Finding the Foreign
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Edited by

Robert Schechtman and Suin Roberts

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PREFACE

By recognizing our uncanny strangeness, we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners.
—Julia Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves

The articles in the following volume represent the collected proceedings of the thirteenth annual Interdisciplinary German Studies Conference, “Finding the Foreign,” at the University of California, Berkeley (March 11-13, 2005). For three days, scholars from a range of fields gathered to explore constructions of the “foreign” in the German-speaking context throughout the centuries in language, literature, music, and visual media.

Etymology reveals that the modern German word ‘fremd’ (foreign) derives from the old Germanic word for ‘distant’ and thereby is also related to the ‘unusual’; this dual geographic and emotive sense is still reflected in the word’s multiple meanings in modern English: ‘der Fremde’ may be translated as ‘foreigner’; ‘die Fremde’ refers to ‘foreign parts’ or ‘distant places’; and ‘das Fremde’ is the ‘strange’ or the ‘unknown’. Situated between friend and foe, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the foreigner or stranger has an ambivalent place in our midst—potentially inspiring curiosity or fear, potentially also a source of insight both about others and about ourselves.

Examining who or what is considered foreign at any historical moment and place can help us understand the formation of national, communal, and personal identities. Presenters discussed how various tropes or rhetorical techniques create a sense of the foreign, and how they serve to position the foreign on the spectrum from friend to foe. At the same time, we must realize that such discourses have always been countered by minority voices, hybrid cases, or even an awareness of the uncanny within oneself to destabilize or re-appropriate these categorizations.

Kristeva’s psychoanalytic study, Strangers to Ourselves, critically points out that our knowledge of even our own selves is always fundamentally incomplete—significant parts of our personal psyche remain subconscious or suppressed, inaccessible to our reflection, yet these “foreign” or “unknown” parts of ourselves nevertheless constitute an integral part of “who we are.”
Kristeva’s analysis draws inspiration from Freud’s essay “Das Unheimliche,” in which Freud astutely noted that ‘heim’ (home) forms the very core of the German word ‘unheimlich’ (strange, uncanny). Freud postulated that the “strange” or “uncanny” is, psychologically speaking, an exterior projection of our own inner fears and anxieties.

Freud’s perspective is important to keep in mind when considering the concrete historical context of this discussion. In the decade and a half since the opening of the “Iron Curtain” (most poignantly signified by the fall of the Berlin Wall) and the collapse of many Eastern European economies, and in the wake of deadly ethnic strife in the Balkans and elsewhere, migration into Western European countries—both by economic immigrants and by humanitarian refugees—increased noticeably, leading to sharp debates about “reforms” of asylum and citizenship laws in Germany and elsewhere. The fears lurking behind German Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s famous statement(s) that Germany is not a land of immigration are reflected in a different setting by Swiss debates over the so-called Überfremdungsinitiativen (measures against “over-foreignization”—see Martin Luginbühl, in this volume) and by well documented cases of violence against “foreigners” in Germany and other European countries. As several contributors demonstrate here, portrayals of the “foreign” can often be correlated with shifting political sentiments and international power struggles. Determinations of foreignness can have very concrete consequences for those so labeled. (While this book was being prepared for publication, the anti-immigration debates that used to seem so European, i.e., foreign to American politics, erupted into heated debates in Washington accompanied by massive street demonstrations in dozens of American cities. We are not exempt from the politics of perceived “over-foreignization”).

Georg Simmel, in his “Exkurs über den Fremden,” famously quipped that the foreigner is not the visitor who comes and then leaves, but rather the person who comes “aus der Fremde” and then stays. In an era of ever-increasing mobility and globalization (of people and of images), examining constructions of the foreign becomes increasingly important. Germany may be a particularly appropriate context in which to undertake such an investigation, given not only its disastrous history of racist xenophobia that culminated in the Holocaust under the Nazi dictatorship, but also its more recent experiences during reunification, when “West Germans” faced “East Germans,” both suddenly realizing that the other seemed, somehow, foreign (“Ossi-Wessi” was the theme of Berkeley’s 2006 Interdisciplinary German Studies Conference, and proceedings are forthcoming from Cambridge Scholars Press).

Berkeley’s annual German conference is hosted by a department traditionally known for the study of “foreign” languages and cultures, and it is ironic that we educators have long promoted the benefits of studying such
languages and cultures as a way for students to see their own culture(s) through fresh eyes—a kind of cultural *Verfremdungseffekt*, to borrow from Brecht. We hope that the work reflected in this volume will contribute to an on-going dialogue about productive modes of human interrelationship at the start of the twenty-first century.

**Contributions**

The articles in this volume are organized in three sections, each treating an aspect of the overall topic of the conference: “Foreign Identities,” “Foreign Narratives,” and “Foreignness in Language.” The first section considers how a sense of the Other as stranger or foreigner has been presented—and contested—in recent works of German literature and film.

Margaret Setje-Eilers’ article, “Ferreting Out the Foreign,” opens the section and the anthology. Similar metaphors of disease, contagion, and threat are shown to be at work in quite different ways in two German films that each address a confrontation of cultures on German soil: in Billy Wilder’s *A Foreign Affair* (1948), post-war American occupying forces meet post-Nazi German civilians, while in Wolfgang Becker’s *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), residents of the former East Germany confront West German consumer culture after the fall of the Wall.

Karin Lornsen’s “Where Have All the Guest Workers Gone?” examines Fatih Akin’s 2004 film, *Gegen die Wand* (*Head On*) as an example of transnational filmmaking in both subject material and production. Using the film’s main characters as examples, Lornsen critiques assumptions of monolithic cultural integrity operating in some theories of multicultural hybridity, and she demonstrates how the protagonists exemplify the fragmented nature of post-modern, highly mobile subjectivity.

In “Entering Unstable Territories,” Susanne Hoelscher analyses Zafer Senocak’s 1998 novel *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft*, noting how the first-person narrator’s creative re-writing of his own family history forces him to confront the concept of “strangers,” including people from the past in his own lineage and from his present in post-Wall Berlin.

Julia Baker’s “Smiling Bonds and Laughter Frees” addresses the power of laughter as a means to cope with the confusion and change that faced both Germans and foreigners in Germany at the time of re-unification. In Hung Gurst’s short story “Moru, der kleine Elefant” and Wladimir Kaminer’s *Russendisko*, humor functions to help characters deal with the challenges of new environments and to overcome divisions arising from perceptions of the foreign in society.
The ever-shifting borders of the foreign and the familiar are discussed in Robert Schechtman’s “Foreign Journeys to the Self,” which examines Barbara Honigmann’s 1996 novel *Soharas Reise* as a literary case study of dislocation and rupture arising from both migration and personal violence. This narrative is shown to challenge any easy assumptions of communal, cultural, or gendered identity in a highly mobile world.

The second part of this volume, “Foreign Narratives,” analyses aspects of foreignness in the realms of public speech, musical performance, transnational and transcultural literatures, and even journalistic satire. Sonja Boos, in “Speaking Foreign,” contrasts two public speeches given by Hannah Arendt and Uwe Johnson after the Second World War, the former in Hamburg and the latter in New York, as well as Johnson’s fictionalized account of his own real-life performance. In each case, Boos shows how the audience’s perception of the speaker’s “foreignness” affects their reception of both the presenter and the presentation.

David Levy’s account of the widely varying reception of Berg’s opera *Wozzeck* (1925) in Berlin offers a description of the interplay of politics and cultural production during Germany’s Weimar Republic. Levy reveals how ascriptions of the supposed foreignness of Berg’s work—some calling it “non-German” or even “un-European”—were often closely related to the political affiliations of the reviewers and their respective media channels, the large Berlin newspapers.

Paul Nissler conjoins the geographic and emotive senses of *fremd* in a novel approach to understanding the varying perspectives found in German and Spanish literary depictions of the Spanish Civil War. In “Exploring the ‘Foreign’ in Literary Spaces,” he sets forth a spatialized model of psychological proximity and distance that he applies to help categorize both dramas and novels about the conflict in which many Germans were involved, physically and/or emotionally.

In “An Image of Guilt and Penance,” Lee Roberts traces German public perceptions of Russian society through the reception of Russian literature in translation, focusing especially on Dostoevsky and his famous novel *Crime and Punishment*. Roberts demonstrates how Dostoevsky and his characters came to be seen as emblematic for Russia and Russians in general. Roberts also shows how the task of translation—in which the translator faces “foreign” elements of language that resist simple rendition in a second language—may alter readers’ understandings of foreign texts and thus the people and places they depict.

Chad Denton’s “Michel under the Knout” serves as a complementary analysis to Roberts’ work. Denton also investigates depictions of Germany’s great “foreign” neighbor to the east (Russia), this time through the medium of German satire, specifically journalistic cartoons from the mid-nineteenth
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Denton exposes the complex interrelation of national and international politics with cultural constructions of the foreign—as do Roberts, Nissler, and Levy in their respective contributions to this volume.

Sarah Bailey Felsen’s article, “Karl Emil Franzos’s Der Pojaz and the Art of Ventriloquism” addresses the tensions between autobiography and fiction in the works of this nineteenth-century author, who, like many of his time and place, had to negotiate between religious and cultural affiliations as Jew and German in the eastern reaches of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Bailey Felsen discusses the ambivalent role of the Jewish ghetto in the widespread genre of the Ghettogeschichten, where similarity and difference were simultaneously operative, and she discusses the appropriateness of applying post-colonial approaches to such stories.

Closing the second section, Suin Roberts offers an analysis of the German-language autobiography of Mirok Li, a Korean scholar who immigrated to Germany in 1920. Applying the theory of “culture shock” that anthropologists have developed to explain common reactions to “foreign” cultural contexts, Roberts demonstrates how Li’s narrative stages a wide range of responses to the “Westernization” of Korea under Japanese occupation, and also how Li’s personal understanding of Europe evolves as he moves from his initial, textually-mediated contacts to subsequent, first-person experiences.

Finally, the third section, “Foreignness in Language,” examines how material features of language form and pragmatic aspects of language use can create or alter perceptions of the foreign. Alexander Onysko opens the section with a linguistic analysis of language contact and change in “Anglicisms in German,” specifically discussing how features of English have affected German in recent decades. Drawing on examples from the newsmagazine Der Spiegel, he highlights the multiplicity of ways in which foreign words and phrases may function in a language, as well as the difficulty of specifically delineating foreign elements in two related languages with a long history of contact.

Moving from linguistic structures to language use, Martin Luginbühl’s “From ‘Welcome Guests’ to ‘Threatening Flood’” offers a provocative analysis of the shifting narratives in Swiss television news coverage of refugees from the 1950s to the 1990s. Luginbühl reveals the subtle interpretations and implicit assumptions that frame supposedly “neutral” news reports and that arise in large part from the use of metaphors and the structuring of dialogue and images in news reports.

Lucia Perrone Capano’s “Sprachfremde and Fremderfahrung as Acoustic and Visual Experience” brings us back to the medium of intercultural German literature. Works by the multi-lingual authors Yoko Tawada and Emine Sevgi Özdamar are shown to foreground the exciting and productive “visual-acoustic crossings” that any speaker (or author) communicating in a second language
experiences. Whether considering the most complex abstractions or discussing the most mundane items, our common perceptions of the world and of words are challenged through our encounters with the new sounds, forms, and concepts available a foreign language.

The closing article in the collection is “Linguistic Varieties and Teaching German as a Foreign Language,” by Ulrike Reeg. In this piece, Reeg discusses the potential for increased linguistic and cultural awareness that the study of ethnolectic varieties of German may provide to learners of German as a foreign language. After an overview of the history of recent mass migration into Germany and its resultant linguistic effects on the language, Reeg offers a didacticized outline of a learner-centered laboratory that uses material by recent multi-cultural authors for language and cultural study.

The multi-disciplinary range of approaches to “Finding the Foreign” contained in this volume reveals how diverse the portrayals of the foreign have been, as well as how contingent and varying the delineation between the foreign and the familiar can become. Finally, the conference demonstrated to all those involved the value of a productive dialogue among disparate academic disciplines that can too often be perceived as foreign to each other.
Part I:

Foreign Identities
FERRETING OUT THE FOREIGN: 
BILLY WILDER’S A FOREIGN AFFAIR (1948) 
AND WOLFGANG BECKER’S GOOD BYE, LENIN! 
(2003)

MARGARET SETJE-EILERS

“Want to buy some illusions, slightly used, second hand?” inquires Erika von Schlütow (Marlene Dietrich) in a sultry nightclub song. Within the context of illusion, Billy Wilder’s post-war A Foreign Affair (1948) and Wolfgang Becker’s post-Wall Good Bye, Lenin! (2003) explore the concept of foreign in films that integrate newsreels into their storylines about Berlin. In Wilder’s rubble film, the ruins of Berlin signify the level of corruption in the US military, in particular the black market activities of Captain John Pringle (John Lund). Vice has become so widespread in the post-war city that Congress sends a delegation to cure what Congresswoman Phoebe Frost from Iowa (Jean Arthur) calls “moral malaria,” and the military authorities considers a clip from an old Nazi newsreel she locates reliable enough to send German nightclub singer von Schlütow to a labor camp.

Over fifty years later, Good Bye, Lenin! relates the process of dismantling and rebuilding the post-Wall East to constructing and consuming images. The action spans about a year, from the fortieth anniversary of the GDR on October 7, 1989, to a few days after unification on October 3, 1990. Christiane Kerner (Katrin Sass) has a heart attack when she sees her son Alex (Daniel Brühl) involved with police during a demonstration for open borders on the GDR anniversary. She awakes from a coma eight months later and returns home, still seriously ill, having missed Erich Honecker’s resignation, the fall of the Wall, and Germany’s world soccer championship. During her convalescence, caretaker Alex is determined to shield her from anything upsetting, in order to prevent another heart attack. He desperately wants her to believe that nothing has changed. Soon, her request to watch television inspires him to venture into filmmaking with his friend Denis Domaschke (Florian Lukas), and together they make elaborately fake newsreels for her.
The following discussion argues that Wilder’s and Becker’s films situate the foreign in the semiotics of illness and health. While *A Foreign Affair* depicts and critiques the foreign as an infectious disease, *Good Bye, Lenin!* unmasks the foreign as confusing equivalence; Becker’s film exposes the desire for pre-Wende differentiation between us and them as pathological.

In Wilder’s *A Foreign Affair*, the separation is a necessary part of the storyline. As the congressional delegation flies over Berlin in the opening sequence, Congresswoman Frost uses chilling words to remind her colleagues of the reason for their trip:

> Twelve thousand of our boys are policing that pesthole down below and according to our reports, they are being infected by a kind of moral malaria. It is our duty to their wives, their mothers, their sisters to find the facts, and if these reports are true, to fumigate that place with all the insecticides at our disposal.

Their mission is to cure, if necessary with chemicals. As Joseph Loewenstein and Lynne Tatlock point out in “The Marshall Plan at the Movies” (1992), Frost's words show that the conquerors have appropriated the Nazi language of the Holocaust. Reiterating fascist discourse, the delegation defines the foreign as the source of disease and infection, good and evil, not questioning its own cultural imperialism. One of the few post-war films depicting the American occupation of Berlin, *A Foreign Affair* contains footage from summer 1947. It was released during the Berlin airlift in 1948, shortly before the division of Germany into DDR and BRD in 1949, when the American image changed from occupying army to protectors against the Russians. Wilder's film shows that the United States Army, stationed in Berlin to denazify the population, has already begun to use American baseball as a panacea for Nazi evil among the youth, to turn them from “mean old men” into kids again. Loewenstein and Tatlock aptly call the film Wilder’s critique of denazification (1992, 433).

The first image of German singer von Schlütow, one of Wilder’s figures in need of denazification, is a point of view shot through Captain Pringle’s eyes. He watches her brushing her teeth, with voluminous mounds of foam around her.

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1 Filmmuseum-Berlin (2005). Robert Shandley (2001, 13-17) explains that Wilder was a member of a team investigating how the film industry could help the US government in the American sector. He made the film to justify the need for denazification and reeducation in Germany to audiences in the US, and to explain the program’s goals to and point to wartime guilt to German audiences. Wilder made the romantic comedy to reeducate the Germans and it was among the U.S. films that flooded the German market after the war.

2 Talking about baseball as a cure, Plummer tells the touring congressmen that the boys were mean old men, not ordinary youngsters. “We had to make kids out of them. We had to kick the goose-step out of them and cure them of blind obedience.”
mouth, framed through a hole in the bathroom door. When Pringle persists in gazing despite her objections, she spits a mouthful of water in his direction, covering him (and surprised spectators) with the liquid. The visual rhetoric of her action conflates the two central metaphors of cleaning and contagion. She tries to rub away her Nazi past to denazify herself, and at the same time sprays her body fluids over Pringle, contaminating him.

Wilder’s film uses music as well as images to show disease moving from the foreign Germans to U.S. soldiers. With songwriter Friedrich Hollaender at the piano, von Schlütow sings at the Lorelei nightclub about the exchange of goods, images, and ideologies. Where black market and black plague merge, desire nurtures a barter economy in which American soldiers trade cigarettes, watches, nylons, and chocolate for whatever they crave, from tangible goods to bodies. The path of merchandise (and services) described in von Schlütow’s first song, “Black Market,” demonstrates the chain of infection: “Shh, tiptoe, trade your things...Enjoy these goods, for boy, these goods are hot.” As she sings, she contaminates; a lit cigarette passes from Pringle’s mouth to hers and ends up in the pianist’s mouth. Exchangeability is cast as contagious infection. During this song, guests buy pieces of a cake that has made its way from Dusty, Pringle’s one-time girlfriend in Iowa, to Frost, to Pringle, onto the black market, and into the Lorelei. Frost, alias Gretchen Gesundheit, is at the club with GIs whose “infection” she is observing. She calls herself Miss Health, but the GIs, thinking she is German, relate it to infection: “We’re fraternizing with a sneeze.” Pringle, who will return to the US with Frost after the film ends, predicts she will be his “aspirin” to nurse him back to health “with all the headaches ahead.”

Von Schlütow’s second song, “Illusions,” laments precisely over exchangeable and fleeting images like those of German-American Frost:

Want to buy some illusions, slightly used, second hand?
They were lovely illusions, reaching high, built on sand.
They had a touch of paradise, a spell you can’t explain.
For in this crazy paradise, you are in love with pain.
Want to buy some illusions, slightly used, just like new?
Such romantic illusions, and they are all about you.
I sell them all for a penny. They make pretty souvenirs.
Take my lovely illusions, some for laughs, some for tears.

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3 See Schmundt-Thomas (1992) for an interpretation of the film as a critique of interventionist politics after the war.
4 See Loewenstein and Tatlock’s analysis (1992) of the song “Black Market.”
5 Pringle is the first to mention the Harvest Moon song, and when he whistles it several times during the film, it becomes a measure of his return to health. Frost also whistles it, and even von Schlütow, confident in her illusion that she will be going to the US with Pringle, begins to whistle it near the end of the film after the police raid.
Reflection of images, the passing of an image from one surface to another, also figures in the film’s visual syntax of contagion. By the time von Schlütow sings this song, Frost, now defrosted and infected, has fallen in love with Pringle. She declines a dinner invitation from the congressmen, causing them to worry that she might have typhoid fever. Their concern is not unfounded; she has caught the contraband disease. She surprises Pringle on their last evening by appearing as an illusion of a femme fatale in a black evening gown and shoes she has obtained on the black market in exchange for her typewriter and ribbons. The “Illusions” song comments on self-images like Frost’s that are “built on sand,” those insisting on moral superiority over the foreign expressed in metaphors of health.

Although the Americans here view themselves as victors, intrinsically good, and thus the epitome of health, they fail to devote much time to bombed-out Berlin. Here, Jacques Lacan’s concept of the false integral self-image generated in the mirror stage offers insight into the construction of national as well as individual identity that extends beyond the self-image of the Americans in the film to its post-war spectators (Lacan 1977, 2).

In Christian Metz’s Lacanian interpretation of cinema, the film screen functions as a mirror that projects the viewer’s self-images and desires, but does not reflect her body (1982, 45). Wilder’s film invited his immediate post-war spectators to align themselves with the cinematic image of American identity as conquerors, thereby reinforcing a fabricated national feeling of health and wellness. Von Schlütow also thinks in broader terms, but she believes, in contrast to the American opinion, that her difficult past exonerates her. She genderizes Nazism (and as an extension also illness) as feminine, excusing her Nazi alliances as “woman’s politics,” and announcing to Pringle, “You are my Führer now. Heil Johnny!” For Johnny’s superior, Colonel Plummer, low-level contagion is part of being an American in Germany. Infected himself, he risks Pringle’s life to lure the singer’s former lover and ex-Gestapo leader Hans Otto Birgel into the nightclub.

Drawn by his old desire, Birgel enters the club as von Schlütow sings her last song, “The Ruins of Berlin,” in which images of repetition and cyclical renewal paradoxically insist that phantoms of the past “won’t return”:

\[\text{In den Ruinen von Berlin}\
\text{Fangen die Blumen wieder an zu blühen,}\
\text{Und in der Nacht spürst du von allen Seiten,}\
\text{Seinen Duft wie aus alten Zeiten.}\]

See Schmundt-Thomas (1992, 189) for a discussion of post-war Germany as feminine.
Despite the lyrics, the sequence invites viewers to conclude that the foreign disease may seem to disappear, but it will reoccur, like smallpox. 

*An Affair* also offers “slightly used, second hand” images from other films, thereby casting filmic intertextuality as contagion, where one image infects and engenders the next in a cinematic black market. The rhetoric of visual appropriation alludes to films including Dietrich’s own *Blue Angel* (1930), Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca* (1942), and elements of film noir. Even Wilder’s opening sequence tacitly invokes an American version of fascist imperialism by imitating Leni Riefenstahl’s image of Hitler’s descent to Nuremberg by plane in *Triumph of the Will* (1935). With its suggestion that ideologies are as exchangeable as images, the sequence sharply critiques the ideology of the occupying American forces.7

Friedrich Hollaender’s songs are as contagious as the images that seep through the boundaries of cinematic history, and characters pass the tunes on to each other like germs. Besides von Schlütow’s songs about infection, delusion, and decay, and a Russian Civil War song of love and death, characters hum, sing, and whistle two American songs grounded in images of robust vigor. “Shine on, Harvest Moon” and the “Iowa Corn Song” offer visions of abundance and thriving health. Frost sings about non-infected Iowan crops; “That’s where the tall corn grows” and “All that’s good, we have the best.”8 At first, Americans, Germans, and Russians sing the songs together in the *Lorelei*, but as the tunes move around, they become subtle references to individual states of health and nationalism.9 The Harvest Moon song circulates like a cure-all, and nearly everyone whistles it near the end.

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7 In the show-down at the end, it is apparent that the film also makes abundant visual references to other films, especially film noir, offering slightly used, second-hand images, casting cinematic intertextuality as contagion, where one image infects and engenders the next. From *Casablanca* we recognize the nightclub, the plane waiting to depart with only one lover in the fog, scarcely concealed Bogart nose-rubbing, and an affair between lovers in a foreign place. The spotlight on the viewer and the femme fatale singer in *Blue Angel* reappear here, as well as a male protagonist who, like Professor Rath, has become infected with an evil disease. The plane parallels *Triumph of the Will*. Finally, the last sequence of Wilder’s film calls up elements of film noir, from intrigue and a sly set-up, to the weary Birgel entering the smoke-filled nightclub to kill his rival, Pringle.

8 *Iowa Corn Song*:

[…] Our land is full of ripe-ning corn, Yo-Ho, yo-ho, yo-ho.

We’ve watched it grow both night and morn, Yo-Ho, yo-ho, yo-ho.

But now we rest, we’ve stood the test. All that’s good, we have the best […]

9 The Russian Civil War song of 1918-20, written in the 1930s, is a love song about weeping lovers who see their heroes ride off to battle. At the club, before von Schlütow’s “Black Market,” Russian soldiers sing the song with Americans, who join in, until
Music and images in *A Foreign Affair* feed on and contaminate those who live the illusion of cleanliness and health, but the film leaves one area untouched by contagion. Visual history exists in a realm of absolute truth. Frost invites Pringle to view a newsreel that becomes proof that von Schlütow was a Nazi, and they watch a clip from “Die Woche im Bild” that shows Goebbels speaking at a Nazi rally and von Schlütow at the opening of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, Gestapo leader Birgel at her side. Soon, Hitler arrives, kisses her hand, and they whisper and laugh. Colonel Plummer later produces a photo of von Schlütow standing at Birgel’s side and cuts it in two to distribute to soldiers who have orders to identify the ex-Nazi, should he return to the Lorelei club. Although illusions, images of contagion, and infectious songs drive the film, recorded visual history exists in an isolated sphere of immunity and veracity, despite the obvious staging of the newsreel clip and the still.\(^{10}\) In 1948, Wilder’s semiotics suggests that fascist and imperialist ideologies are interchangeable, but his film relies on a truth claim anchoring the foreign as uncontested evil in filmed history. The pathology of the foreign has its source where image, sound, and words match meaning: in the Nazi past and in disease. In Saussure’s terms, the signifier and signified that make up the sign are joined inseparably.\(^{11}\)

Metaphors of illness and health structure *Good Bye, Lenin!* in a way that resists Wilder’s alignment of image, sound, and words with signification. His film associates illness and coma with the desire for a system of reference, a kind of Grenztalgie. While the foreign stands for disease in Wilder’s film, Becker links health and the ability to cope with blurred boundaries between self and foreign. The former East jumbles many versions of foreign, ranging from an East that existed only in theory, to the actual erasure of the former East in united Berlin, to the deliberate re-scripting of memory—the East as it “should have been.” Many figures yearn for a referential system that assigns meaning to image and words, one in which narration and pictures match.

Alex believes his mother needs such a correspondence. Before she returns from the hospital, he redecorates her bedroom as it was before her heart attack and the fall of the Wall. Reinstating the GDR also allows him to return to a life predicated on a system of imagined dualistic reference that distinguishes between us and the foreign. In this make-believe world, socialist idealism is socialist reality. The film suggests this reference existed only as fantasy (and illness) in the minds of idealists like Christiane. It is foreign because it never existed, but it is also not foreign because it was so often imagined.

during the film a few Russians sing it again when the club is almost empty and Birgel lies dead on the floor.

\(^{10}\) Marlene Dietrich chats with Bobby Watson playing Hitler.

\(^{11}\) See Saussure (1966, 67 and 113).
As Alex reconstructs this illusion for her, he realizes how comfortable it is. In a capitalist-like fetishist search for former GDR brands, he tries to locate products such as Spreewald pickles and Mocca-Fix coffee. (Ironically, not only Alex searches for GDR realia; Becker and his crew had to locate or reconstruct food, jars, labels, and furniture that had disappeared to recreate the East for their set). Unlike his sister Ariane (Maria Simon), who quickly adapts to post-Wall Berlin as a Burger King employee, Alex yearns for old ideological distinctions. Because the world never existed in which Alex and Christiane feel most at home, it is as foreign as the western world.

Many of Christiane’s friends play along for her sake but also for their own, as they too are infected with a yearning for an illusory life behind the Wall. Hanna Schäfer confides to Alex that she can send the complaints Christiane dictates to her, directed at SED officials, right on to the western company Otto Versand: “Ach, Alex, es ist so schön, sich mit deiner Mutter zu unterhalten. Man hat das Gefühl, es ist so wie früher. Nur mit ein paar kleinen Änderungen, und das geht weiter zum Otto-Versand.” As Dina Iordanova notes, the film uniquely thematizes the absence of the Wall, not its presence (2003, 27). As in Wilder’s film, ideologies are interchangeable, but here the issue is equivalence instead of reference.

In Becker’s landscape of Berlin, the only person who is immune to the disease of utopian illusion and can deal with the non-dualistic post-Wall situation is nursing student Lara (Chulpan Khamatova) from the former USSR. In her profession as well as in her personal relationships, she works to achieve everyone’s health. After Christiane’s birthday party, she chides Alex: “Mir tut deine Mutter Leid. Es ist nur zu gruselig, was du mit ihr machst.” When they argue later, she bursts out, “Du musst es deiner Mutter sagen. Nicht wegen mir, wegen ihr.” Near the end of the film, after Christiane’s second heart attack, we see Lara through the glass door of the hospital room where it seems she tells Christiane about the Wende and impending unification (the sound is muffled, leaving the viewer with conjecture instead of correspondence of words and meaning). Alex’s sister Ariane, her boyfriend Rainer (Alexander Beyer), and his father Robert (Burghart Klaußner), are likewise unenthousiastic about the bedroom revival of pre-fall days, and they are for the most part uninfected by Alex’s illness.

Just as Alex’s frantic plan to recreate utopia seems to be working, his mother announces that she wants to watch television, and her request initiates Alex’s unanticipated study of image construction, motivated by his desire to hide German unification from her. His plan to film his own television newscasts works because Denis, his designated partner in a satellite dish company, is an

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12 Becker explains in the audio commentary to the DVD how difficult it was to find these props.
inspired and talented amateur filmmaker. Alex, former East, and Denis, former West, make images that gradually conflate definitions of the foreign into an indistinguishable mix of foreign and one’s own. These films are a kind of cure for Alex, who has become infected by a utopian East. His medication takes the form of four broadcasts, each on a different level of image construction, and each lesson in filmmaking turns out to be a more challenging rehabilitation session. All four gradually reveal to him the unclear borderline between self and foreign in images, as well as in post-Wall Berlin. His convalescence proceeds slowly, but by the time he makes his last film, he seems robustly willing to embrace an environment without the foreign in the murky indistinctness of unified Germany.

Denis already knows how to construct cinematic images that can make any kind of desired truth claims, and in teaching Alex, he helps him regain health. At the same time, their filmmaking raises the question whether any pure form of ideology is achievable, with or without image fabrication. The lack of discernable borders between us and the foreign also intrudes into the distinction between documentaries and narrative film. On the meta-level of Becker’s film, Alex uses voice-over narration throughout, which is also a fundamental technique of newscasts. This voice-over in the main film reflects the confusion in Alex’s short films between documentaries and narrative film, exposing both Geschichte and Geschichten as fictions. Where art and life are indistinguishable, documentaries, thought to be so foreign to narrative film, are shown to be narrative film turned inside out.

Prompted by Denis’ comment that today’s news is the same as last year’s, Alex and anchor Denis make their first series using clips from year-old tapes like Current Camera News. (Becker reports that he reached a similar conclusion after studying the format of newscasts from the former East and West).13 Denis, the Wessi, makes Ossi broadcasts sitting behind a table in shorts, a suit jacket, and tie in front of a taped-on photo, like Kafka’s judges in The Trial, who sit on a kitchen chair to pose for their formal portraits.

Filmmaking, lesson two, evolves as an emergency measure after Christiane sees a Coca Cola banner on a wall outside her former-GDR bedroom. First we see Denis reporting from the Coca Cola building until an employee shuts him down. Back in the “studio,” anchor Denis explains that the East has recently won its patent trial for its invention of Coke.14 A clip follows from a 1950s film

13 Becker discusses the results of his research on news material from the former East and West in the audio commentary to the DVD.
14 The theme of Coca Cola references Billy Wilder’s 1961 film, “One, Two, Three,” about the (imperialist) presence of the American soft drink in Germany just before the Wall was built.
that shows a “Coke factory” in the East. Christiane is surprised, but gullible. Alex’s voice-over confides:

**Als ich an diesem Tag in die Wolken starrte, wurde mir klar, dass die Wahrheit nur eine zweifelhafte Angelegenheit war, die ich leicht Mutters gewohnter Wahrnehmung angeleichen konnte. Ich musste nur die Sprache der “Aktuellen Kamera” studieren und Denis’ Ehrgeiz als Filmregisseur anstacheln.**

While constructing a world that defines the foreign, Alex encounters the elusive quality of reference. Word and image are aligned with meaning in the first films Alex and Denis make, but the more sophisticated their films get, the further the narration moves away from the images, until it completely contradicts our visual memory and prevents the particular correspondence between signifier and signified anticipated by the viewer accessing her own visual memory of historical events.

Christiane’s escape from her bedroom into a chaos of western cars and furniture in what she considers the GDR calls for the third level of filmmaking, since her outing inspires a creative explanation for the onslaught of foreign westerners into her pre-fall Eden. Newscaster Denis reports that Erich Honecker is allowing citizens from the West to seek asylum in the GDR. Moreover the GDR is giving each newcomer “welcome money.” Denis overturns our referential system as viewers, since we are familiar with the announcement, but the other way around. Alex’s voice-over acknowledges after this film, “Irgendwie musste ich zugeben, dass mein Spiel verselbstständigte. Die DDR, die ich für meine Mutter schuf, wurde immer mehr die DDR, die ich mir vielleicht gewünscht hätte.” The ominous elements in the former East, from the ubiquitous Stasi to censorship, are noticeably absent from Alex’s utopia. Here, Becker taps into construction of the East as idealized memory, the Ostalgie theme of works like Thomas Brussig’s novel (and film with Leander Haussmann) *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999).

The fourth and last film in the series of Alex’s history rewrites is the most constructed, idealistic, and unlikely of all, but it is nevertheless the final stage of inoculation into a healthier realm that embraces a vague sort of equivalence instead of referentiality. Christiane has told her children the truth about her husband, who did not defect to the West for another woman as she had led them to believe, but had fled and had expected them to follow. Confronting her past and her long-repressed fear of losing her children causes a second heart attack

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15 The reasons given for people wanting to come to the East to live—unemployment, an uncertain future, and Neo-Nazi activity in the West—were concerns voiced in the former East about the West. Ironically, they now apply to the former East itself.
that motivates Alex, who is worried that she might die, to locate his father in the West and bring him to her.

Having been reunited with his father and learned complex family truths that resist a clear assignment of guilt, Alex is ready to accept the gray area and heal. He is prepared to face a not so ideal present and past, and he wants to make a film for his mother that announces the border opening. The resulting film is also the most technically advanced. First, an authentic clip shows Honecker resigning and congratulating someone. Denis’s commentary reports that the man is Sigmund Jähn (Stefan Walz), the first German astronaut in 1978, who has supposedly just been named head of the party and chairman of the state council. Following this announcement, Alex casts a taxi driver who resembles Jähn in the star role of the film that he has made with Denis. The man is possibly the former astronaut, Alex’s idealized childhood father figure, but Becker teases the viewer by leaving the referentiality open and declining to say whether the man is or is not Jähn. We have to entertain the notion that he simply may be similar. In this film, Jähn announces the opening of the borders to achieve socialist ideals, i.e., not only dreaming about, but realizing a better world by approaching others.16

Each level of Alex and Denis’s filmmaking has separated word and image a little further, until in this last film they are completely at odds with our memories of events and reach the limits of visual rhetoric in a network of non-correspondence. While we watch footage of the Wall coming down, First Secretary Jähn comments on happy Westerners entering the East, but our visual memory tells us we are watching Easterners enter the West. As familiar images become foreign to spectators, they appear without a referential foreign, and we wonder which ideology experimented with manipulated and exchangeable images first.

The comedy of shifting reference points in Alex’s films takes visual form in Becker’s film as a comedy of inscrutable gazes exchanged among the viewers of Alex and Denis’s fourth film premiering in Christiane’s hospital room. Entangled in a confusion of signification, Alex’s viewers demonstrate how ambiguous and indeterminate the concept of foreign is on personal and political levels in post-Wall Germany. Alex is sure he is fooling Christiane with his tale of the Wall opening and Westerners hurrying eastward. Lara knows that Christiane knows (or does she?) and Alex doesn’t, and so on. Everyone has a different, unrevealed referent for any single image in Alex’s film. As spectators, we can emerge with Alex from our coma-like fixation and heal, Becker

16 Alex has Jähn read from cue cards: “Sozialismus heisst sich nicht einzumauern, sondern Sozialismus heisst auf den andern zuzugehen, mit den anderen zu leben, nicht von einer besseren Welt zu träumen, sondern sie wahrzumachen. Ich habe mich daher entschlossen, die Grenzen der DDR zu öffnen.”
suggests, when we can cope with an elusive, indiscernible foreign in an economy of constructed images and ideologies.

Becker’s film is not only about filmmaking, but also about creating illusion and referential systems that situate the foreign. It explores deliberately constructed memory, as well as the unconscious nature of memory fabrication, and implicitly locates memory in the realm of mental-visual film. A Foreign Affair suggests that history recorded as news images transmits the truth about the foreign. Refusing to distinguish between inserted news clips and narrative filmmaking, Good Bye, Lenin! obfuscates the foreign and reveals instead the exchangeable nature and production of images and “truth” in Alex’s films. Finding the foreign in A Foreign Affair works because the film locates a referent in visual history; it doesn’t work in Good Bye, Lenin! because the Becker film and the Alex-Denis films befuddle anyone looking for reference.

References

WHERE HAVE ALL THE GUEST WORKERS GONE? 
TRANSCULTURAL ROLE-PLAY 
AND PERFORMATIVE IDENTITIES 
IN FATIH AKIN’S *GEGEN DIE WAND* (2004) 

KARIN LORNSEN

In this paper, I analyze Fatih Akin’s suburban melodrama *Gegen die Wand* (*Head On*, 2004) in light of transnational filmmaking. The concept of transculturality, developed in recent cultural theories in particular by Wolfgang Welsch, stresses the global and local interconnectedness of cultural forms, defining a more adequate standpoint in the description of a complex Turkish-German relationship than the popular ethnocentric models of multiculturalism and interculturalism. This approach starts with the question of the cultural self-awareness of a post-migrant generation in Germany in allusion to Rey Chow’s thoughts on cultural authenticity and representation in her renowned essay “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” This question, variously asked by Westerners who demand a certain otherness from those regarded as “others,” could be transferred into the German context as “Where have all the guest workers gone?”: it reflects the numerous ethnocentric commentaries following in the aftermath of Akin’s successful production.

One might assume that indisputable global migration processes, border traffic, and multi-medial interconnectedness would also trigger reconception of nation’s literary canon, so that the participation of immigrants and their descendants in the cultural production of “German” literature would be a self-evident normality. However, the ambivalent reception of Akin’s fourth successful motion picture 1 *Gegen die Wand* shows that works by non-German artists are still labeled as ethnic or minority cinema and interpreted in terms of

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certain stereotypical features of a “marginal” art scene. The movie, however, stresses the dissimilarity of the two main characters, Sibel and Cahit, who appear polymorphic and antagonistic despite a shared Turkish heritage. Their differences in age, gender, language ability, social ties, and interests erode widespread notions of a uniform, maladjusted post-migrant entity promoted by German media. The movie points out different shades of cultural expression that move beyond the “defiled image” (Chow 1994, 52) of the mute and lecherous Gastarbeiter or his female counterpart, the veiled and submissive Suleika.2 Gegen die Wand refrains from a meta-cultural standpoint and from a limited portrayal of ethnic phenomena in cultural contact zones, addressing instead existential problems of metropolitan urbanites. Thus, the story is ultimately about adolescence and passionate love, the experiences of two people grappling with their emotions and negotiating their own sense of identity. The following examination begins with an overview of the portrayal of Turkish immigrants and their descendents in “German” cinema since the recruitment of foreign labor in the 1960s. In contrast to early attempts to grasp immigrant’s living condition in stereotypical figures and settings, recent new voices of a “cinema in transit” not only challenge borders–fixed concepts based on production locations and casts–but also the conventionalization of characters and fictional spaces. The analysis then addresses issues of postmodern hybridity, transculturality and cultural modes of social mise-en-scène based on current models of film scholarship and cultural criticism. These perspectives on forms of cultural expressions are exemplified by a juxtaposition of Gegen die Wand’s two main characters. The focus of the analyses lies on the first part of the movie, which is set in Hamburg.

Cinema of normality? The reviews of Gegen die Wand

The plot of Akin’s film is straightforward and is driven by crucial conflicts: Cahit Tomruk (Birol Ünel) is a German of Turkish descent in his forties living in Hamburg. He has lost the will to live after the death of his wife and becomes an alcoholic. One night, he crashes into a wall (hence the title), and barely survives. At the psychiatric clinic he is taken to, the youthful Sibel Güner (Sibel Kekilli), who has also tried to commit suicide, approaches him. She asks Cahit to carry out a formal marriage with her so that she can break away from her restrictive parents’ home. Cahit is turned off by the idea at first, but then he agrees to take part in this plan. As Sibel tells him frankly that she prefers an

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2 Karin Yesilada (1997) observes the sometimes one-sided and pejorative literary portrayal of the Turkish women penned by “German-German” as well as “Turkish-German” authors and filmmakers. For the tendency of reaffirming the stereotypical image of the Turkish woman living in Germany, she coins the term “Suleikarism.”
independent sex life, they live for a while as roommates with separate private lives. Eventually they fall in love, and things take a different turn as Cahit kills one of Sibel’s lovers out of jealousy. While he is in prison, she goes to Istanbul, and he follows her upon his release. The film’s Turkish setting first depicts Sibel’s self-abandonment as she exposes herself to the criminal milieu of Istanbul. Drug abuse, rape, and stabbing almost cost her life, but her miraculous survival marks a turn in her attitude. She chooses middle class family life in Istanbul with her new Turkish husband and infant daughter; even a re-encounter with the ex-convict Cahit a few years later does not alter her decision.

The second and shorter part of the movie was met with criticism. Some accused the film of victimizing Turkish women and thus reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Despite overemphasizing Sibel’s constraining family situation, such evaluation disregards the heroines’ subtle play with clichés that serves not only as a protective mechanism to deal with her family, but also as a tactic to steer viewers’ opinions. Furthermore, drugs and alcohol, promiscuity and sexual abuse, excessive lifestyles, and decaying social ties underline the generally gloomy tenor of the movie and are features shared by most of the Hanseatic city’s inhabitants.

It is significant how naturally Fatih Akin’s melodrama was embraced as German filmmaking once it gained national and international success. The low-budget production was the winner of the European Movie Award (2004) and the Golden Bear (2004), marking the first time in eighteen years that a submission from Germany managed to take the Berlinale’s top prize. In the aftermath of all the awards, the media were eager to determine the genre of the movie and above all to pin it down to a national category: Die Zeit evaluates Akin’s success as German Migrantenkino “that moves self-confidently between the worlds;” (Nicodermus 2004, 9). Hamburg’s senator for cultural affairs declares Akin as “representative of German high culture;” (in Rodek 2004); the nationalistic Turkish newspaper Türkiye celebrates the “Golden Bear for the Turkish cinema” (quoted in Gülfirat 2004), and Die FAZ applauds the jury’s decision as fresh blood for a stagnated “world cinema” (Althen 2004, 35).

Not only the critics disagree about the place of Turkish-German cinema; it also seems as if Akin’s movie is raising a debate on the nature of a post-migrant stratum. On the one hand, the “hybrid” descendants, as depicted by the spirited Sibel and the apathetic Cahit, are embraced as “Avantgarde der Widersprüche in einer glattgebügelten Gesellschaft” (Diez 2003, 19). On the other hand, the Turkish-German actress Sibel Kikelli is branded as “rassige

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1 Screenwriter Hatice Ayten remarks that Sibel’s period of life in Istanbul runs the risk of retreating from the initial deconstruction of female clichés suggested in the first part of the story line.
Where Have All the Guest Workers Gone?

deutsche Filmdiva by the German media, and Akin is confronted with questions about Gastarbeiter issues during press conferences.

In view of this discordance about the status of artists of non-German heritage, it seems as if the “cinema of normality,” which Die Zeit claims is enunciated by Akin’s movie, has to be repeatedly justified. Seemingly, even after four decades of postwar immigration, the majority of German public—driven by a defaming popular discourse—still has difficulties coming to terms with an amalgamation of cultural expressions on German ground.

Transcultural point of departure

To avoid the slippery slope of a metacultural analytical framework that necessarily applies one’s own ethnocentric perspective, the following analysis follows a transcultural point of departure. The concept of transculturality acknowledges the reciprocal influences of various modes of representation and cultural practice occurring especially in the contact zones of metropolitan areas. The contemporary German theorist Wolfgang Welsch, whose definition of transculturality shall serve as a guideline, suggests abolishing anachronistic models of monolithic cultural contact. He argues that transculturality is, in the first place, a consequence “of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures” (198), and it describes more adequately than a multi- or intercultural paradigm the interlinkages of postmodern living conditions.

In the past years, few attempts have been made to apply this anthropological term as an analytical tool in film studies. For instance, David MacDougall ventures beyond the Eurocentric limits of epistemology to confront the philosophical implications of contemporary transculturalism. He considers ethnographic film a more powerful media than ethnographic writing. Films transcend “culture” “by subordinating cultural differences to other, more visible contents (including other kinds of differences such as physical ones) and by underscoring commonalities which cut across cultural boundaries” (252).

A transcultural approach also addresses recent requests for a re-evaluation of a Turkish-German cinema. Hamid Naficy (2001, 11) has coined the term “accented cinema” as the product of the dual of “postcolonial displacement and postmodern scattering.” Deniz Göktürk (2000, 6) advocates the notion of a transnational cinema “exploring the pleasures of hybridity.”

In the course of popular appropriation of postcolonial terminologies in recent German migrant discourse, one is tempted to label Sibel’s and Cahit’s idiosyncratic biographies as “hybrid.” In the simple affirmative employment of

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4 In the aftermath of the Berlinale Award the German tabloid Die Bildzeitung presented Kekilli’s porn past in a race-baiting manner (c.f. Nicodemus 2004).

5 Ibid.