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The postmigrant condition in Thomas Arslan's Berlin Trilogy

In recent years, the concept of “postmigration” has emerged to describe and to make sense of new ways of living the migratory processes and the consequences of those processes on the second and third generation of migrants. The notion of postmigrant seeks to develop a new perspective on transformations caused by migration, going beyond confining and essentializing concepts. This perspective also seeks to overcome the binary distinction and the “demarcation-line” between the migrant and non-migrant, going beyond the widespread use of the migratory as a demarcation line.

The concepts of postmigrant or postmigrant condition are, in my view, a very productive framework for reading Thomas Arslan's Berlin Trilogy, providing new perspectives on migration and its social and cultural consequences, and thereby new perspectives on culture and society at large. This set of films also called “Migrant Trilogy” (1996-2001) blurs the boundaries constructed by the so-called “Gastarbeiter-Kino” of the Seventies and Eighties, moving beyond essentializing categorisations of nationality or ethnicity, and thus transforming national stories into transnational and transcultural narratives. Drawing on recent theoretical approaches to post-migration, my paper will focus on the narrative and visual strategies of Thomas Arslan's cinema to represent aesthetically the experience of living the transcultural post-migrant condition.

Keywords: German cinema; boundaries; postmigration; transculturality; transnational narratives

Intensified migration, globalization, and generalized mobility have prompted a reconfiguration of the ways in which identity is experienced

as well as the way in which the protagonists of population flows regard their allegiance to locality. The Humanities and Social Sciences have been paying increasing attention to the transformative impact of migration on contemporary society as a whole, and to the fact that migration involves not only people, but also ideas, cultures, religions and art, as well as to the changing notion of migration and migrants. In the past, migrants were often regarded as uprooting themselves from their home country, then facing the challenges of resettling in and assimilating to the host country. The word migration evoked images of permanent rupture and uprootedness, as well as the abandonment of old cultural practices and the painful learning of a new language and culture. But as recent research persuasively argues, these earlier concepts of migration no longer suffice, since they imply or generate polarization or antagonisms. Furthermore, they do not encompass the experience of the second or even third generation of migrants, which is significantly different from the migratory experience of their parents.

In recent years, the concept of “postmigration” has emerged to describe and to make sense of new ways of living the migratory processes and the consequences of those processes on the second and third generation of migrants.¹ The notions of postmigrant, postmigrant society and postmigrant condition open up new perspectives on transformations caused by migration, going beyond confining and essentializing concepts, which as Roger Bromley (2017: 37) points out, have an “othering effect”. As Bromley convincingly argues, “Postmigration is a useful concept for exploring the conflicts and contradictions, the dialectic of belonging and unbelonging, and the split subjectivities which, in many cases, are a feature of postmigrant belonging” (2017: 36).

Likewise, the German social-scientist Naika Foroutan argues in favor of this theoretical framework for analyzing transformations in migrant impacted societies. The post-migrant perspective seeks to overcome the binary distinction and the “demarcation-line” between

¹ The term has been developed and operationalized across the social sciences (Foroutan 2019: 152) but has been adopted by artists and scholars both in German and English (Schramm, Pultz, Petersen 2019).

the migrant and non-migrant at a time when migration and mobility constitute everyday normality. Moreover, this new paradigm does not imply forgetting about migration, but rather calls for a different analytical angle to describe migration (Foroutan 2019: 149).

As the theatre director Shermin Langhoff (2009) argues in relation to the Arts, and more specifically in relation to “postmigrant theatre”, it had become a matter of urgency to move away from the former labels of guestworkers, migrants and foreigners, insisting on the overall plurality of life-stories and backgrounds as a fundamental condition of modern society and the social and cultural interaction among all its members: “It makes sense that their stories need to be told differently and apart from those that have actually migrated, hence ‘post-migrant’” (Langhoff 2009: 27). Thus, the postmigrant perspective necessarily goes beyond the widespread use of the migratory as a demarcation line and “describes cultural, ethnic, religious and national diversity as normality” (Canan and Foroutan, 2016: III, 15). At least since Langhoff’s use of the concept with reference to theatre, scholars from Arts and Humanities have been employing ‘postmigration’ as an analytical frame to make sense of the general impact that earlier and ongoing migration movements have had on society, and on culture and the arts (Schramm, Pultz Moslund, Petersen 2009).

The concepts of postmigration and postmigrant condition provide, in my view, a very productive framework to read Thomas Arslan’s Berlin Trilogy. The concept, as both a literal description of a status and a critique of the terms such as migrant or person from a foreign background, helps clarify new perspectives on movement, mobility and transit as well as new ways of coping with change and uncertainty beyond the confinement of the term migration. This set of films, also called “Migrant Trilogy”, includes *Geschwister – Kardesler* (*Brothers and Sisters*, 1996/1997),² *Dealer* (1999) and *Der schöne Tag / A Fine*

² The original title underscores what in general has been called “the double occupancy” inherent to Turkish German cinema. See Elsaesser 2005. This double entitlement may be read as a strategy to bring the past into the present, but as I will argue further on, this memory will be deleted or at least negotiated. On the presence of siblings in Berlin School films, see R. F. Cook, L. Koepnick, K. Kopp and Brad Prager 243-4, but it is not easy to read this presence as nostalgia and if this were the

Day (2001). These consecutive films are connected by the fact that the main protagonists are always young people of Turkish origin, who were born or grew up in Germany.³ Each of the three films tells a self-contained story but the characters turn up in all of them time and again. Despite the characters' Turkish origin, their ethnic identity is not the dramatic core of the film narrative. The problems they are facing, their feelings and emotions have a universality⁴ that goes beyond ethnic or national identity. Moreover, the recurrent stereotypification that characterizes earlier filmmaking, usually authored by German directors, is absent from Arslan's work. In fact, Thomas Arslan marked the end of the so-called Gastarbeiter-Kino (guestworker cinema) of the Seventies and Eighties, moving beyond essentializing categorisations of nationality or ethnicity and transforming national stories into transnational/ transcultural narratives. Arslan, among other filmmakers from a migratory background, paves the way for a postmigrant and cosmopolitan cinema featuring a culturally hybrid Germany, that has Berlin and Kreuzberg as its centrifugal and symbolic point, but which wants to represent or to depict transcultural practices and subjectivities as well as fluid and shifting identities, thereby reaching transnational and transcultural audiences.⁵

case, nostalgia would mean the loss of affection and security, eventually associated with a broad sentiment of loss and displacement.

³ Thomas Arslan was born in Germany in 1967, the son of a German woman and a Turkish guestworker. He is considered one of the founders of the so-called Berliner-Schule/ Berlin School, briefly defined by Möller and Wood 2007: 40) as "a low-key cinema, devoted to the real as well as to realism, of a rare formal rigour and a stubborn tenderness" (quoted by Th. Schick 2010: 145, "A "Nouvelle Vague Allemande"? Thomas Arslan's films in the context of the Berlin School) in *Acta Uni.Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, 3 (2010) 143-155.

⁴ Decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo has coined the terms "diversality" and pluriversality" to signal his ambition to rethink universality through diversity: "Diversality should be the relentless practice of critical and dialogical cosmopolitanism rather than the blueprint of a future and ideal society projected from a single point of view (that of the abstract universality)" W. Mignolo 2002: 90 f.

⁵ Among other scholars, Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel offer a brief and useful overview over the area of Turkish German (Film) Studies, its intersecting fields and emerging paradigms. I would stress a concise summary of the three distinct historical periods and critical paradigms of the area, from the essentialized

Brothers and Sisters/Siblings (1997) is the first part of Arslan's Berlin Trilogy. As the title suggests, the film tells the story of three siblings (two brothers and one sister, all teenagers) who live with their Turkish father and German mother in Berlin, in the Turkish district of Kreuzberg. Despite their solid familial bonds, the three siblings approach their identity as youths of Turkish origin very differently. Erol, Ahmed and Leyla have different choices and similar obstacles in their coming of age, and different perspectives for the future. While one of the brothers, Ahmet, is preparing for University, the eldest, Erol, is considering returning to Turkey to do his military service, since he doesn't see a future for himself in Berlin ("Was soll ich denn hier?" What shall I do here?). In turn, Leyla, the sister, suffers from the obstacles put forward by their authoritarian father, apparently echoing the main topic of the earlier Turkish German Cinema, the so-called "cinema of the affected" or "cinema of duty"⁶. But unlike the victims of the "Gastarbeiter Kino", Leyla is able to get around their father's blind decisions or rules and to escape the claustrophobic space, or the "mental ghetto" as Göktürk puts it, of the first wave of Turkish German cinema. Indeed, the problems and characters addressed by this generation of German-Turkish directors can no longer be reduced to the integration problems of their parents, in consonance to new ways of living and new ways of shaping identity in a tendentially postmigrant society. The balancing act between familial constraint and urban socialization has been retained, but has moved into the background.

Erol is on the move throughout the film, seeking to make himself at home in the world – either the German or/and the Turkish world. That is the reason why he decides to do military service in Turkey.⁷ It is not a patriotic impulse or the sense of belonging exclusively to a nation or an ethnic community. It is rather a way of coping with his need to reframe his identity in face of his different art of belonging – a "hybrid

representations of Turks as mute victims to a cosmopolitan approach to migration and immigration beyond Germany (Hake & Mennel 2012 :1-16).

⁶ See Sarita Malik 1996 and Rob Burns 2007a, 2007.

⁷ Curiously Arslan's father also returned to Turkey to do military service. During this time (1967-71), Thomas Arslan attended the elementary school in his parents' home country.

belonging”, since belonging is fundamental to identity formation. As Roger Bromley asserts, “the dialectics of belonging and not belonging shape the identities and agency of migrants and their descendants in ways that contest the locally available models and open up the possibilities of new affiliations” (Bromley 2000: 121). Indeed, the protagonists’ mobility reflects the search for stable identity and belonging, which it is not easy to accommodate in a society in change. Sometimes the continuous mobility and almost obsessive quest is lived with pleasure – “the pleasure of hybridity” as Deniz Göktürk calls it,⁸ sometimes this search is translated into a split subjectivity and ongoing movement along or through liminal spaces, like subway stations and their long corridors and stairs, city streets, cafés and parks. The predominance of non-places in the Berlin Trilogy signals both that identity in transit and the solitude of that process. Furthermore, the intense mobility may be read as the materialization of the “endemic uncertainty” of our liquid modern society, borrowing Bauman’s perspective in *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Bauman 2005).

As Marc Augé argues, “The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude” (Augé 1995: 103). It is a kind of disquiet, uprootedness and anxiety that characterizes a society in changing in the turn of the century, both the post-reunification German and the more and more heterogeneous European society. But it may be enlightening to consider Katja Nicodemus’s point of view, which implies not only the idea of inclusiveness but also connectivity: “In *Siblings (Brothers and Sister)*, [...] the camera complicity follows the brothers Erol and Ahmed on their paths through Berlin’s Kreuzberg neighborhood. It is precisely through the conscious concentration on the perspective of the kids that the paths through the neighborhood come to be expressed in a “cruising” sense for life, which can no longer

⁸ Deniz Göktürk, *Turkish delight – German fright. Unsettling oppositions in transnational cinema*, at <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/mediated.pdf>.

On the notion of “pleasures of hybridity”, see Sarita Malik, “Beyond ‘The Cinema of Duty’? The Pleasures of Hybridity: Black British Film of the 1980s and 1990s”, in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*. London: Cassell, pp. 202-215.

be defined as German, Turkish or German-Turkish. This communal walking through the city quite naturally ensures the development of a friendship and the symbolic appropriation of a terrain" (Nicodemus 2008: 467).

The second film of the Trilogy, *Dealer* (1999), depicts a static, closed and almost unrecognizable Berlin: anonymous residential buildings, run-down industrial spaces, dark entrances in old buildings and in contrast to this dull city, the bright colours of the parks. According to the minimalist language of the Berlin School, the film describes the psychological state and the erratic path of its main character, Can, who earns his money by dealing drugs on the streets of Berlin. He is the father of a little girl and his girlfriend Jale wants him to stop his criminal activities. She is afraid that he will get caught by the police. Can promises her he will change his life, but he doesn't have the opportunity or is unable to do so. Finally, the police put a stop to his activity and he is sentenced to prison for four years. As Arslan confirms, Can finds himself in a state of confusion, restlessness, disorientation, which makes it impossible for him to make his choice and change his desperate situation. Moreover, the precarity of the family bonds, Can's own fragility and loneliness displayed by means of insistent close-ups and medium shots, make it impossible to rebuild a future, but even though we can't read his situation as the result of his ethnicity. On the contrary, nothing is said about his citizenship or ethnic background but only about his state of mind, his psychic disposition, his insecurity, helplessness and frustration about the future, which permeates different ethnicities or religions and is more and more generational and global.

In fact, Arslan's main characters don't resist incorporation into German society and they don't get caught up in the conflict between Turkish values and the German Culture. And although they do not embody the pain of assimilation and incompatible antagonism, they may still be victims of confrontations in a discriminatory society, that it is not yet able to overcome old stereotypes. There is a scene in *Brothers and Sisters*, that displays and deconstructs this identity assignment and stereotypification. In this scene, the police enter a pool hall where Erol, Ahmed and their Turkish friends are, and for no apparent reason apart from the characters' ethnicity, demand identification documents and

search the young men with evident violence. While their belongings are being checked, the Turkish boys are aggressively told to remain in silence and only speak when asked to do so, which they accept without any kind of resistance. But the police don't find anything suspicious. As postmigrants as well as citizens in a society in political, social and cultural transformation, they have to cope with old stereotypes and at the same time to find or experience new forms of being in the world. Even the marginality and criminality in which Can is involved is not necessarily a consequence of his ethnic identity.⁹ It is the result of his postmigrant condition, his displacement, alienation and the absence of perspectives potentiated both by his multiple identity and multiple simultaneous affiliations. As Bromley states, "Postmigrancy cannot be celebrated or romanticized as a "new belonging" as it is an agonistic process, a struggle on several fronts" (2017: 37-38). The emptiness and loneliness, metaphorically expressed in the images of the Berlin streets, are both the reflection of Can's state of mind and of the society he lives in.

A Fine Day is the last and the brightest film of the Trilogy. It is literally a day in the life of the 21-year-old Deniz, who aims to become an actress and meanwhile makes her living by dubbing movies. During this day she strolls through Berlin, breaks up with her boyfriend, visits her mother, meets her sister, auditions for a job and gets to know Diego, a young Portuguese man living in Berlin. She lives alone in her own apartment, which may be read as the successful path of Leyla from *Brothers and Sister*. The fact that Deniz's role is performed by the same artist, strengthens this line of thought. Her daily life is partly spent in public transport, but nothing is said or shown about the centrality of movement between locations in Deniz's daily routine. The viewers are left alone in their reflexions and eventually their empathy, but they are challenged to fill in the near silence of the spaces and the blanks that the filmmaker leaves unresolved.¹⁰ In fact, Deniz is constantly out and

⁹ Nevertheless, Guido Rings (2008) argues that the two brothers are still representatives of a ghetto-culture and only the last film of the Trilogy, *A Fine Day*, would present a convincing transcultural protagonist.

¹⁰ In fact, the Berlin School filmmakers and their restrained acting (visual) language don't make it easy for the viewers. The actors, frequently young and not well-known to the audience, don't show their emotional state and don't display much

about but, unlike Leyla in *Brothers and Sisters*, she is able to move freely between a number of different zones in the city. This persistent mobility, that stands in opposition to the entrapped Turkish woman of the films of the first phase, may be read with the help of Tim Cresswell's point of view as flow, becoming, change, and as a "form of relative freedom", and a break from earlier confined spaces and time (Cresswell 2006: 56-57). Moreover, the intense mobility represents metaphorically or materializes both the performative dimension of migration as well as the performance inherent to the identity construction itself. Through Deniz's movement, Berlin is depicted as more fluid and connected than in the previous two films and much less a site of conflict or confrontation. However, her wanderings or walks through the city reflect a mixture of determination and insecurity. As Jessica Gallagher (2006: 350) also points out, Deniz's wanderings appear to reflect an inner unrest and a search for something undefined. Although Deniz doesn't embody a female flâneur, as sometimes the critics argue, but rather a kind of restlessness, disquiet and some kind of ambition. She is not the Baudelaire's moving passionate observer. Deniz doesn't look at the city, in order to discover it, she simply looks ahead, with determination and at least security about her own path.

Against Gallagher's point of view, I don't read Deniz's wanderings as disengagement nor dissatisfaction, but rather as unrestlessness and self-determination. One of the film's initial scenes highlights Deniz's determination and ambition. In this scene, Deniz, the German Turkish girl, meets her boyfriend, Jan, in a café. The core of the conversation is about Jan's future. Jan, who apparently has German citizenship, talks about the very serious issue of quitting university. He sees no future for his studies and cannot stand his career-oriented fellow students. Deniz can't understand Jan's plan and accuses him of always giving up too fast in difficult obstacles/situations. Once again, in Arslan's Berlin Trilogy, a young man, this time not a Turkish-German, is giving up his goals, because the future is uncertain and studying a waste of time. In this way, *A Fine Day* revolves also around precarious and labile

about their inner lives, and as Thomas Schick (2010: 145) underscores: "They act cold-hearted".

relationships, which according to the filmic point of view, characterizes the contemporary society: “Everybody is breaking up, getting new partners, it’s all so random” argues Deniz. Moreover, love is an almost impossible sentiment, difficult to live through and to define. The talk between Deniz and the university professor is a kind of metadiscourse, on love, for sure, but mainly on the interpersonal relationship in the filmic narrative, or putting it in Zygmunt Bauman’s words, on the “uncanny frailty of human bonds” (*Liquid Love*, 2005) in our liquid modern society. Feelings are easily disposable, as is shown by Deniz, who in one single day breaks up with her boyfriend, because, apparently, he is always seducing other women, while she has just eyed up a boy, on the way to the date with her boyfriend, as if, quoting Bauman, “Being on the move [...] becomes a must” (Bauman 2003: 17). The ease of disengagement and termination-on-demand, the falling in and out of love seems to come the new generation all too easily (Bauman 2003: 18).

In Thomas Arslan’s films we find an example of the ways in which German film “must be seen increasingly within a transnational rather than national context, both with regard to the manner in which films are produced and the stories they choose to tell. We may argue, that the so-called Turkish turn gave way to the “transnational turn”: “Even a cursory look at recent publications confirms the transnational as a key category in explaining the new cinema of hybridity that emerged in the Berlin Republic and the New Europe of the 1990s and that today finds privileged expression in Turkish German cinema” (Hake and Mennel 2012: 11). In fact, Arslan’s film narratives are less about the marginalization of migrants and the victimisation of Turkish woman or the German Turkish community than about homelessness and emptiness felt by women as well by men in our postmigrant world – or put in other words, ways of feeling and ways of seeing have crossed borders paving the way to transcultural audiences. In my view, Thomas Arslan aims to deconstruct stereotypical perceptions of ethnic, national or religious identity, by providing points of identification to a transcultural community, who will be able to feel empathy with that sense of displacement and the anxiety of belonging – even when the director avoids deliberately the overacting and the viewer’s emotional contagion.

Surely Arslan Berlin's Trilogy has at its centre a hybrid Germaness, after a long period of migrants influx, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Reunification. However, Arslan's films also reflect on the transnational experience of hybridization, displacement, uprootedness and alienation that not rarely come with migration, postmigration and last but not least, with postmodernity or our "liquid modernity". Here I borrow Katja Nicodemus's words:

This is no film for *multikulti* labels, not for hymns about the New German Cinema. But one that, with its hip T-shirts, minor cultural abjections, and a perfectly bilingual heroine, narrates from a perspective of a globalized world affected by migration movements, a world that has become so infinitely normal that one can no longer say a new word about it. (2008: 468)

Before I conclude, allow me some words on Arslan's representation strategies.

Arslan's film narratives, as in general Berlin School "counter-cinema" (Abel 2008), avoid creating emotional narratives commonly triggered by the plot, the acting style or the diegetic and non-diegetic music. The restrained emotions they evoke in the viewing audience, potentiated by the slow-pace and long takes, leave the audience time to their own reflections and to follow slowly the camera's gaze. Arslan observes, describes and narrates slowly, allowing the viewers to apprehend the space the characters inhabit or traverse, often a metaphorical space, and to build up their own meaning of the filmic narrative. At the same time, he documents Berlin in the 1990s, a time when the city changed radically. Arslan represents aesthetically the political, social and urban transformation of Post-Wall Berlin into a culturally hybrid capital, continually highlighting the presence, I would say, increasingly conflict-free presence of the Turkish culture on the Berlin cityscape.

To conclude, thanks to the second and third-generation of Turkish German filmmakers the aporias of migration have been regarded since then from a more dynamics lens, that includes complex and plural experiences and their different stages. Thomas Arslan, like Fatih Akin or Buket Alakus, among others, can stand for a much broader film-making

as well as film-viewing community that crosses cultural and hyphenates ethnic borders. As Thomas Elsaesser (2005: 27) rightly argues “the forms of othering” typical of a previous period may be in the process of being superseded, giving rise to a boundary-drawing approach and a general recognition of mutual interference and mutual responsibility as necessary forms of a new solidarity and sense of co-existence, in contrast to the cinema of the first generation, which constructed around the idea of incompatible antagonisms.

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