

From Turkish greengrocer to drag queen: reassessing patriarchy in recent Turkish–German coming-of-age films

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Abstract

This article explores the critical reassessment of one particularly prevalent ethnic stereotype in Turkish–German cinema: the stereotype of the oppressive Turkish patriarch. Comparing Yasemin (1988), a much-cited, early coming-of-age film made by German film-maker Hark Bohm, with three recent features made by young Turkish–German film-makers – Sülbiye Günar’s Karamuk (2002), Ayse Polat’s Tour Abroad and Züli Aladag’s controversial Rage (2006) – it examines father–daughter and father–son relationships and traces how these films reaffirm or invert the clichéd image of the domineering Turkish father who is out of touch with German majority culture. Drawing on Kobena Mercer’s concept of the dialogic imagination, the article investigates whether these cinematic representations of the vilified or idealized father promote social change through ‘a multiplication of critical dialogues’ or whether they simply reiterate dominant ‘discourses of domination’ (Mercer 2003).

Keywords

Turkish–German cinema
coming-of-age film
diasporic family
patriarchy
dialogic imagination
diaspora cinema

Some of the most prominent directors of the New Turkish–German Cinema have put the destabilization and critical investigation of ethnic stereotypes of ‘the Turk’, or rather, the Turkish–German migrant, high on their artistic agenda. In fact, Fatih Akin, currently the most high-profile of the ‘Young Turks’, who started his career in the film industry as an actor, decided to make his own films because he was no longer prepared to the play the ‘stereotype Turk’, that is the Turk who is either a victim or a social problem (cited in Dehn 1999). By scripting and directing his own films, including such success stories as *Kurz und schmerzlos / Short Sharp Shock* (1998), *Im Juli / In July* (2000) and *Gegen die Wand / Head-On* (2004) he hoped to avoid these stereotypes (arguably creating other ones instead) and to move films about migrants out of the ‘guest-worker niche’ and into the mainstream of German film culture (Akin 2004).¹ Thomas Arslan, best known for his Berlin Kreuzberg Trilogy, expresses a similar disaffection with clichéd portrayals of Turks. By releasing Turkish characters from ‘the burden of representation’ (Mercer 2003: 251),² he endeavours to utilize cinema as a space for shifting public perception: ‘If it is already no longer possible to avoid clichés altogether, one can perhaps attempt to pass beyond them, that is to say, to try and use such images as the point of departure in order, gradually to dismantle them in such a way as that

1 The term ‘guest-worker’ (*Gastarbeiter*) refers to labour migrants who were ‘invited’ by the West German government during the economic boom years of the 1950s and 1960s. Like ‘guests’ they were expected to stay only temporarily but many, in particular, Turkish labour migrants were joined by their families and stayed for good. Films about Turkish and other labour migrants were first made by German film-makers during the 1970s and, from the 1980s on, also by Turkish film-makers living and working in

Germany. Thematically, these early films focused on inhuman living and working conditions of foreigners in Germany (e.g. the documentary *Ganz unten / Lowest of the Low*, Jörg Gförer, 1986) and the victimisation of Turkish women (*Shirin's Hochzeit / Shirin's Wedding*, Helma Sanders Brahm, 1976). Many of these films were gloomy 'social problem' films making a moral appeal for more tolerance and compassion towards foreigners. Except for Rainer Werner Fassbinder's art house classic *Angst essen Seele auf / Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) about the unlikely romance between a young Moroccan labour migrant and a much older German woman, films about guest workers and ethnic minorities occupied a small niche in the market.

2 Mercer's much-quoted concept of the burden of representation includes the tacit assumption that the black or other ethnic minority individual represented in a particular film 'can be regarded as representative of every black person's perception of reality' (2003: 251). In addition, it raises the expectation that every ethnic minority film-maker will make films about their ethnic constituency.

3 All German quotations cited in

something else becomes visible' (Arslan cited in Burns 2007: 372). Similarly, Sülbiye Günar, whose debut film *Karamuk* premiered on the German television channel WDR in 2004, stated in an interview that she was determined to avoid any essentializing notions of Turkishness:

I would be extremely pleased if [audiences] were relieved to find that, at last, *Karamuk* is a film which is not about a Turkish greengrocer and his wife with a headscarf and not about drug dealers in kebab-huts, but about Turkish fellow citizens, who have been living in Germany for decades and who grew up here. Citizens, who speak almost more German to each other at home than Turkish and who, just like Johanna, have their own individual identity and do not have to discuss whether they are German or Turkish or something else.

(Günar 2002)³

Günar's list of ethnic stereotypes succinctly summarizes the shift from narratives focusing on the alterity of Turkish immigrants to narratives about criminalized Turks. While the 'cinema of alterity' denotes primarily 'social problem' films made by indigenous German film-makers who approach the Turkish 'other' with a social worker ethos (see Burns 2006; Seeßlen 2000) and express 'a sense of moral indignation and compassion' (Fenner 2006: 26) for marginalized and exploited guest workers and oppressed, victimized Turkish women, the 'cinema of the affected' (Burns 2006: 133), associated in particular with Tevfik Baser's early films *40 Quadratmeter Deutschland / Forty Square Metres of Germany* (1986) and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies / Farewell to a False Paradise* (1989), follows a similar narrative formula but emphasizes the authenticity of personal experience. Whereas in the German press and on television, Turkish men have been collectively typecast as violent gang leaders and criminals for decades (see Butterwegge 2007; Farrokhzad 2006), in cinematic representations, this form of 'self-othering' only gained wide currency in the late 1990s with the emergence of the 'Young Turks' and their films *Short Sharp Shock, April Kinder / April Children* (Yüksel Yavuz, 1998), *Dealer* (Thomas Arslan, 1999), *Anam – Meine Mutter / Anam – My Mother* (Buket Alakus, 2001) and *Wut / Rage* (Züli Aladag, 2006). At the same time, indigenous German film-makers reinforced this new cliché of the criminalized Turk in films such as *Ghettokids* (Christian Wagner, 2002) and *Knallhart / Tough Enough* (Detlef Buck, 2006).⁴

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001 and subsequent attacks on a commuter train in Madrid and on the Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh, ascribed to Muslim fundamentalist organizations, have had a significant impact on ethnic stereotyping of Turks in the German media. 'At least in West Germany', Christoph Butterwegge notes in *Die Zeit*, 'the Arab or Turkish Muslim has since replaced the south-European "guest worker" and the black asylum seeker, until then the most prevalent stereotypes of foreigners' (Butterwegge 2007). Since 9/11, the criminalization of Turks has become politically and ideologically charged and has become part and parcel of discourses on terrorism and Islam. On account of his Muslim faith, in particular, the Turkish

man has become more suspect than ever before: as a possible ‘sleeper’, he poses a threat to security and as a Muslim husband or father, to the values of Western liberal democracy. According to Butterwegge, this explains why forced marriages and honour killings – both symbols of the clash of civilizations – are receiving extensive media coverage.

However, remarkably, this ‘Islamization’ of the ethnic stereotyping of Turks is only just beginning to filter down into recent cinematic representations. In fact, it seems as if, on the whole, Turkish–German film-makers were making an effort to counterbalance these dominant media discourses by featuring ‘enlightened’ Turks or those who are ‘acceptably “German”’ (Teraoka 1989: 110) and whose ethnic background constitutes neither baggage nor the films’ central thematic concern. This is not to say that the portrayals of Turks are predominantly positive. One need only think of Fatih Akin’s award-winning film *Head-On*, hailed as a new departure of Turkish–German cinema – and yet, we come across the age-old story: Sibel’s brothers threaten to kill her because she has dishonoured the family by pursuing an extra-marital affair, which leads to her husband accidentally killing his rival (see Suner 2005; Berghahn 2006). And what about the ultimate screen villain Can in Aladag’s controversial television film *Rage*, a Turkish gang leader who befriends and bullies Felix, then terrorizes Felix’s German middle-class family and is eventually killed by Felix’s father in a desperate attempt to protect his family?

Ethnic stereotyping is ‘predicated on the reduction of complex cultural codes to easily consumable visual and verbal clues’ whereby ‘non-white cultures and characters [are represented] as static and one-dimensional’ (Wiegman 1998: 161). Moreover, in so far as stereotyping invariably involves simplification it goes hand-in-hand with the creation of binary oppositions through which the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is charged with an ‘implicit or explicit moral assessment concerning the group’s inherent essence’ (Wiegman 1998: 161). Normally, the positive pole is assigned to hegemonic white culture, whereas the negative pole to the racialized or ethnicized other. As will be illustrated later, *Rage*, a film by a Turkish–German director, differs from the widely used conventions of ethnic stereotyping since it problematizes the social norms of Germans as much as it probes those of Turkish culture. In fact, *Rage* is not the only film to dislodge the Manichaean oppositions that underpinned earlier depictions of Turkish–German culture on German screens in the 1970s and 1980s.

In this article, I propose to explore how one particularly prevalent stereotype – that of the oppressive Turkish patriarch – has been reassessed in recent Turkish–German cinema. Focusing on coming-of-age narratives, I will consider the representation of father–daughter and father–son relationships, a theme which has received comparatively little attention in Turkish–German film productions since the 1990s.

Coming-of-age films are about the transition from childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood.⁵ What distinguishes coming-of-age films set in a multicultural milieu from those set in a milieu in which race and ethnicity are normalized – and thus invisible and, presumably, socially irrelevant – is that they revolve around their protagonists’ ambivalent search for ethnic and cultural belonging. In a number of

this article were translated into English by the author.

- 4 Unless otherwise stated, all films referenced in this article were produced in Germany.
- 5 For a discussion of the genre conventions of coming-of-age films made by migrant or diasporic film-makers, see Berghahn (in press).

6 Aladag's début feature *Elefantenherz / Elephant Heart* (2002) and *Kebab Connection* (Anno Saul, 2004) are additional examples of this trend. For a discussion of Ayse Polat's experimental films see Randall Halle's article 'Experiments in Turkish-German Film-making' in this volume.

Turkish–German coming-of-age films, this search is imagined as inter-generational conflict within the family, which becomes a privileged site for the clash of civilizations. In particular, more recent coming-of-age films tell a different story, focusing on teenage protagonists who negotiate successfully between their Turkish heritage and German society. The 'voluntary affiliations' made by these second- or third-generation adolescents result in the formation of new communities and hybrid identities in which descent and tradition ('involuntary' affiliations) are of no greater importance than those elective affinities that transcend ethnic and racial boundaries (see Hollinger 2000: 7). In the adolescents' quest for identity and belonging, father figures play a crucial role. Comparing the early coming-of-age film *Yasemin* (1988), scripted and directed by German film-maker Hark Bohm, with three recent films by contemporary Turkish–German film-makers, Sülbiye Günar's *Karamuk*, Ayse Polat's *Auslandstournee / Tour Abroad* (2000) and Züli Aladag's *Rage*, a number of remarkable developments and inversions in the young protagonists' choices and in the depiction of patriarchy become apparent.⁶

The stereotype of the oppressive patriarch and the clash of civilizations

Yasemin 'has been multiply cited as an emphatic milestone in German–Turkish understanding' (Göktürk 2002: 251) and as a paradigmatic example of a coming-of-age film set in a Turkish–German milieu. Yet in reality it invokes every conceivable cliché of traditional Turkish Muslim patriarchy, which has dominated the German media for decades. These clichés have become particularly virulent again in the wake of 9/11 and have resulted in the Islamization of Turkish stereotypes. The widespread media coverage in 2005 of the honour killing of Hatun Sürücü in Berlin, a 23-year-old Turkish woman, who was shot dead by her brothers while waiting at a bus stop because her way of life was incompatible with what her family deemed appropriate (see Lau 2005), illustrates what is at stake. Aged 15, Hatun had been forced to marry one of her cousins back in Turkey, but together with her baby returned to Germany when the marriage broke down. Her desire for independence, her pursuit of a career, her refusal to wear a headscarf and her alleged promiscuity was perceived as a violation of the code of honour of Turkish Muslim patriarchy. 'The purity of the woman is the honour of the man', states a Turkish proverb, which is cited by the cultural anthropologist Katherine Pratt Ewing in her article 'Between cinema and social work: Turkish women and the displeasures of hybridity' (2006: 265). In the eyes of the Sürücü family, Hatun had behaved like a German, that is, impure woman. Honourable behaviour means chastity before marriage and bowing to male supremacy. Thus, the control of women's lives and their sexuality is crucially linked to the public and social identity of Turkish men. Ewing makes the point that Turkish men in diaspora are even more likely to resort to draconian means to guard their honour since the experience of migration, usually from rural Anatolia to Germany's urban centres has resulted in a profound destabilization of their identity. Thus, the culture conflict is not simply one between Turkish and German society, between Islam and secularism, but

one between rural and urban culture. Moreover, working in low-profile jobs and being marginalized in German society creates a sense of humiliation, for which Turkish men overcompensate by reasserting their power in the family context. Whilst second- or third-generation Turkish women tend to welcome the opportunities Western society affords them, their Turkish fathers (or husbands) feel threatened in their masculinity and struggle to re-define their identity in the new social context. All these factors contribute to the men's insecurity and extreme female oppression (see Weisner 2005; Kelek 2006).

Given the close link between female purity and male honour, the media depiction of Turkish-German family life is gendered: 'the adolescent girl who is expected to wear a headscarf, pulled out of school at a young age, kept close to home, and forced to marry a relative from Turkey, became a powerful symbol of cultural difference and the failure of the Turks to embrace assimilation' (Ewing 2006: 269). Thus, in coming-of-age narratives, it is usually adolescent daughters rather than sons who fall victim to the power of the patriarch – as is the case in *Yasemin*.

Hark Bohm's well-intentioned and seemingly liberal-minded film has been analyzed in numerous publications (see Kühn 1995; Göktürk 2000; Burns 2006, 2007) and has enjoyed considerable visibility around the world featuring 'on almost every German-Turkish film programme and [being] circulated by the Goethe Institutes even in Thailand and India' (Göktürk 2000: 68). *Yasemin* tells the story of a 17-year-old Turkish greengrocer's daughter in Hamburg-Altona, whose father Yusuf turns from a loving and reasonably liberal father into a despotic family patriarch when the family honour is violated because his elder daughter, Emine, is ostensibly not a virgin when she gets married.⁷ However, *Yasemin* finds out that the real reason for her brother-in-law's failure to produce the required proof of his wife's virginity, the traditional bloodstained bridal sheet, was his own impotence. She confronts her father with the truth, thereby openly challenging the archaic principles on which Turkish Muslim patriarchy is based and which inevitably put the blame for a man's lack of virility or even his sexual transgressions on the woman. Yusuf instantly puts *Yasemin* under house arrest and arranges for her deportation to Turkey, allegedly in order to protect her from the corrupting influences of a country of 'infidels'. Cousin Dursun and *Yasemin*'s father take her to some remote place where Turkish men, who are supposed to arrange her onward journey to Turkey, are dancing round a camp fire like gypsies – a clichéd depiction of the exotic other. In the last minute, *Yasemin*'s German boyfriend, Jan, appears on his motorbike and elopes with her. Despite having been 'rescued' from the oppressive rule of Turkish patriarchy, she mourns the loss of her family and tears are streaming down her face as she holds on to Jan on the motorbike. As Deniz Göktürk and other critics of *Yasemin* have noted, the film's stance vis-à-vis multiculturalist integration is highly problematic. It reinforces the dichotomy of a liberal and liberalizing Western culture which is contrasted with an oppressive, backward Turkish-Muslim culture and draws on the common fantasy of 'victimised Turkish women, who, especially when young and beautiful, need to be rescued from their patriarchal community' (Göktürk 2000: 69).

7 Both Kühn (1995) and Burns (2007) draw attention to the implausibility of the film's plot, which makes *Yasemin* an entirely unrealistic role model of cultural integration.

Yasemin with its rigid binarisms is an illustrative example of what Kobena Mercer – building on Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism – has called the ‘*monologic tendency*’. In his article ‘Diaspora culture and the dialogic imagination’, he contrasts the monologic imagination underpinning hegemonic representational strategies, which typically homogenize and totalize the experience of ethnic minorities in diaspora, such as Black people in Britain and the Turkish diaspora in Germany, with a ‘*dialogic tendency* which is responsive to the diverse and complex qualities of [. . .] our differentiated specificity as a diaspora people’ (Mercer 2003: 255). According to Bakhtin and Mercer, ‘the dialogic principle’ entails ‘the possibility of social change [which] is prefigured in the collective consciousness by the multiplication of critical dialogues’ (Bakhtin cited in Mercer 2003: 255), whereas the monologic principle inherent in dominant discourses resists change since these dominant discourses are actually ‘discourses of domination’ (Mercer 2003: 258).

To put it simply, in *Yasemin* Western culture wins hands down, whereas more recently Turkish–German directors have begun to reassess critically the alleged superiority of the indigenous German family – and found it lacking. Lacking in fathers as such, or in fathers who provide adequate role models of masculinity. In some cases, this gives Turkish fathers or father figures the opportunity to excel. *Karamuk* and *Tour Abroad* are two coming-of-age narratives that depict unconventional, idealized Turkish fathers.

The nurturing Turkish father

Karamuk tells the story of 17-year-old Johanna, who lives with her single mother in Cologne. Her one ambition in life is to become a fashion designer but she needs to find the money to study in Paris. When her mother does not support her, Johanna approaches Peter, her mother’s ex-partner and the man whom she presumes to be her father. She soon learns that not the German Peter but a Turkish man named Cumhur is her biological father. He is the owner of an elegant Turkish restaurant. Without revealing her identity, Johanna finds work in the kitchen of Cumhur’s restaurant and befriends the Turkish chef. Determined to find the money to go to fashion school, she breaks into Cumhur’s safe – and gets caught by him. At first Cumhur is furious, but then his anger subsides and he is forgiving, generous and thoughtful. He explains to Johanna why he never got the chance to be the kind of father to her which he would have liked to be: Johanna’s mother never told him that she was expecting a baby from him, presumably because she did not want to marry him. So, Cumhur married a well-educated Turkish woman, Füssun, with whom he has two children and an exceptionally happy family life, which is contrasted with Johanna’s conflict-ridden and fragmented domestic background. The rebellious and unhappy Johanna soon learns to trust her new-found father, who instantly assumes a protective and nurturing role in her life, even integrating her to some extent in his perfect family life. It is Cumhur, rather than Johanna’s German mother or her ex-partner Peter, who provides Johanna with the financial means to study in Paris. His attitudes are as liberal as those of any well-educated Western man and are based on the acceptance of complete equality between the sexes. His social status – he is

the wealthy owner of a sophisticated restaurant (not a Turkish greengrocer or owner of a kebab shop), a luxurious home and an expensive car – is on a par with any German middle-class man. At the same time, he has not renounced his Turkish origins. In his restaurant, he employs exclusively Turks; his family home is a mixture of German interior design and Oriental opulence; Füssun and Cumhur speak Turkish and German with each other; and, like any self-respecting Turkish man, he is part of an all-male Turkish community, as a scene that shows him drinking tea in his office with other Turkish men indicates. Cumhur marks a dramatic departure from the cultural stereotype of earlier Turkish father figures. Like the good Black father in New Black Cinema, who comes deceptively close to the 'archetypal White Hollywood father' (Bruzzi 2005: 166), Cumhur represents the new Turkish man, being in effect an idealized cultural hybrid in which the German middle-class values of education, tolerance and material success are fused with Turkish family values (see Figure 1).

The pivotal moment in Johanna's hybrid identity formation is the moment when Cumhur lovingly accepts her as his daughter, taking her in his arms and under his wing – and this despite the fact that she has just tried to empty his safe. Johanna happily embraces her new Turkish–German identity: for the tenth-anniversary party of Cumhur's restaurant, themed One Thousand and One Nights, she designs contemporary Oriental costumes for Cumhur's daughters, learns a few words of Turkish. At the end of the film she embarks on a romance with Zervan, the young Turkish chef at the restaurant, before setting off on her journey to the Paris fashion school. Even though the film's final shot shows Johanna on the train, there is a suggestion that the romance that did not survive between Cumhur and Johanna's mother will blossom in their daughter's generation, implying that Turkish and German cultures have grown together.

Ayşe Polat's road movie *cum* coming-of-age film *Tour Abroad*, which has been compared to *Central Station* (Walter Salles, Brazil, 1998), *Kolya* (Jan Sverak, Czech Republic, 1997) and *Alice in the Cities* (Wim Wenders, 1974), is another film about a 'found father'. It sketches the development of an elective affinity between an 11-year-old girl and a Turkish would-be drag queen.



Figure 1: The idealized Turkish father Cumhur (Adnan Maral) and Johanna (Julia Mahnecke; photo courtesy of Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln).

Zeki, a 42-year-old Turkish homosexual performer and singer who has been touring Europe for the past 15 years, suddenly finds himself lumbered with Senay, the daughter of an ex-colleague of his, who died in an accident. Zeki tries to track down Senay's mother, a Turkish belly dancer, who abandoned her husband and baby daughter and whom Senay presumes dead. The quest for Senay's mother takes Zeki and Senay on an odyssey across a number of European cities, including Wuppertal, the most memorable location of Wenders's *Alice in the Cities*, to Istanbul. But the encounter with Senay's mother does not culminate in a happy reunion. When laying eyes upon her daughter, she immediately runs away, unwilling to assume responsibility for her child. Senay, whom her father had deceived by telling her that her mother was dead, feels betrayed by him. Kneeling in front of a collection of colourfully illuminated cacti, presumably a present from her deceased father, she reproaches him for first having lied to her and then having deserted her through his death.

If indeed a formative experience that triggers the transition from childhood to adulthood can be considered as the common narrative strategy of coming-of-age films, it is Senay's sobering realization that her biological parents were disloyal and deceitful. One last time she tenderly touches her treasured cacti collection and speaks to it as if it were her father, bidding farewell to it/him, before handing it over to a little orphaned girl. Then she is ready to put the past – and her parents – behind her and embrace a new life together with Zeki, who has developed from a reluctant guardian into an affectionate foster father. The film's final scene shows Zeki and Senay getting into a taxi, driving off to the airport from where they will fly back to Germany. One can only assume that Zeki, this camp, bohemian man, gay man, in all respects the very opposite of the Turkish patriarch, will stay with Senay for good.

Ayşe Polat's film depicts a journey back to what are supposedly the cultural roots of the protagonists. Yet, the film makes the point that both Senay and Zeki have become deracinated. Often in colonial discourse, the country of origin is linked to the mother. As Stuart Hall notes, narratives 'of displacement' typically recreate 'the endless desire to return to "lost origins", to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning' (Hall 2003: 245). It is not coincidental that both Senay and Zeki are rejected by their Turkish mothers. When Zeki pays a brief visit to his old mother in her summer bungalow on an island near Istanbul, she is cold and distant and only interested to find out whether he is married at all. She is obviously unaware of or unwilling to accept his homosexuality. Polat uses the maternal rejection of the protagonists as a trope of deracination. However, deracination is not tantamount to loss. On the contrary, it provides the liberating opportunity for Zeki and Senay to forge voluntary attachments which can prove stronger and more nurturing than biological parenthood. The effeminate Zeki is certainly a better mother, or father, or both than Senay's biological parents. In fact, the film makes the point that it is precisely his ambiguous gender identity which equips him to stand in simultaneously for Senay's unloving mother and her deceased father.

As Barış Kiliçbay suggests in his reading of *Tour Abroad*, Zeki, though not performing as a drag queen himself, is through various intertextual references associated with well-known Turkish drag artists. He shares his

name with Zeki Müren, ‘a pioneer in queer art music’ and ‘legendary for both the quality of the songs he interpreted and the flamboyant appearance he cultivated’ (Kiliçbay 2006: 110). Unlike other drag artists, he chose to ‘expose a gender ambiguity by wearing women’s clothes without passing himself off as a woman’ (Kiliçbay 2006: 110). An even more important role model for Zeki in the film is the Turkish celebrity Bülent Ersoy, to whose famous popular songs he listens on his journey with Senay and whose photo he carries in his wallet. Ersoy, a male to female transsexual, ‘started her career as a drag performer in the same fashion as Zeki Müren’, but through a sex change in 1981 abandoned her life as a drag queen in favour of becoming a ‘whole woman’ (Kiliçbay 2006: 110–111). However, by retaining her male first name, Bülent continues to draw attention to her gender ambiguity. In *Tour Abroad*, Bülent Ersoy’s music embodies Zeki’s desire to be a woman, a desire that is touchingly expressed in his response to Senay’s fear and bewilderment when she has her first period. Zeki encourages her to embrace her womanhood enthusiastically and to celebrate it! Zeki and Senay experience a moment of great closeness when they both dress up in women’s clothes in a hotel room, performing Ersoy’s song about unrequited love ‘Yakti Beni’ together (see Figure 2). The scene culminates in Senay tenderly dropping rose petals on Zeki’s prostrate body. Moreover, his various male friends, whom he visits *en route*, refer to him as ‘my girl’, ‘sister’ or by other feminine designations. In short, it is impossible to conceive of a Turkish man further removed from the traditional stereotype of the oppressive Turkish patriarch than Zeki, a tender, sensitive and affectionate foster father, who would rather be a mother instead.

Both *Karamuk* and *Tour Abroad* are films about teenage girls who are initially without fathers but who are able to transform this absence or loss into something positive. Both girls are free to choose good Turkish fathers, who are able to support their daughters’ maturation. The films disavow



Figure 2: Zeki (Hilmi Sözer) and Senay (Öslem Blume) performing Ersoy’s song (photo courtesy of Neue Mira Filmproduktion GmbH).

monochrome images of Turkish patriarchy by depicting fathers with fluid (Turkish–German; masculine-feminine) identities. Focusing on nurturing father–daughter relationships outside the context of the traditional family, these coming-of-age narratives call into question essentialist notions of identity based on bloodline and ethnicity, promoting voluntary affiliations and the formation of hybrid identities instead.

Fathers who can not win: the emasculated German versus the authoritarian Turkish father

Even before *Rage* was televised in September 2006, it caused a major uproar in the German media after a controversial preview of the film in *Der Spiegel*, 10 days before its envisaged premiere on 27 September. The article, entitled ‘Turkish Devil’, criticized Aladag’s film for being an ‘orgy of humiliation and violence’, for portraying a young Turkish migrant as a perpetrator and, thereby, being social dynamite and non-pc, and for inviting the audience to take voyeuristic pleasure in the masochism, humiliation and destruction of a German, middle-class family that represents the values of Western liberal democracy (Festenberg 2006). This brief article resulted in controversies at the highest level, involving politicians and managers of the television channel ARD, which had intended *Rage* as a contribution to the ongoing public debate about the integration of migrants into German society. The film, originally scheduled for a prime-time slot was postponed by 2 days and moved to a late-night slot, yet the official reason given for the re-scheduling was not its alleged racism but that it was unsuitable for adolescent viewers on account of its extreme violence.

Set in Berlin, the film tells the story of Can, the adolescent son of a Turkish greengrocer and the Laub family, consisting of middle-aged university professor Simon Laub, his attractive estate agent wife Christa and their teenage son Felix. Felix is an over-protected ‘mummy’s boy’ and a loner without siblings or friends. He gets bullied by Can, from whom he buys ‘dope’, but at the same time, he is drawn to him because the gang leader Can with his macho behaviour, confidence and ‘street cred’ represents the kind of hyper-masculinity that Felix finds lacking in his father and in himself. When Simon Laub discovers that Can is bullying his defenceless son, he gets embroiled in the conflict and becomes the chief target of Can’s hatred and aggression, while Felix is confused as to which side to take (see Figure 3). In a final showdown, reminiscent of Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* (Austria 1997; US remake 2007), Can holds the Laub family hostage in their own living room and forces them to play a sadistic ‘family game’: Simon Laub is given a gun and can choose whom to kill – himself or his wife – in order to save Felix’s life, whom Can holds prisoner with a sharp blade at his throat. In utter despair, Simon pulls the trigger – and finds that the gun is not loaded. Following further verbal abuse, Can lets go of Felix and walks out – the game is over. In a state of shock and rage, Simon Laub attacks Can and drowns him in the swimming pool. Upon realizing that he has actually killed Can, he breaks down and cries inconsolably. Not only has he taken the life of someone, but he has also betrayed the values on which his whole existence was founded.

What makes this film pivotal in the context of this article is that *Rage* critically reassesses Turkish and German fathers – and ultimately finds fault

with both, even though neither Felix's nor Can's father are depicted without empathy. Simon Laub is a soft-spoken, highly educated and gentle man, who espouses humanist values and believes in the power of language and rational reasoning, not in physical violence as a means of conflict resolution.⁸ Despite his many virtues, he is depicted as an inadequate role model for his son because ultimately he does not live by what he preaches. Felix senses his father's ambivalence and is not alone in interpreting it as a weakness. Can provocatively asks on his first visit to the Laub family, when Felix's mother, rather than his father, kicks him out: 'Hey, Felix, who is boss here? Mummy or Daddy?' Can's instinctive assessment of the reversal of traditional gender roles in the Laub family is correct. It is Christa who brought the capital to buy the luxurious family home and it is Christa, who has the courage to search for a trespasser in the garden at night. She is in control and treats her husband in a patronizing way because he does not live up to her expectations of a 'real man'. Simon's best friend, Michael, a conventionally masculine man, who earns his living as a car mechanic, owns a gun and is 'man enough' to give Can a good beating (something Simon is incapable of doing), is the kind of tough guy whom Christa respects and desires – and with whom she has a clandestine affair. Felix's troubled search for identity and belonging is attributed to the dysfunctional family situation in which both parents have extramarital affairs and in which the father is perceived as weak and emasculated. He can, therefore, not facilitate his son's maturation, which, according to Freud, depends on the father delivering the child from his bond with the mother. In an abusive tirade, Can sums up Simon Laub's precarious status within his family by applying the values of Turkish Muslim patriarchy: 'You have no honour, man. You don't deserve any respect. Your family needs a man, not a queen like you. You son-of-a-bitch', re-iterating in cruder terms what Simon's wife had said earlier on: '[Felix] needs you now. As a man. As a father', implying that he does not fill either of the roles.

Simon Laub is the modern-day equivalent of Jimmy Stark's apron-wearing father in the Nicholas Ray's classic coming-of-age film *Rebel without a Cause* (USA, 1955). This film, too, attributes Jim's psychological problems, his inability to find a place amongst his peers and to become 'a proper man', to inadequate fathering. As Stella Bruzzi rightly notes, *Rebel without a Cause* 'is only ostensibly about Jim's problematic rebelliousness [. . .]; its underpinning subject is the son's desire to have and to become a traditional, authoritative father' (Bruzzi 2005: 53). The same holds true for Felix, who is baffled and confused by his father's perceived lack of authority. Thus, to some extent *Rage* appears to endorse a traditional Turkish, rather than a Western concept of masculinity, a point of criticism raised in the controversial preview of the film in *Der Spiegel*: '*Rage* takes sides with Can, the film's secretly idolized hero, and endorses a culture that revolves around the concept of honour, that holds women and homosexuals in contempt and that advocates a return to the law of the jungle' (Festenbergs 2006).

While it is certainly true that the film remains equivocal about the various models of masculinity it presents, Can's father does not fare all that well either. Like so many Turkish-German film fathers before him, he is a greengrocer and a devout Muslim. The fact that he remains nameless

8 In an interview Züli Aladag remarked: 'Simon Laub espouses the right values [. . .] the values he stands for are virtuous and represent those of the majority of Germans' (Aladag and Gassner 2007). When in the film, Felix asks his father: 'Why did you let the Turks into our country?', Simon Laub explains that the deracination and marginalisation of the Turkish immigrants is to blame for their aggressive behaviour. Laub says this even though he has just been humiliated by Can and his gang.



Figure 3: The emasculated father Simon Laub (August Zirner) in his first confrontation with Can (Oktay Özdemir) (photo courtesy of Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln).

underscores the typecasting of this character. Although he speaks with a slight accent, his command of German is remarkably good. Like Simon Laub, he is a soft-spoken and polite man who appears to grant his son Can considerable autonomy. When Simon Laub visits Can's father for the second time, seeking his support in disciplining Can, the Turkish father is unwilling to co-operate and replies that he has no control over what his son does in the street and that 'the young people' need to sort out their problems themselves. This is actually sensible advice since only due to Simon Laub's involvement has the conflict between Can and Felix escalated into an aggressive clash of cultures. Yet this ostensibly *laissez-faire* attitude is at odds with the paternal authority the Turkish father imposes upon his son when punishing him for his wrongdoings: he beats him, even in front of Simon Laub, when it transpires that Can has bullied Felix into surrendering his expensive trainers. After the police has raided Can's family home and found large quantities of drugs, the Turkish father evicts his son. The context of this scene is particularly pertinent since it links the father's mercilessness to the principles of Islam, by which he abides: Can comes home badly bruised and watches his father kneeling on the floor, praying. After Can's father has rolled up his prayer rug, Can tries to kiss his hands and thereby seek his father's forgiveness. But the father rejects Can and laconically asks him to leave the keys behind when leaving the flat. In particular, the cold and unforgiving way in which Can's father banishes his eldest son is shocking. Accompanied by a popular song by the Turkish singer Sezen Aksu, and composer Ferdi Tayfur, Can takes one last look at old family photos displayed in a glass cabinet and then sits down and cries. This highly emotional scene evokes a real sense of pity for the screen villain Can and suggests that the strict upbringing he experienced has played a fair share in

his becoming a criminal. Can's father is certainly as inadequate a role model for his adolescent son as Felix's father. The crucial difference, however, is that Can adopts the values of traditional Turkish patriarchy with its emphasis on honour and respect. He bows to his father's authority and accepts the harsh punishment he receives without questioning it. Even though Can is not a practising Muslim himself, he is depicted as the product of a traditional Turkish Muslim upbringing. Whereas his father has found a niche of quiet co-existence within German society, his socially disenfranchised son is struggling to find his place in society, and vents his frustration with hatred, rage and terror.

The controversies surrounding this 'non-pc' film were due in part to the fact that *Rage* can be read as an allegorical narrative about the Muslim terrorist threat to Western liberal democracy. Felix's parents espouse precisely those values on which German contemporary society is built: the leftist-liberal values of the '68-generation combined with the capitalist ethos of materialistic achievement. The killing of Can in the climactic final scene is highly problematic since it could be interpreted as Western society's legitimate act of self-defence against the Islamic aggressor. Thus, *Rage* represents an alarming intensification of the culture clash paradigm found in earlier Turkish-German films – or does it?

Rage is in fact one of those still comparatively rare films in which the 'voyeuristic ethnographic gaze' (Burns 2007: 369) is directed at both Turkish and German fathers and the beliefs they stand for. The film does not just point the finger at the problems inherent in traditional Turkish patriarchy; it is equally critical of the shortcomings of the bourgeois Laub family, a microcosm of German hegemonic society (Aladag and Aust 2006). According to Züli Aladag, even a liberal, open-minded man like Simon Laub, who thinks that

he does not have a problem with foreigners, [who] on the contrary, considers himself to be a champion of their rights [. . .] is by no means immune to intolerance [. . .]. It is easy to be tolerant as long as one does not have anything to do with foreigners, but as soon as their problems become our own, that's the end of tolerance. This is an issue particularly close to my heart. Which values do we really represent? On what common level can we actually communicate? And how can we avoid such conflicts?

(Aladag and Gassner 2007)

By scrutinizing the majority as well as the minority culture and by not being afraid of invoking ethnic stereotypes that fly in the face of political correctness, Aladag risked antagonizing the left-liberal Germans as well as the Turkish-German community. This was a risk he consciously took, hoping to spark a process of critical self-reflection on both sides and, ultimately, to improve the dialogue between Turkish and German culture and thus pave the way for normalization (Aladag and Aust 2006).

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the funding I received from the British Academy, which enabled me to present an earlier version of this article at the conference of the

Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Philadelphia in March 2008. This article is part of a larger project on *Migrant and Diasporic Cinema in Contemporary Europe*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under the *Diasporas, Migration and Identities Programme*, compare, <http://www.migrantcinema.net>.

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Suggested citation

- Berghahn, D. (2009), 'From Turkish greengrocer to drag queen: reassessing patriarchy in recent Turkish–German coming-of-age films', *New Cinemas* 7: 1, pp. 55–69, doi: 10.1386/ncin.7.1.55/1

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