

Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland: Transcript

Language, History and the Representation of Turkish-German Labour Migration in

Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland (2011)

Hello. My name is Lizzie Stewart. Today I am going to be talking about *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland* (*Almanya – Welcome to Germany*). *Almanya* is a relatively recent film which takes a humorous, affectionate and often sentimental or nostalgic look at the history of Turkish labour migration to Germany. The film is a family affair both in terms of its authorship and its content. It was written and directed by the Şamdereli sisters, Nesrin and Yasemin Şamdereli, and focuses on the story of three generations of the fictional Yilmaz family: Hüseyin Yilmaz and his wife Fatma, who migrate to Germany; their four children Veli, Muhamed, Leyla and Ali, who spend their childhood in both Turkey and Germany; and Hüseyin and Fatma's German-born grandchildren, Cenk and Canan.

The comic and often fantastical story of Hüseyin and his family's experience of migration and their initial encounter with life in Germany is told by the film's narrator, Canan, who is Hüseyin's granddaughter. Canan, we discover, is a university student, who lives with her secret English boyfriend, and has just discovered she is pregnant. While Canan is concerned about revealing her pregnancy to her family, the majority of the film consists of her telling the story of her family's migration in response to two questions raised by her young cousin Cenk. The first, prompted by a difficult day for Cenk at school is: 'Was sind wir denn jetzt? Türken oder Deutsche?' (What are we then? Turks or Germans?). The second, related question is: 'Wenn Oma und Opa Türken sind, warum sind sie denn hier?' (If Gran and

Grandpa are Turks, then why are they here?').¹ While Canan's voice guides us through this story, it is Cenk's imagination of her narration which populates and animates it.²

The story of the family's past continues to unfold in flashback as a means of entertaining Cenk during the family's journey to Turkey to visit their newly acquired holiday home there. This house has been bought by Hüseyin, the grandfather, who reveals his purchase of the house in Turkey on the same day that he and his wife Fatma announce that they have become German citizens. This is also the day that Canan begins her story for Cenk. While one level of the plot is set in the 1960s to the 1970s, this focus on the past is framed by the present day concerns, dilemmas and relationships within the family, as well as by the physical and metaphorical journey which the family undertakes.³

Almanya premiered at the prestigious German film festival, the Berlinale, in 2011, the year which also marks the fiftieth anniversary of the initiation of Turkish labour migration to West Germany.⁴ With this historical moment in mind, in this talk I am going to focus on the

¹ *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland*, dir. by Yasemin Şamdereli (Concorde, 2011). Note on Turkish spelling. I have used the Turkish spelling of the director's name, rather than germanising the spelling. The names of characters in the film are written as listed in the film credits.

² Ulrike Irrgang, 'Von despotischen Türken und kaltherzigen Deutschen: Zur Inszenierung und Destruktion kultureller Stereotype in der Komödie', *Global Media Journal*, 3.2 (2013): 1-27 (p. 19).

³ For a discussion of *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland* as a 'road movie' see Daniela Berghahn, *Far-Flung Families in Film: The Diasporic Family in Contemporary European Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 12 and pp. 69-75.

⁴ The coincidence of the year of the premiere with this anniversary is also highlighted in several recent publications: Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel, 'Introduction', *Turkish German Cinema in the New Millennium: Sites, Sounds and Screens*, ed. by Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. 1- 16 (p. 1); Kathrin Emeis and Julia Boog, 'Almanya oder Deutschland Revisited: Der Culture-Clash im deutsch-türkischen Kino – 50 Jahre später', in *50 Jahre Türkische Arbeitsmigration in Deutschland*, ed. by Şeyda Özil et al., *Türkisch-deutsche Studien*, 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), pp. 165-81.

narration of the past within the film. The present day narrative is also important, however, and is something that you can discuss further, using the discussion questions that accompany this video.

I will begin by briefly explaining how Turkish labour migration to Germany began and by relating this to the comic and often fantastical representation of this history in the film. I will then explore how this helps us understand the use of language in the film and why language is an important theme in Turkish-German cinema. Finally, I will look at the reception of *Almanya* as a mainstream comedy and will suggest that it is not only the ‘feel good’ humour of the film, but also the film’s concern with the history of labour migration, which allows it both to enter and to shape the German mainstream.

The History of Turkish Labour Migration to Germany and its Representation in *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland*

Large-scale Turkish labour migration to Germany began in 1961, when the two countries signed recruitment agreements designed to provide the post-war economic boom in West Germany with temporary labour or so-called ‘Gastarbeiter’ (‘guest workers’). As this rather contradictory compound noun suggests, this migration was initially intended to be temporary, with so-called ‘guestworkers’ to be employed on the ‘Rotationsprinzip’ or rotation principle. This meant that individual workers were expected to return to Turkey after two years and then be replaced by a new set of workers, rather than individuals being employed on longer contracts. Such a system proved unsustainable, however, both for German employers, who protested against the lack of workforce continuity this created for them, and, as *Almanya*

shows, for many of the so-called *Gastarbeiter* themselves.⁵ In the film's flashback narrative, then, we see the young Hüseyin bring his family to settle in Germany after an initial period in which he worked there alone. This decision is prompted by the revelation that his son has been skipping school back in Turkey and so it is a decision that is first and foremost about keeping the family together.⁶

Within *Almanya*, the grandson Cenk imagines the initiation of this migration in a fantastical way. Canan explains to him that the *Gastarbeiter* were 'gerufen' or 'called' by the German government and Cenk imagines this call being heard not only in Italy and Turkey, but also in the North Pole. While historically *Gastarbeiter* did indeed come not only from Turkey but also from Italy, Spain and Morocco, the inclusion of the North Pole and Eskimos is Cenk's own exaggerated addition to the bare facts of the story.⁷ This exaggeration is typical of the comic, fantastical mode in which the narrative of the family's past is shown to the viewer.⁸ It adds colour to the story both figuratively and literally – note the difference between the

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the *Rotationsprinzip* see Rita Chin, *The Guest Worker Question in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 48-51. The *Rotationsprinzip* is also briefly mentioned in Hake and Mennel, p. 3. Liesbeth Minnaard also provides a clear and concise history of the history of labour migration to Germany: Liesbeth Minnaard, *New Germans, New Dutch: Literary Interventions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), pp. 19 – 25.

⁶ For a discussion of family reunion measures and the way they shaped migration see Berghahn, p.31. Berghahn also points out that, unlike most films about migration in which 'transnational migration destabilises or even fractures the natural family', in *Almanya* '[m]obility is conceived of as continuity and transformation rather than rupture' (Berghahn, p. 72).

⁷ This episode is also mentioned in Berghahn, pp. 70 – 71.

⁸ On exaggeration, see Irrgang, p.19.

colours used in the scenes which take place in flashback and the scenes which are set in present day Germany.⁹

Daniela Berghahn highlights Cenk's perspective as one of 'magical realism', an artistic technique which is often used to present a heightened and alternative view of 'reality'.¹⁰ Cenk's perspective throughout the film is therefore not only comical, but might also be read as a comment on the 'real' historical origins of labour migration. By suggesting that the call for workers reached places as different and disparate as Turkey and the North Pole, for example, Cenk's version of the story highlights the lack of pre-existing relationship between Germany and the countries with which it did strike recruitment agreements. This stands in contrast to post-war migration to the UK and France, which mainly took place from former colonies. Turkey and Germany have never stood in a colonial relationship to one another and there was little systematic contact between Turkey and Germany in the years prior to the initiation of the labour migration agreements of the 1960s.¹¹

Language as a Theme in *Almanya* and in Turkish-German Cinema

The newness of the Turkish-German encounter is important for understanding the use of language in *Almanya*. As the links between Turkey and Germany were relatively minimal prior to this large-scale labour migration, the majority of Turkish labour migrants had been

⁹ The use of colour in the film is commented on at various points in Berghahn's analysis, see, pp. 70 – 73.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 70 – 71.

¹¹ For discussions on the differences and similarities between the history of post-war migration to Germany and the UK see, for example, Monika Albrecht, 'Postcolonialism, Islam, and Contemporary Germany', *Transit*, 7.1 (2011), 1 – 25 (p.11) and Chin, pp.265 – 73.

exposed to little or no German before arriving to work in Germany. Language has therefore been a central theme in literature and film of Turkish-German migration.¹²

This theme is continued in the very title of *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland*. The word *Almanya* means ‘Germany’ in Turkish, and this mixing of German and Turkish in the title of the film reflects the way in which the main characters also switch between languages when talking with each other. From the very opening of the film, on a linguistic level we are presented with a format that reflects Canan’s initial answer to Cenk’s question about whether he and his family are Turkish or German. As Canan says ‘man kann auch beides sein’ (‘you can also be both’).¹³ This message is reflected in both the title and the use of language of the film.

The use of language in the film might also lead us to ask ourselves who the film addresses. As many critics have noted, the linguistic joke in the film is that, within the flashback scenes, the Turkish conversations take place in German, and conversations originally in German are rendered in an invented nonsense language that draws on Scandinavian and Slavic sounds amongst others.¹⁴ At first, it might seem that this device is for the benefit or pleasure of the ‘mainstream’ or German-German viewer. As Julia Boog and Kathrin Emeis highlight, the use of language certainly puts the spectator in the position of the *Gastarbeiter* and their families,

¹² Chin, p. 129.

¹³ *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland*.

¹⁴ The language of the film is commented on by most critics, the majority of whom also connect this to the use of nonsense language to replace German in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940). See, for example, Emeis and Boog, pp. 174-75, p. 177; Berghahn, p. 71; Irrgang, p. 20. Brigitta B. Wagner highlights the Scandinavian influence on this nonsense-language in her article, ‘The Sixty-First Berlin International Film Festival: Old and New From Almanya’, *The Germanic Review: Literature, Theory and Culture*, 86.3 (2011): 221- 24 (p. 233).

who in the 1960s were newly arrived not only in a foreign country, but also in a foreign language. So is this a film intended to ‘educate’ Germans about Turks?¹⁵

In answering that question, it is important to note that within the world of the film the linguistic switch is demanded by Cenk, the younger cousin. As we see in the present-day scenes of the film, Cenk speaks mainly German at home with his (we assume) German-German mother and his Turkish-German father. We also see him struggle with his Turkish on the family holiday to Turkey. When Canan begins to narrate conversations which originally took place in Turkish in their original language therefore, Cenk asks ‘Können sie nicht alle Deutsch reden?’ (‘Can’t they all speak German?’)¹⁶ So, the use of language is about communication with the generation whose grandparents and great-grandparents first migrated to Germany, as much as it is about communication with an audience who may not have grown up in a family ‘mit Migrationshintergrund’ (‘with a background of migration’), but whose nation-state and daily environment have also been shaped by those who came to Germany in the second half of the 20th Century.

While language is a typical theme of artistic works about and by Turkish-Germans, the use of a ‘kitschy, feel good’ humour to engage with this theme is unusual.¹⁷ In earlier portrayals of this theme, a concern with language or the lack of German exhibited by *Gastarbeiter* tended

¹⁵ The ‘educational’ and bridge-building ‘potential’ of work by Turkish-German artists has frequently been highlighted. Some scholars and many Turkish-German artists themselves consider this a restrictive understanding of this work, however, and argue that it reduces the extent to which films, literature and theatre by Turkish-German artists are valued in their own right: see, for example, Leslie A. Adelson, ‘Against Between – Ein Manifest gegen das Dazwischen’, in *Text und Kritik*, 9.6, Special Issue on *Literatur und Migration* ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold (2006), 36-46 (pp. 38-39).

¹⁶ *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland*; Irrgang, p. 20.

¹⁷ The quotation here is from Wagner, p. 223. The use of humour in the film is the subject of the articles by Emeis and Boog, as well as by Irrgang.

to be addressed as part of a focus on social problems, with the *Gastarbeiter* cast as victim or cause of these problems.¹⁸ As Boog and Emeis point out, *Almanya* returns to the themes of these early films, but not to their tone:

Zwar thematisiert der Film [*Almanya*] all die großen, tragischen Themen der ‘Betroffenheit’ von Heimat(verlust) bis hin zur Identitätssuche, doch geschieht dies in eben jenem erleichternden und enthemmenden Modus des Witzes, der mit viel Sinn für die komischen und bizarren Details dieses deutsch-türkischen Zusammentreffens den großen Verletzungen und den Kontroversen um Integration und Leitkultur etwas von ihrer Schärfe nehmen kann.

(The film certainly does thematise all the great, tragic themes of ‘Betroffenheit’ [the experience of being negatively affected by migration], from home(lessness) to the search for identity, but this takes place in the light and disinhibiting mode of the joke, which, with a delicate sense for the funny and bizarre details of this German-Turkish encounter, can take the edge off injured feelings and off the controversies surrounding integration and Leitkultur [the idea of a German guiding culture]).¹⁹

¹⁸ Hake and Mennel provide a good summary of the history of Turkish-German cinema and highlight this tendency on pp. 4-5. See also Wright, p. 149. Further key articles on Turkish-German cinema include: Deniz Göktürk, ‘Turkish Delight – German Fright: Migrant Identities in Transnational Cinema’, in *Mediated Identities*, ed. by Deniz Derman et al. (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2001), pp. 131 – 49; Rob Burns, ‘Turkish-German Cinema: From Cultural Resistance to Transnational Cinema?’, in *German Cinema: Since Unification*, ed. by David Clarke (London and New York: Continuum, 2006) pp. 127 – 34. A particularly useful discussion of comedy can be found in Karin E. Yeşilada, ‘Turkish-German Screen Power – The Impact of Young Turkish Immigrants on German TV and Film’, *German as a Foreign Language*, 9.1 (2008): 73 – 99.

¹⁹ Emeis and Boog, p. 179.

We might want to question whether taking the edge off such debates obscures the negative effects which ideas such as a *Leitkultur* and particular policies can have on postmigrant Germans.²⁰ In the case of the use of language in the film, however, the joke does more than take away the sting of the problems: it also shifts the focus from the linguistic ‘failures’ of the first generation of Turkish *Gastarbeiter* to the resourcefulness of this generation in dealing with the challenges presented by migration, such as having to negotiate the language barrier. The focus is therefore placed firmly on the successes of that generation. As highlighted by the actor Fahri Ogün Yardin, who plays the young Hüseyin in the flashback scenes, the film thus acts as a ‘Denkmal’ or monument to the achievements of the first generation.²¹

²⁰ Berghahn highlights ‘the real hard-ship and marginalisation’ faced by *Gastarbeiter* and their families, p. 70. This is a question which Sara Ahmed raises when looking at *Bend It Like Beckham*, a British film often mentioned alongside *Almanya*: Sara Ahmed, ‘Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness’, *New Formations*, 63 (2007 – 2008): 121 – 37.

²¹ Fahri Ogün Yardin, ‘Extras’, *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland*, dir. by Yasemin Şamdereli (Concorde, 2011).

Turkish-German Comedy and History Enter the Mainstream

While the plot of *Almanya* focuses on the arrival of the fictional Yilmaz family in Germany, the popularity of the film is frequently considered to represent the arrival of Turkish-German cinema in the mainstream. Sabine Hake and Barbara Mennel, for example, see the film as ‘asserting the new normalcy of Turkish Germans and, by extension, German multicultural society.’²²

The word ‘normal’ is a very loaded one in the German context. As you will see in many of the other videos on this site it is often used when talking about contemporary Germany as a country moving away from identification with its extremely problematic past.²³ The remembrance of that past has also been used to shape the contemporary nation state though. Perhaps paradoxically this creates a point of identification which leaves out people whose parents or grandparents arrived in Germany after the Nazi period, and who were uninvolved in that element of recent German history.²⁴ In the final part of this talk, I am going to focus

²² Hake and Mennel, p. 7.

²³ On normalisation see the work collected in Stuart Taberner and Paul Cooke (eds), *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006).

²⁴ Annette Seidel Arpacı, ‘National Memory’s Schlüsselkinder: Migration, Pedagogy, and German Remembrance Culture’, in *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Paul Cooke (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), pp. 105-20.

on arguing that it is not only the ‘feel good’ humour of *Almanya*, but also its assertion that migration history *is* German history that allows it to join in this ‘new normalcy’.²⁵

According to Dagmar Brunow, who looks at documentary films which address the history of labour migration to Germany:

Die Geschichte der Arbeitsmigration nach Deutschland [ist] unzureichend in der deutschsprachigen Geschichtsschreibung verankert [...]. Durch die Erinnerungslücke im kulturellen Gedächtnis Deutschlands wird den Nachkommen der ‘Gastarbeiter’ immer noch die Zugehörigkeit zur Nation in Abrede gestellt.

(The history of labour migration to Germany is not sufficiently anchored in German-language historiography [...]. As a result of the gaps in the cultural memory of Germany, the descendants of the ‘guest-workers’ still continue to be denied membership of the nation).²⁶

Given the general lack of attention to this history in the public sphere, Brunow also highlights the tendency for the history of the *Gastarbeiter* to be preserved in family stories and passed on orally.²⁷ Within the world of the film *Almanya*, an oral narrative becomes part of history when Hüseyin is invited to give a speech in front of Angela Merkel and the German nation at

²⁵ The idea of *Almanya* as a ‘heritage film’ which might ‘claim a space for the collective memory of immigrants, which has been elided in the official memory of the host nations’ is also raised in Paul Cooke, *Diasporic Communities and Heritage Film: An Email Exchange with Daniela Berghahn*, *Screening European Heritage*, 31 May 2013, <<http://arts.leeds.ac.uk/screeningeuropeanheritage/diasporic-communities-and-heritage-film-an-email-exchange-with-daniela-berghahn/>> (15/02/2014).

²⁶ Dagmar Brunow, ‘Film als kulturelles Gedächtnis der Arbeitsmigration: Fatih Akın’s *Wir haben vergessen zurückzukehren*’, in *50 Jahre Türkische Arbeitsmigration in Deutschland*, ed. by Şeyda Özil et al., *Türkisch-deutsche Studien*, 2 (Göttingen: V&R, 2011), pp. 183 – 204, (p. 184).

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 185.

a fictional event called ‘Deutschland sagt Danke.’ Although Hüseyin dies before the event takes place, Cenk, who he rehearsed his planned speech with, is invited to tell his story instead.²⁸ This fictive event arguably serves to highlight the way in which the film wishes the history of labour migration to Germany to be remembered; not just by individual families but also as part of the memory of the nation-state.

Popular films often do shape the imagination of a nation, and *Almanya* has been hugely popular.²⁹ This ‘ideal’ version of the presentation of the history of migration within the film may itself be a step towards this type of memory outside the world of the film. As Canan says ‘eine Familie braucht eine Geschichte’ (a family needs a story/history). Canan’s narration, as imagined through Cenk’s eyes, provides a story and a history which the film seems to suggest is needed not just by the Yilmaz family alone, but by the Federal Republic of Germany as a whole.

Almanya has been referred to as ‘A *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) for migration histories’ by a number of reviewers and critics.³⁰ Elements common to both films include a rich and warm visual style, a concern with the issues involved in conforming to West German ‘norms’, and both can be considered part of a turn to include ‘other’ histories in the broader narrative of Germany’s past.³¹ What I have focused on today is the ways in which *Almanya* uses language and comedy to stake a claim in the German nation-state by adding to the story of Germany’s past. This has left little time to discuss other important aspects of the film, such as its approach to issues of assimilation and integration, the use of comedy, and the mixture of fact

²⁸ Berghahn also discusses this scene, p. 71.

²⁹ Berghahn notes that ‘with 1.4 million admissions in Germany alone’ the film is ‘to date the commercially most successful film’, p. 41.

³⁰ Here I am quoting Wagner, p. 223.

³¹ For more information on *Good Bye Lenin!* see the materials relating to this film on the rest of GFLI website: <<http://germanfilm.co.uk/goodbye-lenin/>>.

and fiction in the film. However, these are areas which you can explore further using the discussion questions which accompany this video.

In concluding this talk, I also want to draw your attention to the way in which re-imagining the past has implications for the future. It is important to highlight that the film looks not just backward, but also forward, particularly through the trope of Canan's pregnancy and the focus on the youngest family member, Cenk. The film imagines the world which it would like not only Cenk, but also Canan's unborn baby, to enter into as one in which individuals and nation states are taken as 'die Summe' ('the sum-total') of everything they have experienced, and one where a proliferation of modes of belonging is possible.³² This idealised world is one in which individuals, families and countries are no longer limited or defined either by their passports or by the need to belong to 'entweder die eine Mannschaft oder die andere' ('either one team or the other').³³

³² Canan delivers a monologue to this effect at the end of the film. As Berghahn highlights Canan is quoting postcolonial writer Salman Rushdie here, p. 74.

³³ *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland*.

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