

## German Film: Race and Migration. Transcript

Jo: We are going to be talking about race and migration in the films *Almanya: Willkommen in Deutschland* and *Gegen die Wand*. What can we learn about questions of race and migration in Germany today from these two films?

Sophie: Something that's interesting about *Gegen die Wand* is there are no problems between Turkish-Germans and 'ethnic' Germans represented. Chait's friends are 'ethnically' German and, although both the main characters move to Turkey by the end of the film, race relations in Germany seem to work very well.

Lizzie: Obviously *Almanya* is a comedy so it doesn't really dwell in the difficult elements of racism in Germany. There is one moment where it comes up which is quite a subtle moment when one of the main characters Canan is on the tube and a woman comes on with three children and an old German woman opposite her starts muttering about people not taking the pill and 'don't they have anything better to do?', 'haven't they learnt anything?', so this is the only moment where you get racist style language coming through and Canan identifies it as that and asserts herself against it. So, it is very much in the background and it focuses much more on the young child's identity conflict. It is interesting that he is the only one who really has an identity conflict in the film and it doesn't come from within the family as much as from outside: it comes from some conversations at school.

Jo: Generally films have one clear protagonist, but in both of these films there isn't one clear main character. So, in *Gegen die Wand* it would be Cahit or Sibel, and in *Almanya* it could be

the grandson or the grandfather. Why do you think these films have multiple main characters?

Sophie: I think in *Gegen die Wand* it has both the male and female main characters to show that it isn't just Turkish-German women who can potentially have problems as has been shown by a lot of Turkish-German cinema in the past. It is also important to show how different Cahit and Sibel are in terms of how they engage with their ethnic background. Sibel has a very traditional family and a certain fondness for Turkish culture even though there is lots of tension between her and her family, whereas Cahit has rejected his Turkish background completely and it's only Sibel who teaches him how to engage with it more.

Lizzie: I think *Almanya* is also about moving away from these one-dimensional figures who you get in a lot of the earlier films which include the *Gastarbeiter* figure. Basically, the more characters you have, the more different personalities can come through and I think what is interesting is how idiosyncratic the characters are in *Almanya*. For example, there's the one uncle who is obsessed with Coca Cola, an aunt who is obsessed with becoming a bin woman, and these are not typical Turkish-German obsessions in any way. So, there is a lot about presenting the characters as individuals, operating in a variety of systems because you have three generations of the family. Each of these idiosyncratic characters is operating in a different context; they are experiencing different elements of migration and of the after effects of migration.

Jo: Do you think it is a problem that these films tell the story from the point-of-view of the Turkish characters and not Germans? Do you think these films are too one-sided?

Sophie: I would point out that in *Gegen die Wand*, as we have just discussed, both the main characters are very much Turkish-Germans. Germanness is a big part of their identity. So, you've almost got those two perspectives in one. Also, the majority of German films are from an 'ethnically' German perspective and would have Turkish-German characters in smaller, stereotypical roles and so it is kind of the turn of the Turkish-German community to have their say.

Jo: These two films explore questions about Turkish immigrants in Germany. Can films about race and migration have appeal outside the country in which they were made or do you think these are German films about German problems?

Lizzie: I think what is interesting about *Almanya* is that it really addresses the specifics of the history of Turkish labour migration. The history of postwar migration to the UK has slightly different roots, it works in a slightly different way, the politics that then happened here are slightly different. So, in a way it is a very German film. At the same time, it's a very comic film, it's a road trip film. It has these elements that are very appealing generally and as we were preparing the videos for this website, the more I talked to people, to friends, about it, the more they were very interested in seeing the films. And *Gegen die Wand* is a passionate, fantastic love story. I can't imagine who wouldn't find something in there!

Sophie: In a review, it was described as 'dripping with sex, drugs and rock and roll' so that has international appeal! I think people can be interested in other cultures and I think there is enough of a parallel in the UK with – not necessarily Turkish immigrants in the UK – but lots

of people in the UK who might come from more conservative Muslim backgrounds and the idea of how they integrate or not can be interesting to people from the UK.

Lizzie: I think it is interesting as well to highlight that they are not just Turkish-German films. They are films with Turkish-German protagonists and perhaps with Turkish-German directors. But *Gegen die Wand*, I think of it in the same way I think of Tarantino films as well. So there are these aesthetic similarities to other films and other genres.

Jo: When we talk about issues of race and migration, terms like ‘immigration’ and ‘multiculturalism’ are often used. When we talk about integration, we talk about immigrants potentially adapting to the culture of the new country, whereas multiculturalism is about immigrants and non-immigrants keeping their cultural identities and living side-by-side and separate. Do you think these films are about fitting in or learning to stand out?

Lizzie: I think there are definitely elements of a fear of becoming too German in *Almanya*. For example, the grandfather Hüseyin, the night before he goes to get his German passport, the night before he legally becomes German, has this nightmare of a German bureaucrat listing the German habits he has to conform to: he has to holiday in Majorca, he must eat pork, these kinds of things. So there is a fear of losing something in becoming German. But there is also an assertion of what being Turkish can bring to Germany. You see this right at the end of the film. Cenk, part of the reason he is asking ‘are we Turkish or are we German?’ is because there is no place on the map of Europe in the classroom for him to place his flag, so he can’t show where he is from. In a little clip at the end, you see him bringing in an extra piece of map for his teacher to put on the wall. So, this is him saying, ‘no, you can just widen

your perspectives a little bit and include me!'. So it is about finding a place to assert particular things from and also saying 'this is the new Germany – make space'.

Sophie: I think this issue is dealt with a bit differently in *Gegen die Wand* because although German culture is shown to have the potential to be liberating: for Sibel, for example, she can go dancing and have sex with lots of different people. However, we are shown Sibel cooking Turkish food, going to Turkish clubs for example. Both Sibel and Cahit do move to Turkey during the film and, although we don't know if they stay there forever, we are shown that it's very important for Turkish-Germans (according to the director) to engage with their Turkish background and they can't live in Germany happily before they have done that.

Lizzie: I think the differences in time between the two films are interesting because the success of *Gegen die Wand* almost makes space for this lighter comedic approach and for this slightly more relaxed approach to integrating your Turkish background into your Germanness. It's only five or six years between them, but it is the work done by *Gegen die Wand* which has a huge effect for later films and it will be interesting to see where that goes next