslan's and Akin's films. It is, however, in almost every case much more obviously a determining feature of the experience of their male protagonists than of their female characters. This results not least from the fact that the central figure in a number of their films is one generally regarded as the male counterpart of the stereotype, exploited in the 'cinema of duty', of the Turkish-German woman oppressed by her family: the young Turkish-German criminal. Akin's *Kurz und schmerzlos* (1997), as well as two films by Arslan, *Geschwister* (1996) and *Dealer* (1998), foreground identity issues for young men of ethnic minority origin in Germany in the 1990s, exposing problems inherent in defining a sense of masculine selfhood when male identity has become tied up with crime and violence.

While the main protagonist of *Kurz und schmerzlos*, Gabriel, is Turkish-German (with, according to Akin, a strongly autobiographical component),⁵ the film assumes a parity of experience between young men of various ethnic minority origins in contemporary Germany, one which distinguishes them from their German counterparts: while both Bobby, of Serbian origin, and Gabriel fall for the same German woman, they apparently have little in common with German men who are largely absent from the film. At its heart is the bond of friendship that exists between Gabriel, Bobby and Costa, of Greek origin. While the film proper begins with Gabriel's release from prison, and is driven in narrative terms by his desire to put his criminal past behind him, the opening credit sequence, representing the time before

⁵ Not only do members of Akin's family (his father, mother and brother) play Gabriel's relatives, Gabriel's home is also Akin's. In the director's commentary to the 2004 Universal Studios DVD release of the film Akin also describes Gabriel as having been 'accessorized' with objects belonging to him.

his incarceration, depicts the three young men caught up in a fight. It thus implies that their friendship is rooted in a shared experience of gang culture and violence. These issues recur in the film, both to test the friendship – as when Bobby, against Gabriel’s advice, joins the Albanian mafia and persuades Costa to help him pull off a gun deal – but also to cement it: when Gabriel’s sister ends her relationship with Costa and the three join forces to beat up her new German boyfriend; and more dramatically in the film’s concluding revenge tragedy when Costa avenges Bobby’s death and Gabriel avenges both Bobby and Costa, a sequence which culminates in the pieta-like image of Gabriel cradling the badly injured Costa.

These sequences suggest that a readiness to respond violently to an urban environment they wish to make their own, but which they ultimately fail to control, is an important facet of the identities they construct for themselves and it is one that links directly to their fascination with American cinema. Not only does Hollywood provide the protagonists with alternative and apparently more attractive identity models to those available in their Turkish/Greek/Serbian-German environments, it also, on a meta-textual level, shapes the film’s construction (thus reinforcing the connection between its director and its central figure). Both the characters and the film itself reference American gangster movies: Bobby is fulsome in his praise of Al Pacino, while the film’s taxi motif (Gabriel takes up cab driving on his release from prison) acts as a nod to *Taxi Driver*, or as Akin puts it a ‘Gruß an Martin Scorsese’.⁶ That the young men must look beyond their immediate environments for masculine role models implies, of course, that father figures of the *Gastarbeiter* generation have failed to offer up convincing versions of masculinity for their sons to emulate: in Akin’s films the ‘traditional patriarch has lost his legitimate function’ (Fachinger 2007: 258). Gabriel’s father is portrayed in a generally sympathetic light, as a firm but loving presence, but his son consistently refuses to accept his invitation to pray with him until the very end of the film when his violent actions mean that he has no choice but to leave Germany. Daniela Berghahn, who reads Gabriel’s prioritization of ‘the

⁶ In his DVD commentary Akin also describes the actors in the film’s gun running sequences as attempting to copy those who behave like Al Pacino in *Scarface*, emphasising the idea that constructing an identity based on an American gangster film model is a mode of behaviour to be found within the Turkish-German milieu in which he himself grew up. He mentions that for the sequence in which the three friends watch the Jacki Chan movie *Sie nannten ihn Knochenbrecher* he had wanted to use *Scarface* but could not get the rights. He also describes the sequence in which a distraught Costa walks through the Hamburg streets bumping into passers-by, one of whom he attacks, as taken directly from *Mean Streets*.

moral code of friendship over the traditions that govern Turkish society' as evidence that he 'has adopted the lifestyle and liberal moral values of Western society', notes of his decision to pray that 'not until Gabriel has experienced the fragility of the moral code of friendship does he respond positively to his father's suggestion', arguing that this marks a first step towards constructing an identity which can more readily accommodate his Turkish origins (2006: 151f.). Gabriel's flight to Turkey might indeed imply a rejection of what is seen to be a problematic version of masculinity, one which valorizes notions of male loyalty, brotherhood and honour that are essentially constructions of the gangster film genre, and one which proves destructive when lived out in the (cinematically constructed) real-world context of Hamburg Altona. However, if the film suggests that in leaving Germany Gabriel is also rejecting an inauthentic and destructive version of masculinity, it gives no real indication of what alternative modes of self-understanding Turkey might offer a young man whose home has always been Germany. As Barbara Mennel points out, this 'is hardly a realistic solution, but rather a phantasmatic resolution that responds to a more profound psychic drama of hybridity and masculinity' (2002: 154).

Arslan's *Geschwister* also ends with one of its protagonists, the twenty-one-year-old Turkish-German Erol, leaving the country in which he has grown up for his father's former homeland. The version of masculinity he will choose to embrace is perhaps implied by the fact that he is heading off to do his military service in the Turkish army and that he welcomes this as an alternative preferable to the desultory life he has been leading as a petty criminal on the streets of Kreuzberg, the monotony of which appears to have been punctuated only by the experience of violence. German society, he believes, has little to offer him. The film tells the story of three young siblings born to a German mother and a Turkish father: Erol, his seventeen-year-old sister, Leyla and his nineteen-year-old brother, Ahmed. In many ways Erol can be read as a somewhat more muted version of Akin's young 'hyphenated' Germans in *Kurz und schmerzlos*. The film highlights 'the influence of the Turkish presence and culture on the contemporary Berlin cityscape' (Gallagher 2006: 339), particularly on its Kreuzberg setting: Turkish music is constantly heard in the background and the Turkish language, on shop signs and newspaper headlines, is ubiquitous. As Akin's protagonists did with their corner of Hamburg, so Erol attempts to make his own what

is essentially represented as a ghetto environment by occupying its streets.⁷ He and his Turkish-German friends hang around cafés and street corners, asserting their territorial rights wherever possible and with violence if necessary. However, like Gabriel, Bobby and Costa, Erol fails in his attempt to define his identity by controlling his environment and his recourse to violence is, like theirs, a somewhat helpless response to an urban reality which appears to slip from his grasp and in relation to which he experiences an intense sense of dissatisfaction. As with his counterparts in *Kurz und schmerzlos*, his own violence is met by the aggression of others who challenge his right to occupy the territory he claims: thus he owes money to a group with more credible gangster credentials than his own and on the streets he risks falling victim to their brutality. Far from carrying positive connotations, the environs of Kreuzberg become ‘an expression of Erol’s exclusion from the space represented by mainstream German society’ (Gallagher 2006: 340).

In another parallel to Akin’s film, Erol links his sense of self to a group identity, professing faith in a masculine bond and a notion of loyalty between friends. However, the bond between Gabriel, Costa and Bobby is represented as real, even while its consequences are fatal, as marked by warmth and as developing out of mutual experiences and shared cultural references. The contact between the group to which Erol belongs seems minimal by contrast. They take any opportunity to single out and mock one of their number and their meetings are punctuated by one insulted member after another taking off. Erol seems to recognize the paucity of the contact he has with these young men, even as he insists on his loyalty to them, complaining to his brother that he has no friends. The film would thus seem to undermine a notion of shared identity amongst ‘hyphenated’ Germans of the kind that drives the plot of Akin’s film and provides at least a temporary anchor point for the identities of its protagonists. Instead, it presents Erol’s decision to leave for Turkey as not least the consequence of his failure to construct a meaningful identity for himself amongst his peers in a German context.

⁷ In her insightful analysis of what she describes as ‘the films’ appropriation of the transnational cinematic economy’, Barbara Mennel notes that both *Geschwister* and *Kurz und schmerzlos* ‘focus on the space of the urban ghetto as an imaginary site of racialized criminality well-known from representations of African-American youth culture’ (2002: 134 f.) and she explores the way in which both films ‘appropriate and rework genre conventions of the ghetto action film’ (155).

Ahmed, who unlike Erol has chosen a German passport over a Turkish one, seems scarcely more emotionally developed than his brother. Although he has a girlfriend at the beginning of the film, the relationship deteriorates as it progresses, his contact to friends seems hardly more meaningful than Erol's and, while the relationship between the brothers is clearly warm, it is also characterized by misunderstanding and frustration.⁸ What distinguishes the two, however, is that the younger brother is continuing with his education and in so doing is shown to have chosen the intellectual over the physical as a marker of masculine identity (while Erol pumps iron, boxes at the gym or watches Bruce Lee films,⁹ reading is Ahmed's leisure pursuit of choice). It is this that will provide him, the film implies, with a passport out of the ghetto and therefore with the opportunity to explore ways of defining a sense of self unavailable to his brother. It also distinguishes Ahmed from his father who, like Gabriel's in *Kurz und schmerzlos*, appears to have been unable to act as a role model for his sons. Here the portrait of a member of the migrant generation is expanded and the reasons for his failure emerge more clearly as relating to his troubled conception of his own masculinity. The siblings' father's ability to have an emotionally satisfying relationship with his children seems to be hampered by the fact that they experience him as somehow inadequate when he fails to move between two cultures with quite their ease – Leyla, for example, corrects his German, undermining his authority in the process. Moreover, he is oppressed by the struggle to keep the family financially afloat, compensating for a sense of failure by asserting his contested patriarchal authority in heavy-handed fashion over the family in general and his daughter in particular.

Arslan continues his exploration of the role played by access to education and to wealth in the construction of Turkish-German masculinities in the second part of his

⁸ In a parallel to *Kurz und schmerzlos*, the brothers do bond at one point via a shared cultural reference. When their father reports on the dangers to which taxi drivers are exposed, both immediately think of Martin Scorsese in *Taxi Driver*. The fact that the same American gangster films are referenced, albeit with more irony, in *Geschwister* as in *Kurz und schmerzlos* is also evidenced by a sequence, reminiscent of *Mean Streets*, in which Erol, like Akin's Costa, beats up a passerby who bumps into him.

⁹ Mennel notes that it is 'the exaggerated physicality of Bruce Lee' that provides 'the precondition for his transnational reception' (2002: 145).

Berlin trilogy, *Dealer*, set in the criminal underworld of the German capital.¹⁰ His occasional voice-over commentary identifies Can, the male protagonist and eponymous drug dealer, as the narrator of his own story, as well as implying that this is a retrospective narrative. It is not, however, one that he has mastered or from which he has learnt. On the contrary, his story, both as he experiences and as he narrates it, appears to be something that happens to him and over which he has little control: his commentaries ‘merely underline the extent to which Can is not the author of his own narrative’ (Burns 2007a: 373). He is in fact characterized above all by passivity: for much of the film the camera simply observes him as he contemplates his environment. This tendency to linger on the interaction between the individual and the space he inhabits implies that identity is understood as in part constituted precisely by that relationship. In Can’s case it is a complex one, even though the space he occupies is notably restricted.

Generally speaking he moves between his apartment and the café where he meets his boss, spending most of his time on the surrounding streets, dealing, confined to ‘a limited number of disconnected and largely featureless urban locations’ (Gallagher 2006: 345). He attempts to exert control over these spaces but his efforts are generally thwarted by the actions of others: his girlfriend who has started to pack before he asks her to leave and the client who persuades him to do a deal in his apartment against his better judgement, for instance. Similarly, and like Erol in *Geschwister*, his attempts to make the streets his own meet with little success. He and his fellow drug dealers guard their territory, ejecting those who are unwelcome, but they are constantly under threat from the police who assert their own superior territorial rights. Can in fact learns in the course of the film that his entry to certain spaces is controlled by others: the police who threaten him with incarceration on the one hand, and his boss, Hakan, on the other, who determines where he can work.

The film contains a number of sequences which show Can and his fellow dealers simply occupying their space, manifesting ‘the staticness of characters who appear almost incapacitated by their environment’ (Burns 2007b: 19). While they attempt to stand their ground in the face of a hostile reality, the effort seems to leave them

¹⁰ Burns points out that the film’s protagonist ‘could be seen as a projection of what might have become of Erol had he not chosen to leave Berlin’, with the relationship between the two figures reinforced by the fact that they are played by the same actor, Tamer Yigit (2007b:17).

largely isolated from one another: they make no eye contact with one another as they pose in lifeless tableaux. They bond only once, in what is one of the few humorous sequences in an otherwise bleak film, when they share a sense of superiority as street-wise natives of the city in relation to a couple young tourists who approach them for drugs. In this respect one could argue that the film, even more emphatically than *Geschwister*, undermines the idea that male friendship can provide a context in which 'hyphenated' masculine identities can be affirmed and secured.

Like the earlier film, *Dealer* also explores father-son relationships. While we learn little about the family background Can seems largely to have rejected, it is clear that Hakan and Erdal, the policeman who takes an apparently friendly interest in the young man's activities, can be considered substitute fathers and as such their presence in the film again implies the inadequacy of a generation of real fathers to provide role models for their sons. They represent the two possible pathways, already set out in *Geschwister*, available to young German-Turkish men: going straight or a life of crime. Hakan, who makes his formative influence on Can explicit – 'Alles, was du weißt, hast du von mir gelernt' –, seduces him with talk of the easy money and glamorous rewards available in the drugs world but dies a violent death at the hands of his gangster associates, a brutal act which makes clear that the apparent freedoms associated with a life of crime are illusory. Erdal, as alternative father figure, tries to persuade Can to go straight but his options in this respect are shown to be severely limited. The freedom available to Ahmed in *Geschwister* to determine his own existence resulted largely from his access to education. In *Dealer* too the advantages of completing school are made manifest in the figure of Can's former friend who is now studying law. The alternatives to a life of crime for Can, however, are unappealing. Only manual jobs are available to him, and, when he leaves the streets for a while to work in a restaurant kitchen, the experience leaves him feeling dirty and humiliated.¹¹ When he returns to dealing, the derisory response of his friends to rumours about his recent employment confirms that this kind of work is difficult to reconcile with the model of hegemonic masculinity in place on the streets.

Can is also part of a traditionally constructed family, partner to Jale and father to a three-year-old girl. He is shown caring for his daughter and would appear to value his

¹¹ This could be read as a reference to the traditional opportunities available to migrant workers of the first generation and therefore as a reference to the 'cinema of duty'.

relationship to her – indeed Burns argues that the scenes in which she appears evoke ‘the domestic happiness which, under different circumstances might have given Can’s life a more solid foundation’ (2007b: 18) – but he constructs his primary role in the family as that of bread-winner, justifying his commitment to the life of crime Jale detests by insisting that it is vital for their financial well-being. He is unable to make emotional contact to Jale and has a set of expectations of the relationship which are out of step with her own, failing to grasp that she is in a position to construct a life without him. Thus, despite her insistence that she is re-defining her existence alone, he nevertheless asks her at the end of the film to wait for him to serve the four-year prison sentence he has received, even to follow him to Turkey, if, as seems highly likely, he is eventually deported, a suggestion to which she responds with incredulity. This topos – that of the faithful wife who waits dutifully for her man – is one of several associated with filmic versions of life in the criminal underworld that the film exploits only to show their anachronism as reference points for a sense of masculine selfhood. Another is the theme of loyalty: Can is unwilling to betray Hakan to the police but his fidelity brings him no reward. At the end of the film the camera lingers on each of the spaces Can has inhabited. These are now completely empty, suggesting, on the one hand, that they have become lifeless without him but also implying that he has left no emotional residue. The final line of his voice over – ‘Seltsam wie sich alles ändert’ – reaffirms his fatalistic attitude to a life he scarcely seems to have lived.

The male protagonists of each of the films examined so far have been more or less integrated into a ‘hyphenated’ community – or more often sub-culture – but they have little contact to other kinds of Germans. This cannot be said of Cahit, the central male figure in Akın’s *Gegen die Wand* (2004), a film which offers a radical revision of a theme central to the ‘cinema of duty’: that of the young woman who desires to be liberated from the patriarchal family. Unlike the characters in both Arslan’s and Akın’s own earlier films, Cahit’s disorientation and depression link not to his ethnic origins but result from the death of his German wife. Equally, the violence towards others to which he is prone is prompted not by racism – as is the case in the sequence in *Geschwister* when Erol and his friends beat up a couple of neo-Nazis – but by insults to his (heterosexual) masculinity. Thus he assaults a man in the bar he frequents who calls him ‘schwul’ and his second attack – this time directed at Niko,

the bar's owner – is similarly prompted by slights designed to upset a sense of masculine pride: Niko suggests that Sibel, Cahit's wife in an open marriage of convenience, is a prostitute and Cahit her pimp.

However, as is the case with all the films examined here, ethnic and gender identity are inextricably linked. Sibel predicts Niko's violent death when, having slept with him once, she rejects him with the threat 'Ich bin eine verheiratete Frau. Ich bin eine verheiratete türkische Frau. Und wenn du mich nicht in Ruhe läßt, bringt mein Mann dich um'. She calls to her aid here a notion of honour specifically (and stereotypically) associated with Turkish and other Muslim cultures. Perhaps surprisingly, she is attempting to use to her advantage a concept of which her own behaviour makes a mockery and of which she herself has been, and will continue to be, a victim. We learn early on that her nose has been broken by her brother for having a boyfriend and after Niko's death she will be forced to flee the country for fear that her brother will kill her to avenge family honour. Cahit's assault on Niko implies that he too has been fundamentally shaped by discourses of honour and shame that are part of his cultural heritage and this despite the fact that for a large part of the film he is anxious to deny his Turkish identity (referring to other Turks with the racist epithet 'Kanaken', for instance).¹²

The film could in fact be said to represent Turkish masculinity overwhelmingly negatively. Sibel's father's is the authoritative voice within a family which 'is represented in exclusively negative terms, as irredeemably oppressive, inexorably patriarchal, and nothing short of fanatical at that' (Petek 2007: 181). His rigid attitudes alienate first his daughter and then, when he disowns Sibel, his wife. Sibel's brother reinforces his father's authority through violence and manifests a distinctly masculinist bias in his understanding of family loyalties when he welcomes Cahit as his brother-in-law after the latter's release from prison even as he insists that he no longer has a sister. The hypocrisies presented as underpinning gender relations in certain sections of the Turkish-German community are made visible in a sequence which offers another variation on the honour theme: the young Turkish-German husbands planning a trip to the brothel are insulted by Cahit's use of the word ' ficken'

¹² Polona Petek reads the murder sequence as one which draws in a highly negative fashion on Turkish stereotypes: 'Cahit is sent to prison for killing one of Sibel's one-night-stands in what is constructed as an outburst of his barbaric, that is definitely non-European machismo' (2007: 183).

in relation to their wives when he suggests they could have marital sex rather than sleeping with prostitutes.

Despite the negative connotations attaching to Turkish and German-Turkish masculinities, however, the film can be understood as charting a process by which Cahit comes to terms with his Turkish identity. He rediscovers lust for life in his marriage to Turkish-German Sibel who challenges his rejection of his Turkish heritage. The relationship might initially end in disaster because the two are unable to reconcile conflicting desires when traditional ideas of love and faithfulness come up against a more contemporary conception of female sexual freedom. However, when the relationship is briefly resumed – and finally consummated – in Turkey after Cahit's release from prison (and after Sibel has settled down with her new partner and their child), he evidences a degree of stability and maturity that contrasts with his earlier erratic behaviour. While he wants to start afresh with Sibel, he is accepting of her decision not to abandon her new family, setting off in the film's final sequence to continue the process of self-exploration he has begun by going back to his roots in his home town of Mersin, replacing the 'spatial dead end' of his suicidal head-on car crash in the film's first part with 'an open-ended journey' (Berghahn 2006: 152).

Thus the trip to Turkey can be understood to release Cahit from the limitations of his previous existence and possibly also from the negatively charged conception of masculinity which underpinned it. He has been liberated quite literally from incarceration for manslaughter but his previous life has also been lived in a series of prisons – the club where he collects the empty glasses, the bar in which he drinks heavily, his own run down and filthy flat and the apartment of his sometime German girlfriend, Maren. All of these 'claustrophobic spaces' (Fachinger 2007: 258) are associated with the violence – both towards himself and others – through which he gave expression to a sense of entrapment in a failed life. Such aggression appears to be a constituent part of all the representations of Turkish-German male identity considered here and suggests an understanding of 'hyphenated' masculinity as deeply troubled, at least as it is lived out in Germany. In fact, *Gegen die Wand* lends credence to an idea that has been at least hinted at in the majority of these films: the notion that Turkey might in fact offer an alternative and potentially less fraught context in which to define new masculine identities.

Female Identity

What possibilities Turkey might offer for self-determination to young Turkish-German women is a question asked less frequently in these films, although it is considered in *Gegen die Wand*, where it is answered differently with respect to the film's male and female protagonists, as we shall see. Sibel's relationship to her environment is different to Cahit's. While she too is initially associated with confined spaces – her parents' apartment and the clinic in which she meets Cahit – and with violent self harm as a response to a sense of entrapment, she also has a degree of success in liberating herself from imprisonment.¹³ Through her marriage to Cahit she transforms her relationship to her environment. The public realm, to which she was denied access all the time she was defined as her father's daughter and her brother's sister is now hers to enjoy and thus she dances in the clubs and drinks in the bars of Altona with a *joie de vivre* denied to Cahit. She transforms the home she shares with him from a barely habitable dive to a light and bright space in which the couple laugh, dance, eat and eventually explore each other's bodies (although the space is constantly under threat from Cahit's violence). Perhaps most significantly she is shown out on the streets alone, happy and apparently the mistress of her own existence. On a number of occasions she is filmed in slight slow motion out in the open, always in high heels and with a smile on her face, as, for instance, when she leaves the fair with the *Lebkuchenherz* with which she is planning to declare her love for her husband.

This last sequence is particularly significant because it immediately precedes the one in which Cahit murders Niko, bringing to an initial end Sibel's opportunity to define her own existence, and particularly her sexual identity, in Germany. One could argue that she is, at least in part, the victim of the inability of the men with whom she comes into contact, whether German, Turkish or German-Turkish, to cope with her sometimes thoughtless insistence on her right to take charge of her own sexuality. Sibel's subsequent behaviour suggests, however, that she sees herself less as a victim than as responsible for the fatal accident. The close cropped hair and androgynous clothing with which she arrives in Turkey imply a deliberate attempt to disavow her sexuality and could even be regarded as a form of penance.

¹³ The fact that she liberates herself from her family, with some help from Cahit but without the aid of a German rescuer is, of course, what differentiates Sibel from her predecessors in earlier migrant cinema.

In keeping with this idea, her movements in Istanbul are initially confined to the journey between her cousin Selma's apartment and the hotel in which she works. When she does finally venture out on the streets again it is no longer in the triumphalist spirit in which strode through Altona. We see her only at night in what is represented as a kind of 'purgatory' (Berghahn 2006: 153): in cafés, bars and streets which now become associated with violence and self-harm in ways not dissimilar to the spaces inhabited by Cahit in the first part of the film. Seeking oblivion in drugs and alcohol, Sibel is raped by a barkeeper (in what could be read as a deliberate parallel to the two sequences in Germany where she chooses to have sex with barmen) and finally beaten, stabbed and left for dead by the three men she provokes in what can be understood as an act of self-harm, one which has been read as both a rejection of her sexuality and an attempt 'to "kill-off" her German identity' (Fincham 2008: 62).

Clearly Sibel feels the need to atone for her (sexually promiscuous) behaviour in the first part of the film and – somewhat problematically – her efforts would seem to be rewarded with a kind of redemption. Once the bleeding Sibel has been found by the passing taxi driver, the film makes a temporal leap to show her subsequent life as girlfriend and mother to a young daughter. While she briefly revisits the relationship with Cahit, and even contemplates leaving Istanbul with him, she eventually stays put, apparently halted in her tracks by the sound of her daughter and her partner happily interacting. Sibel's choice for more conventional family life over the passion of her relationship with Cahit can be interpreted in a number of ways: as a mature decision to maintain the utmost security and continuity for herself and her daughter; as a selfless act in which she puts the happiness of her child and partner before her own; or as a capitulation – an abandonment of the attempt to expand the parameters within which she can define her gender and sexual identity and the decision to accept instead a more limiting role, one which provides social acceptability but not perhaps self-fulfilment.¹⁴

Perhaps Sibel's decision needs to be understood in the light of two other possible modes of female self-definition presented in the film. She is contrasted with two slightly older female counterparts, both of whom have chosen non-conventional

¹⁴ Victoria Fincham suggests that the fact that we never see her new partner implies 'that he is insignificant to her sexually and emotionally' (2008: 54).

lifestyles and both of whom Sibel initially admires but whose example she eventually rejects. Maren and Selma are represented as independent women who determine their own lives but neither has found any kind of permanent happiness with a partner: Maren suffers in the on-off relationship with Cahit and Selma, who is extremely successful in her job, is also alone and, the film implies, unloved. When she witnesses what appears to be her somewhat sterile life in Istanbul, Sibel explicitly rejects Selma as a role model: 'Selma, die ich so bewunderte. Heute habe ich nur noch Verachtung für sie'. If the film is seen to share her negative assessment of her cousin's lifestyle, then it is possible to conclude that *Gegen die Wand* rejects the idea that independent women who choose not to define themselves through heterosexual relationships can achieve happiness. Or less harshly, one could argue, it simply recognizes the difficulties that face women, across the ethnic divide, who attempt to construct their lives outside of conventional boundaries. Certainly in the film's final images of its two central characters spatial metaphors are used to indicate their respective (lack of) freedom. While Sibel can only regard Istanbul from the window of the apartment she has decided not to leave, Cahit looks out at the landscape from the window of the bus taking him out into the world to discover himself.

Gegen die Wand represents a departure from *Kurz und schmerzlos* in a number of ways. Unlike Sibel, the female characters of the earlier film are only sketchily drawn – the fact that it references the Hollywood gangster genre might account for the rather stereotypical roles they play – and they are also far less caught up in the struggle to liberate themselves from patriarchal control.¹⁵ Gabriel's sister, Ceyda, would in fact seem to embody the freedom available to second-generation Turkish-German women to define their own identities. Although she does not assert her presence on the streets in the way that her brother and his friends do (there are in fact very few sequences in which she is seen outside), she is at liberty to dress as she wishes (for instance, in a rather revealing dress at her older brother's wedding), to enjoy the Hamburg nightlife, and to date whom she pleases (although she does apparently have to rely on Gabriel's influence with her parents to obtain such freedoms and has to put up with his interference in her love life, as when he beats up her new boyfriend after she has rejected Costa). However, like her German friend and counterpart, Alice, her filmic

¹⁵ Mennel, who reads *Kurz und schmerzlos* as a variation on the ghetto action film, also points out that this 'thoroughly gendered genre relies on a structure of static femininity and dynamic masculinity' which Akin's film certainly reproduces (2002: 146).

function is primarily to act as love interest and as an object of contention between the men in the film. Just as she rejects Costa, so Alice transfers her love from Bobby to Gabriel. As the revenge plot begins to take precedence over the love story towards the end of the film both women are marginalized. As Alice tries to comprehend what is happening in the wake of Bobby's death, and particularly why Gabriel is carrying a gun, Ceyda arrives, talks to her brother in Turkish and then holds her friend back as Gabriel leaves, providing an example of 'exclusion by the pluricultural group that prefers to keep the Germans out of their decision-making processes' (2008: 23). The film seems to imply at this point both the limitations of cross-cultural understanding – the Turkish-German sister grasps the codes of conduct that determine her brother's behaviour better than her German friend – but also sets up, in stark contrast to *Gegen die Wand*, a stereotypical (filmic) contrast between the men who act and women who suffer through their actions. Gerd Gemünden has claimed that in *Kurz und schmerzlos* 'it is not the gap between foreigners and Germans that cannot be closed but the one between men and women' (2004: 186). It might be more accurate to say that both binary divisions remain firmly in place.

Similarly, *Geschwister* shows less interest in Leyla than in her two brothers, although she, like Ceyda, offers evidence that second-generation Turkish-German women have expanded opportunities for self-definition. On the one hand, there is some evidence that she is more likely than her brothers to fall foul of her father's need to assert his authority in the family as a way of compensating for his lack of control over his environment. Interrupted by his daughter while trying unsuccessfully to balance the family's finances, he responds negatively to her request to go to Hamburg for the weekend with her boyfriend and resorts to physical violence when she questions his decision. Also the fact that she is an unskilled worker in a clothes factory might imply that her options are more limited than those of her brothers who use education and military service as opportunities to change their lives. Moreover, her job, as Barbara Mennel points out, links her to her predecessors in the 'cinema of duty': 'the emphasis on the realistic portrayal of her at the workplace is reminiscent of the earlier socially critical phase of Turkish-German filmmaking' (2002: 146). On the other hand, she, like her brothers, makes the streets – and the clubs – of Kreuzberg her own, choosing her friends and her boyfriends, discussing the nature of love and relationships in terms

that are generationally rather than ethnically distinct, and at the end of the film she is looking forward to leaving home and moving in with a girlfriend.

The link between the female protagonist in *Dealer* and earlier representations of Turkish-German women would seem even more marked. Jessica Gallagher argues that the 'limited urban space available to Jale' indicates that she inhabits 'the restrictive and claustrophobic spaces experienced by earlier female characters in the Turkish-German *Gastarbeiterkino*' (2006: 348). She is seen mostly in the apartment she initially shares with Can, once at the till in the shop in which she works, and only briefly in other environments, always in the company of the male protagonist. But *Dealer* also indicates that she has entered a period of transition: confinement is associated with the relationship with Can which she is in the process of ending. Of the two of them, Jale is not only emotionally more astute but also more willing to take an active part in determining her own existence. Thus she seizes the opportunity to leave Can with a view to establishing a better life for herself and her daughter. That she can do so would appear to be in no small part the consequence of female friendship. Jale's friend Eva provides her with somewhere to stay when she leaves Can and it is with Eva that she is going to travel to Portugal in an attempt to redefine her existence at the end of the film. Given the limitations of male friendships as they are represented in these films, and the potential dangers that can attach to them, it is interesting that a same-sex friendship is seen to have a positive function in relation to the attempts of a female protagonist to define her identity. Mennel has argued that *Dealer* conforms to the gender norms of the kind of ghetto films it references by equating 'femininity (and the maternal) with morality, and masculinity with criminality' (2002: 147) but one could equally argue that it subverts those conventions by contrasting a passive male subject with an active female counterpart who is far more successful in determining her own existence with the help and support of other women.

Dealer opens with Can awake in bed, with Jale and their daughter sleeping next to him, as he ponders his existence at the beginning of another 'Arbeitstag' in a film which charts his progress towards unwanted isolation from his loved ones and lengthy incarceration. Arslan's next film, *Der schöne Tag* (2000) similarly begins with an early morning sequence. But here it is the male half of the couple who remains sleeping while, Deniz, the female protagonist slips out of his apartment to return to her own, thus setting in motion a narrative which starts with her liberation from a

relationship that has run its course and concludes in an open-ended fashion as she contemplates the extent to which she is free to construct her life.

As in *Dealer*, for large parts of *Der schöne Tag* the camera lingers on the protagonist as she moves through the city. While her Berlin, like Can's, is made up of the city's residential rather than its historic or representative spaces, it is nevertheless a much less circumscribed urban space than his. Deniz is shown taking a whole variety of forms of transport through the city – buses, trams, underground trains and taxis – as she negotiates its spaces, taking part in various activities relating to her job as an actress, interacting with her family and encountering various of the city's other inhabitants. As Gallagher notes: 'Through her travels, Berlin is depicted as more fluid and connected than in [Arslan's] previous two films and much less a site of overt conflict or confrontation' (2006: 350). The audience is never allowed to forget the metropolitan nature of her environment, with the noise of traffic dominating the sound track, competing with the bird song in the park and intruding on her conversations.

Deniz moves through Berlin with confidence, making its spaces – parks, restaurants, cafés – her own. Such self-assurance seems in part to come from her awareness of – and her willingness to confront the challenge presented by – the fact that her progress through the urban environment is monitored by (the gaze of) men who would control it if possible. Thus she makes eye contact with a number of male figures in the course of the film and chooses how to respond to their interest in her: positively, in the case of the young Portuguese man, Diego, with whose path her own intersects at various points in the film; or in the case of the young man on the underground in its final sequence in whom she might, or might not, be interested and who might, or might not, have a place in her future. But she also effectively – and somewhat aggressively – challenges the taxi driver who shows an interest in her by meeting his gaze and demanding to know what he wants. The most telling sequence in which she contests the desire of men to control her movements sees her walking home through the housing estate in which her apartment block is located. One member of a group of young Turkish-Germans makes a sexually explicit remark to which Deniz responds by demanding an apology and insisting on her right to respect. While the group accepts the rebuke, the oldest member attempts to reassert his and his friends masculine authority by offering her their protection. With this sequence the film would appear to mock the territorial behaviour of young men of ethnic minority origin as it is enacted

in *Kurz und schmerzlos* and Arslan's own *Geschwister* and *Dealer*. While Deniz allows them to accompany her a short way, she soon dismisses them, insisting that she can manage alone, and she ignores them the next time she walks through the estate. Her confidence and freedom of movement, the film implies, is greater than theirs.

Der schöne Tag can also be understood as an exploration of the nature of love and of a woman's freedom to determine her identity within a heterosexual relationship. Burns has pointed out that her 'outward dynamism is also symptomatic of an inner restlessness' (2007a: 374) and in the course of the film, Deniz is confronted with the complexity of her own emotions in the break up with a boyfriend she claims no longer to love and in the encounter with a young man who, while he clearly has the potential to be a new lover, turns out already to have a girlfriend. These developments suggest to her the complex nature of current conceptions of relationships and of love, a view for which she finds further evidence in a discussion with her sister, whose budding career is potentially about to be jeopardized by a baby she is not sure she wants, even though she has a partner she loves and who would welcome the child: 'Ich habe nicht studiert, um Hausfrau zu werden'. Deniz rejects the attempt of her mother to help her 'in her existential search for perspectives in life by proposing traditional Turkish gender roles which she has fully internalized' (Rings 2008: 28). The mother is reluctant to seek a new partner after the death of her husband, an apparently difficult man with whom she argued but with whom she shared a 'Partnerschaft' and towards whom she felt a 'Verantwortungsgefühl', two concepts which her daughter rejects as having no relevance in a contemporary relationship. But Deniz also seems troubled by the way in which contemporary culture in general – and film in particular – determine the way in which love can be defined. The influence of film in this respect is emphasised in sequences in which she dubs a scene from Eric Rohmer's *Conte d'été*, where the young protagonists discuss their relationship, and in which she talks at a casting about a film depicting a young women's sexual and emotional development. At the end of *Der schöne Tag*, in a chance (and somewhat stilted) encounter with a professor of 'Alltagsgeschichte', she complains about the clichéd nature of the discourses which surround love. The professor responds with a lecture on the nature of love as an historical construct which can change with time – one that has become more complex as opportunities for individual self-expression have increased – and

with the reassurance that the communication of authentic emotion is still possible, that love can still be a 'Mittel der Verständigung', despite the clichés associated with it in the contemporary world.

The liberating conclusion of the protagonist's 'beautiful day' would seem to be that she is free to determine for herself the nature of her feelings and to decide how and in what context these will be expressed. In all of this her ethnic origin seems to play only a limited role, evident in the clash of values that emerges in the encounter with her mother but nowhere else. In this regard she provides a particularly compelling example of a tendency also identifiable in the other films examined here – the development of a distinct gender division in the representation of Turkish-German identities, one very different to that which characterized the 'cinema of duty'. It is now above all young men of ethnic minority origin who are portrayed as victims of cross-cultural tensions. The male protagonists of Arslan's and Akin's films seem condemned by their ethnic origins to inhabit a social underclass, unless they have access to the education which would allow them to escape, not least because they define their identities with reference to problematic and limiting notions of masculinity. Their female counterparts, on the other hand, seem far more determined to escape the bind of the gender stereotypes to which their male counterparts are still attached. While their success in this undertaking varies from film to film – and while the freedoms available to them are determined, as they are for Turkish-German men, by family background and educational opportunity – each is shown actively attempting to revision what it means to be a Turkish-German woman today.

Beyond binary divisions?

So it would seem that while these more recent manifestations of Turkish-German cinema are distinctly different from their predecessors, they are still attached to binary divisions, although these are less marked in relation to ethnicity than they are to gender. While young Turkish-German men of a particular social class are shown struggling to find a way to live out successfully their multiple identities, other characters, Erol in *Geschwister* for instance, and most of the female figures, are portrayed as being able to negotiate more effectively the demands of a bi-cultural heritage. However, it is precisely the fact that Turkish-German cinematic heroines are

more competent in this regard than their male counterparts which points to a clear divide in the representation of gendered experiences of 'hyphenated' identity.

The binary thinking that underpins these films means that they are also resolutely heterosexual in terms of the sexual identities and gender relations they portray, excluding alternatives to the heterosexual couple as offering possible sources of identity, happiness or security (witness the examples of Selma and Maren in *Gegen die Wand*). Alternative sexualities hover at their margins but in ways which reveal how threatening these can be to those constructions of heterosexual masculinity potentially destabilized by the experience of social exclusion. In *Dealer Ziki*, one of Can's regular customers, constructed negatively as a slave to his addiction and as a police informer, is seen prostituting himself to men to get money for drugs. It is not clear whether his choice of customer reflects his sexual preference but it, and his addiction, lead to him becoming the victim of the violence of several of Can's drug dealing colleagues, while Can himself looks on without intervening. In its typically low-key way, *Dealer* thus demonstrates how masculinity, within the criminal milieu in which Can operates, is defined in rigidly heterosexual terms that demand the exclusion of other kinds of sexuality posing a threat to its hegemony. Similarly, when in *Geschwister* Ahmed fails to join Erol and his friends in beating up the neo-Nazis, Erol expresses his anger and shame at his brother's apparent lack of courage by casting doubt on his masculinity and, as we have seen, Cahit responds with violence to taunts directed at his sexuality. Polona Petek maintains that *Gegen die Wand* is in fact 'rife with homophobia' and insists that 'its exploration of exilic and diasporic identities is staged through an emphatically heterosexual scenario and its unconvincing resolution rehearses the familiar heteronormative tropes of home as maternal haven' (2007: 181). While this final claim might seem somewhat exaggerated given that Sibel is not defined at the end of the film primarily through her role as mother, it nevertheless highlights the extent to which *Gegen die Wand* and the other films considered here work within conventional binary frameworks in relation to both sexuality and gender.

Given this tendency, then, it is significant that at the heart of *Auf der anderen Seite* (2007) is a relationship between two young women, Lotte and Ayten, the one German, the other Turkish. This integration of a lesbian couple into its plot is certainly not the only thing that distinguishes Akin's most recent film from the others

considered here. *Auf der anderen Seite* is substantially broader in scope, focusing not just on the politics of identity which have dominated recent Turkish-German filmmaking but more broadly on the politics of nation, exploring different facets of contemporary Turkey as it prepares to enter the EU and examining points of comparison between Turkey and Germany, particularly in relation to human rights issues and the State's response to political opposition. The fact that Lotte's mother, Susanne, is played by the New German Cinema's most iconic actress, Hanna Schygulla, associated above all with the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, suggests that Akın wants his own film to be read in relation to traditions of leftist film-making in Germany. More than this, however, it gives a presence in a film exploring the nature of oppositional politics in Turkey to Germany's '68 generation, whose intense dissatisfaction with the West German State also, of course, spawned violent political protest.

While these dimensions of the film go beyond the concerns of this article, it is worth focusing briefly on its construction of the identities and relationships of its six central figures in ways quite distinct to the other films considered here. The range of characters it incorporates is much broader and their connections to one another more complex, as is to be expected in a narrative which embeds individual identity issues in an exploration of broader matters of life, death, loss, love and fate. There are the Germans: Lotte who falls for Ayten in Hamburg and loses her life in Istanbul where she has followed her lover after her deportation; and Susanne who, in a parallel movement, travels to Istanbul after her daughter's death. There are the Turkish-Germans – or Turks who are long-term residents of Germany – Nejat Aksu and his father, Ali (played by leading Turkish actor, Tunçel Kurtiz, who, mirroring Hanna Schygulla's function with regard to the NGC, locates the film in relation to Turkish cinema) and the prostitute who briefly becomes Ali's partner, Yeter. After Yeter's death at the hands of his father, Nejat goes to Turkey to look for her daughter and ends up sharing a flat first with Lotte and then with Susanne. And finally, there is Turkish Ayten who is in fact Yeter's daughter, although this is never revealed to the other characters who fail to grasp completely their mutual interconnectedness.

One could argue that this tangled web of interrelationships reflects something of the complexity of current Turkish-German relations with each of the characters representing a position on a spectrum of possible interactions between Germans and

Germany and Turks and Turkey. Significantly in this respect, the figures come from two different generations and, in contrast to the other films considered here, the older characters are as nuanced as their younger counterparts. Nejat's father stands for the *Gastarbeiter* who are now enjoying their retirement and the film attempts to avoid some of the (cinematic) clichés associated with representations of this generation. He has a loving and communicative relationship with the son he has brought up virtually single-handedly after the death of Nejat's mother and his attitude to Yeter is determined far less by patriarchal norms of appropriate gender behaviour than that of the two younger Turkish-German men who threaten her for working as a prostitute. Moreover, her death at his hands in a fit of jealous rage cannot be interpreted as a consequence of Muslim discourses of honour and shame in quite the same way as Cahit's murder of Niko in *Gegen die Wand* or the violence inflicted on women in a number of the films considered here.

Ali's involuntary repatriation to Turkey at the end of the film is contrasted with Nejat's decision initially to visit and subsequently to stay in Istanbul. It could be argued that through Nejat *Auf der anderen Seite* problematizes what has been identified as further common topos of contemporary Turkish-German filmmaking. He would seem to offer compelling confirmation of the contention that education provides the best means of finding a way to live comfortably with a bi-cultural heritage in Germany. As a professor of 'Germanistik' at the University of Hamburg he has clearly embraced the German culture with which he grew up and now disseminates it to others. But Nejat gives up his profession in order to live out his German-Turkish identity in a different context, running a German bookshop in Istanbul. Thus with this figure Akin offers a variation on a theme also present in *Kurz und schmerzlos* and *Gegen die Wand*: the possibility that Turkish-German men need to have experienced Turkey as well as Germany in order to construct a fully rounded sense of self. Significantly, *Auf der anderen Seite* presents Nejat as an emotionally mature and sensitive individual. Rainer Gansera has argued, with reference to the film's aesthetic and to a possible autobiographical starting point for the character, that Nejat is in fact a parallel figure to Cahit in Akin's previous film:

Auf der anderen Seite überrascht zuerst durch den ruhigen, beinahe mediativen, balladisch fließenden Erzählgestus, der den Bildern Raum und Zeit gibt und einen deutlichen Kontrast darstellt zur dramatisch rockenden Aufgewühltheit von *Gegen die Wand*. Ein Kontrast, der sich in den jungen männlichen Helden der beiden Filme am schärfsten zeigt. War Cahit [...] in *Gegen die Wand* ein wilder, zügelloser,

selbstzerstörerischer Charakter, so ist Nejat [...], der junge sanfte Mann in *Auf der anderen Seite*, das Gegenbild: sanft, besonnen, fürsorglich. Wenn man beide Figuren auch als Spiegel von Akins doppelgesichtigem Temperament deuten darf, dann repräsentiert Nejat die von Furor suizidaler Verzweiflung abgewendete, nachdenkliche, spirituelle, feminine, fast 'mütterliche' Seite. Die andere Seite sozusagen. (Gansera 2007)

Despite the gender stereotypes with which he characterizes Nejat, Gansera makes a valid point here. Not only does Akin offer something other than another variation on disoriented masculinity with this figure, he also avoids constructing the film's love story around him. In fact, Nejat's primary emotional contact is with members of the older generation: Lotte's mother, whom he treats with tact and sensitivity in the wake of her daughter's death and who helps him understand that he must forgive his father; and Ali, whom he initially rejects in the wake of Yeter's murder, but whom he seeks out at the end of the film in an act of spiritual homecoming to his father's village.

While Susanne visited Istanbul as she hitchhiked her way to India thirty years previously, neither she nor Lotte would appear to have had any contact to Turkey or even to Turkish-Germans before Lotte helps Ayten, initially out of kindness and then out of love, after she has fled to Germany fearing persecution for her political activities. Lotte's and Susanne's relationships to Ayten, as they are represented in the film, could be read as a direct attempt to explore alternatives to the binary frameworks in which gender and ethnic relationships and identities have been constructed in Turkish-German film. The lesbian relationship unsettles the heteronormative dynamic with which this cinema, at least in its most successful manifestations, is associated.¹⁶ Moreover, it is conducted through the medium of English and takes place in both Germany and Turkey. Thus no one culture is seen to offer a dominant paradigm for their relationship. Instead the transnational context in which it is played out means that the two young women are able to explore new ways of defining themselves and their interaction. While Susanne is initially portrayed as hostile to the relationship – not least because she finds it difficult to separate from her daughter and is jealous of her lover – after Lotte's death she will embrace Ayten. In fact, she will take on the role of mother to this young woman, thus constructing a parent-child relationship across the ethnic divide for which there are few cinematic precedents.

¹⁶ Notable examples of films which explore ethnicity and homosexuality in tandem are Kutluğ Ataman's *Lola + Bilidikid* (1998) and Ayşe Polat's *Auslandstournee* (1999).

In terms of the intersections between gender, ethnicity and sexuality it explores *Auf der anderen Seite* offers a number of perspectives different to the other films considered here. Interestingly, however, in terms of its representations of (urban) space, it conforms more readily to patterns already in place in earlier films. For all their independence, the female characters still experience danger in the urban environments they traverse. Yeter is threatened for plying her trade in Bremen's red light district and both she and Lotte fall victim to violence at the hands of men, or in Lotte's case, of a boy who totes the stolen gun with which he shoots her like some screen Mafioso. For Ayten it is her oppositional politics which mean that both Turkish and German public spaces are fraught with danger. Not only is Nejat not exposed to such dangers, he is shown, in a way not dissimilar to Cahit in *Gegen die Wand*, to enjoy a freedom of movement greater than that of his female counterparts. The film opens with and then repeats a sequence of images representing his road trip to his father's home. These emphasise not only the beauty of the Turkish countryside but also Nejat's pleasure at passing through it. Despite this apparent gender distinction, however, as a whole *Auf der anderen Seite* can be said to steer a path between some of the more extreme positions taken by a number of the other films considered here. Unlike Arslan in *Der schöne Tag*, he insists on the continued relevance of a bi-cultural heritage to constructions of 'hyphenated' identities in contemporary Germany but, in contrast to his own and Arslan's earlier films, he does not depict it as leading to almost inevitable social exclusion and/or rigid and limiting conceptions of gender and sexual norms. On the contrary, freedom of movement across national, gender and generational boundaries and the greatest possible freedom of choice in the construction of identity are advocated in this film as a way of overcoming the limitations of binary understandings of gender, sexuality and ethnicity.

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