Hollywood in Altona:
Minority Cinema and the Transnational Imagination

Gerd Gemünden

The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as social practice. . . . The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.

—Arjun Appadurai

At the press screening of his second feature, *Im Juli* (In July) (2000), at the 2001 Berlin Film Festival, director Fatih Akin introduced the film with the following words (in English): “*Im Juli* is a German film. It was made in Germany. [Pause] It was shown here in German theaters.” Vaguely familiar with the film through some reviews, I found Akin’s words puzzling. Why this emphasis on Germany as the film’s country of origin and exhibition? Couldn’t this be assumed since the film was showing in the so-called Neue deutsche Reihe, a sampling of German films from the last year for international journalists who have limited opportunities to see them? And why such an emphatic self-positioning within the national German cinema? To disavow being typecast as a hyphenated filmmaker? To assert a position within a German national cinema that encompasses, rather than marginalizes, Turkish-German directors? Or, more simply, to deflect expectations that *Im Juli* be a follow-up to the portrayal of minority culture of his first feature, *Kurz und schmerzlos* (A short sharp shock), and to assert, instead, the right to make different kinds of films, with different target audiences, in different genres, and with different social concerns?
Akin’s remarks are straightforward and unambiguous, yet they are also puzzling and full of irony. I quote them here because they point toward the difficulty of articulating what German national cinema has come to mean in the new millennium. Over the last ten years, minority filmmakers have emerged as a significant creative force, contributing to what Hamid Naïcy calls “the genre of independent transnational cinema” or what Ella Shoat and Robert Stam label “postcolonial hybrid films,” a development that challenges us to rethink the meaning of “German” in German popular culture. In the first part of this essay, I want to review the function of cinema within the construction of the nation as an imagined community, showing how global and local concerns have overtaken national ones. In the second part, a reading of two films attempts to demonstrate that one very significant agent in this development has been a changed stance toward discourses and representations of Americanization. Fatih Akin’s Kurz und schmerzlos (1998) as well as Angelina Maccarone and Fatima El-Tayeb’s Alles wird gut (Everything will be fine) (1998) register a disavowal of the rhetoric of cultural imperialism and Coca-colonization that was dominant during the 1970s and 1980s, instead presenting U.S. popular culture as liberating and empowering; for the diverse protagonists of these films, it provides a most viable alternative to a German culture that is perceived to be too limiting and exclusive in its insistence on homogeneity, purity, and authenticity. On a deeper political level, the United States is sought out as a model for social and ethnic integration, cultural hybridity, and progressive notions of immigration and citizenship.

In his influential study Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson has linked the emergence of the modern nation-state as a sovereign and limited entity since the eighteenth century to the epistemological, political, and technological changes that have allowed the nation to imagine itself possessing these attributes. A fundamental role in producing such an imaginary has been played by the novel and the newspaper, “creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.” Following Anderson’s concept that the nation is to be understood as a construct that needs to be envisioned and sustained primarily by mass media, recent film theory has addressed the question of how particularly cinema, as the most important mass medium of the twentieth century, participates—in both enabling and critical modes—in representations and discourses of community building. In his recent essay “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema,” Andrew Higson raises the question of the degree to
which Anderson’s concept of the nation—imagined as a limited, finite, and sovereign community—provides an appropriate framework for conceptualizing the specificity of national cinema. Higson suggests that an account of national cinema must acknowledge not only the nationalizing effect of certain discourses and state politics but also the increasingly transnational dimensions of cinematic production, distribution, and reception. The boundaries defining cinema culture, claims Higson, do not coincide with Anderson’s limits of the nation-state. On the contrary, the communities imagined by cinematic means tend to be local or transnational rather than national. In the words of Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake: “[As] the crucial genre of transnational production and global circulation for refigured narratives, [film] offers speculative ground for the transnational imaginary and its contention within national and local communities.”

The emergence of a German-Turkish cinema in Germany during the last ten years needs to be situated within the developments just outlined. Films such as Sommer in Mezra (Summer in Mezra) (Hussi Kutlucan, 1991); Schattenboxer (Shadow boxer) (Lars Becker, 1992); Nach dem Spiel (After the match) (Aysun Bademsoy, 1997); Yara (Yilmaz Arslan, 1998); Aprilkinder (April children) (Yüksel Yavuz, 1998); Ich Chef, du Turnschuh (Me boss, you sneaker) (Hussi Kutlucan, 1998); Dealer (Thomas Arslan, 1999); Lola und Bilidikid (Kutlug Ataman, 1999); Kanak Attack (Lars Becker, 2000); and Im Juli (Akin, 2000) call into question existing definitions of national German cinema. Made by directors born in both Germany and Turkey, the transnational dimension of these films is not anchored in the biography of the filmmakers, nor is it informed by any claim to record authentic or personal experiences. These films form part of a wider European and non-European cinema that is “driven by its sensitivity to the production and consumption of films in conditions of transnationality, liminality, multiculturality, multifocality, and syncretism.”

These films from the last decade introduce us to German-Turkish relationships that differ significantly from those represented in the New German Cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s, taking leave of the stereotype of portraying immigrant communities in Germany as lost between two cultures and insisting instead on fluid notions of German and Turkish identity. They thus confirm Deniz Göktürk’s observations regarding “the development from a [1970s] ‘cinema of duty’ to ‘the pleasures of hybridity’,” which she sees exemplified in Sinan Cetin’s Berlin in Berlin (1993). Yet the films cited previously are even more playful and ironic in their reversal of cultural stereotypes than
the example she chooses to discuss, showing many incidents of humorous enactments of ethnicity; ridiculing essentialized notions of racial or ethnic identity; and relying on performance and masquerade, comedy, irony, and pastiche to portray the complex lives of minorities in Germany. They also attest to a change in German popular culture, allowing the vernacular a flexibility to reflect these changes that high culture apparently still lacks (see also Sabine von Dirke, “Hip Hop Made in Germany,” this vol.).

As Göktürk shows, representation of so-called guest workers and other minorities in films such as *Katzelmacher* (Fassbinder, 1969); *Angst essen Seele auf* (Ali: Fear Eats the Soul) (Fassbinder, 1973); *Shirins Hochzeit* (Shirin’s wedding) (Helma Sanders, 1975); and *Yasemin* (Hark Bohm, 1988) emphasized the status of the victim, the oppressed, the silenced, and the abject. Made by German leftist filmmakers, these films aim to raise the consciousness of viewers about social and gender injustice and racial prejudice, as do the films of Turkish filmmaker Tevfik Baser, *40 m² Deutschland* (1986) and *Abschied vom falschen Paradies* (Farewell to a false paradise) (1988). Yet by insisting on the fundamentally different experiences of Germans and non-Germans, they invariably cement the popular narrative of “lost between two cultures.” These films, claims Göktürk, “are informed by a social worker’s perspective and haunted by residual notions of cultural purity, community and authenticity,” often relying on reified notions of exile and diaspora that have little to do with the filmmakers’ own biography—as in the case of Baser—and that comply with the label “ethnic” or “third world” cinema in order to profit from funding policies and to target specific audiences.

There is yet no overview of German-Turkish or minority cinema of the last decade. My following remarks about the role of U.S. popular culture in this development and its effects on understanding the national remain therefore somewhat speculative. As I want to argue, one very significant aspect of German-Turkish cinema, and German minority cinema in general, is a relationship to Hollywood filmmaking and U.S. popular culture that is very different from the New German Cinema. As I have shown elsewhere, the famed auteurs of the 1970s entertained a highly ambivalent relationship to the United States, exposing in their respective films the ways in which Hollywood has shaped the social, psychological, and political dimension of the post-war generation. U.S. popular culture functioned in this scenario as catalyst and antagonist, providing both foil and engine to articulate the paradoxical predicament of those born around the end of World War
II. Filmmakers such as Akin and Maccarone and El-Tayeb, in contrast, belong to a generation of Germans who have learned from Hollywood in a way that Wenders and Fassbinder never wanted to. Like other successful filmmakers of the 1990s, they put emphasis on fast editing, stylized interiors, witty dialogues, and well-paced plot development—as well as a strong emphasis on entertainment rather than consciousness raising—aiming for professional standards and a visual style that their Hollywood-reared audience expects. Yet, unlike Doris Dörrie, Sönke Wortmann, Joseph Vilsmaier, or Tom Tykwer, they do understand themselves as part of an alternative cinema that gives voice to minorities and indeed shows the centrality of the margins. Thus despite their aspirations to be commercially viable and entertaining, one must see Kurz und schmerzlos and Alles wird gut as films that are “minor” in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense—by definition these films are always political; they mark the “double movement of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the image”; and they insist on the minor as a “collective assemblages of enunciation.” It is this tension between the major and the minor that makes the two films I now turn to a significant new development within the tradition of cultural productions that address Americanization in Germany.

Called by critics a mixture of gangster film and multicultural Milieustudie, Kurz und schmerzlos revolves around the friendship of Gabriel (a Turk), Costa (a Greek), and Bobby (a Serb), in the hoods of Hamburg-Altona. Released from prison, Gabriel rejoins the lives of his would-be gangster and small-time mafiosi buddies, despite resolutions to stay legit. When conflicting love interests intersect with a deal to purchase illegal weapons, the inevitable happens, leaving Bobby and Costa dead and Gabriel heading for Turkey. With an international soundtrack including U.S. and Hamburg hip-hop, Turkish and Greek traditional music, and the Spanish-language punk band Niños Con Bombas, the film tries to re-create the dense atmosphere of 1980s U.S. crime films as well as that of more contemporary films revolving around life in the hood. As multilayered subjects, the three protagonists show themselves to be well versed in a variety of idioms and languages that they can mimic, parody, or employ as their own most authentic means of exchange. They ridicule the infantile language that Germans adopt when they speak to foreigners, as well as German efforts to create a multicultural society: “Ich steig bei den Albanern ein—das nennt man heute Multi-Kulti,” says Bobby before joining the Mafia.12 While the three remain outsiders to German culture, they do participate in the prevalent everyday racism, belittling Asians and
uttering remarks like: “Silvio hat mich zum Neger gemacht. Er hat mir
nicht vertraut.”

The youths can speak the respective languages of their parents, yet
their true moment of bonding occurs through the lingo of U.S. gang-
sters. All three show themselves to be well versed in the language and
gestures of Al Pacino and Robert de Niro. Particularly Bobby loves
Americanisms, calling Gabriel “my baddest mother-fucker,” while
constantly donning the swagger and demeanor of the two American
stars in the hope of commanding some respect in the mean streets of
Altona. In a particularly memorable scene, we witness the three young
men watching an Asian karate film, the hero of which is derided for his
failure to live up to the toughness and masculinity of Al Pacino. Sitting
next to each other on a sofa, Costa, Gabriel, and Bobby communicate
with each other without making eye contact, merely looking at the
screen in front of them—their relationship is structured around projec-
tions and perceptions of which they are not the authors. Yet such
other-directedness is not criticized as a colonization of the subcon-
scious—as one protagonist famously quipped in Wim Wenders’s *Im
Lauf der Zeit* (1976)—but celebrated as a moment of true experience.
As in Pacino’s struggle to fit into U.S. society as a Cuban (in *Mean
Streets*), they recognize their own problems of assimilating to German
society. Yet *Kurz und schmerzlos* is not entirely complicit with its pro-
tagonsists’ emulation of things American, for the viewers realize that
the incongruity between the three youths’ lives and the fictions they
want to live is what costs Bobby and Costa their lives.

By resorting to the Hollywood gangster film as its generic model,
*Kurz und schmerzlos* situates itself in a long line of German postwar
films. Yet Akin’s film is quite different from famous precursors such as
Klaus Lemke’s *48 Stunden bis Acapulco* (1967), Rainer Werner Fass-
binder’s *Liebe ist kälter als der Tod* (1969) and *Der amerikanische Sol-
dat* (1971), Rudolf Thome’s *Rote Sonne* (1970), or Wenders’s *Der
amerikanische Freund* (1977). Whereas these earlier films are examples
of modernist and experimental filmmaking that present Hollywood
cinema as an aesthetic and political model of fascination and rejection,
Akin’s film seems far less paradoxical. Aesthetically, it marks its rela-
tion to features of Scorsese, de Palma, or Coppola as one of unadul-
terated fascination and emulation, employing a camera and editing
style that invokes the American precursors without irony. Yet in terms
of gender politics, Akin remains much closer to the German auteurs
cited previously. As with many films by Thome and Wenders, *Kurz und
schmerzlos* also presents an unquestioned embrace of codified gender
roles by its male protagonists. The homosocial bond between the three men comes at the expense of stable and equal heterosexual relationships. Indeed, it is not the gap between foreigners and Germans that cannot be closed but the one between men and women. The three men are victims not of German oppression but rather of their own misunderstood masculinity, shown here to be a mixture of native tradition and Hollywood deception. For the modern Turkish and German women in the film, this machismo may at first be attractive and titillating, yet ultimately it is not tolerable.

If the Hollywood to be emulated in *Kurz und schmerzlos* is that of 1970s and 1980s crime films and more recent films set in the hood, it is 1930s screwball comedy that defines the trajectory of *Alles wird gut*. Also set in Hamburg, the film follows its gender-bending Afro-German heroines’ pursuit of love and fulfillment in the face of everyday racism. A “mainstream black lesbian comedy,” as screenwriter Fatima El-Tayeb describes it, the made-for-television film tackles sensitive issues of race and sexuality while trustfully relying on the upbeat nature of a Hollywood-style narrative that delivers what its title promises—in the end, everything will be fine.

Even more so than in *Kurz und schmerzlos*, in *Alles wird gut* American popular culture provides the means through which the characters define themselves and relate to each other. Nabou, a dropout with dreams of winning the lottery, is a fan of Skunk Anansie and Tina Turner and styles herself like urban young blacks in the United States; Kim, a workaholic designer in an advertising company, was once inspired by Angela Davis to leave behind her white rural home (and her real name, Erika) and to seek self-fulfillment in the city. She is clearly representative of many radical intellectuals her age who have been absorbed by the culture industry they once decried. Kim’s dormant disavowal of German *Spiessertum* is reawakened when she meets Nabou, for whom she will, in the end, forego a bourgeois marriage and career. For Giuseppa, Kofi, and his son Kwame—the respective friends surrounding the two protagonists—the heroes and heroines of contemporary popular culture likewise supply points of commonality and give meaning to their lives, be they Greta Garbo, Michael Jackson, or the Ninja Turtles, respectively.

Yet the film clearly divides between appropriate and inappropriate modes of reception of U.S. culture—between cultural poaching and mere consumption. In a particularly humorous scene, Kim and Dieter, her boyfriend and boss, emerge from the movie theater to discuss the performance of Julia Roberts and Kevin Costner.
DIETER: “Endlich mal wieder ‘n guter Film, nicht so platt, von wegen aus Hollywood kommt keine sozialkritische Message . . .”

KIM: “Sozialkitschig wolltest du wohl sagen . . .”


KIM: [ironically] “Ja, ich auch. Julia Roberts als Mutter Teresa und Kevin Costner ihr indischer Liebhaber!”

DIETER: “Also manchmal verstehe ich dich nicht. Diesen französischen Frauenfilm fandste eurozentrisch und der hat dir jetzt auch nicht gefallen . . . ausserdem war Costner ja’n Halbinder.”

While Kim derides the manipulative tearjerker, Dieter defends the performance of the two stars because they disappear into their roles; he does not see through the ethnic drag of Kostner as Halbinder (reminiscent of his performance in Dances with Wolves). Whereas Dieter lauds the culture industry’s ability both to entertain and to provide social critique, Kim—like Adorno—only sees mass deception. Dieter’s shallowness is also visible in the many Americanisms with which he peppers his language: “der Deal, das Brainstorming, sorry, Mäuschen, ich bin total busy.” The dichotomy between the two is obvious and, following genre conventions, intentionally overdrawn—white boys don’t dig popular culture. Dieter, of course, represents not only the yuppie-esque German manager in Armani suit and sneakers but the mainstream of German men (and women). For Nabou, Guisepa, and Kim, in contrast, certain aspects of American popular culture provide a means to articulate their racial and sexual difference in playful and yet politically relevant ways. As savvy recipients, they appropriate and reinterpret popular culture. While Dieter raves about Julia Roberts’s phony humanism, Kim lights two cigarettes at once, imitating Paul Henreid’s chivalry toward Bette Davis in Now, Voyager—a gesture of emancipation and role reversal that shows her creative use of pop culture, the meaning of which will certainly escape Dieter. Interestingly, German popular culture, represented in the film only in the form of techno music favored by Katja, Nabou’s “ex,” provides Afro-Germans with no resources for cultural poaching. German culture, whether high brow or commercial, offers these minorities no source for appropriation or even subversion.

In Kurz und schmerzlos the biggest gap opens not between non-Germans and Germans (there are hardly any in the film) but between men and women. The biggest divide in Alles wird gut, in contrast, is not class or gender but race. Both Nabou and Kim abandon their white German
love interest. While one film ends in tragedy and the other in bliss, both advocate a retreat—Gabriel will return to the country of his parents and Kim and Nabou will cultivate an island existence within a society that clearly has difficulties accepting difference, as symbolized by their holding on to the buoy amidst the Hamburg harbor in the final frame.

The two films’ portrayal of how German minorities use U.S. popular culture raises, of course, questions about the political implications of such a reception. As stated earlier, these films take leave from discourses of cultural imperialism of the 1970s and early 1980s, from the fierce anti-Americanism of Edgar Reitz or Hans Jürgen Syberberg, and from the paradoxical, highly ambivalent stance of Wim Wenders or Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Yet one should be careful not to misread this as a naive co-optation by the U.S. culture industry. Rather, what is at stake is a different understanding of the national and of what it means to be German. For the New German auteurs, the national itself was a minor that needed to be upheld against the dominance of the U.S. film industry. Self-marginalization became an attitude with which the auteurs defined themselves as minor vis-à-vis the dominance of Hollywood—always eager to identify with the other (as in the films depicting foreigners cited earlier) yet never questioning how the government’s funding of their films served the legitimization of Germany’s larger postwar political strategy to reintegrate itself into the West.16

Born to parents who immigrated to the Federal Republic, directors such as Akin and Maccarone have a very different relationship to the “German question” than the postwar New German directors. Gone are the brooding meditations on one’s parents’ alleged complicity in the Third Reich; gone are the attempts to claim victim status, the self-hatred, and the triangulation of U.S. popular culture with German fascism. The minorities in these films are not voiceless and disempowered outsiders as the “Griech aus Griechenland” from Fassbinder’s *Katzelmacher* but rather the articulate representatives of a new generation of Germans who fight xenophobia through creativity and parody.

For German minority cinema, Americanization is that part of globalization that is willfully accepted and incorporated. The protagonists of *Kurz und schmerzlos* and *Alles wird gut* do not experience U.S. culture as something that is imposed from above or merely happens—rather, these young Germans Americanize themselves because U.S. popular culture offers opportunities to articulate ethnic and racial differences that do not (yet) exist in Germany. To that extent—and to that extent only—Hollywood is not an other but is part of almost every national cinema. The positive effects of its global, and indeed univer-
sal, aspirations are the fostering of supranational imagined communities that displace those of the nation-state. For minorities living in a nation such as Germany, which refuses to see itself as *Einwandererland*, this is an attractive position.

But, of course, “globalization” remains a far more ambiguous and problematic term. For those who believe in it, it promises openness—the free flow of people, goods, and information; political liberalization; and transparent, more democratic societies. Others fear its effects, which range from homogenization and exploitation to the erosion of individual cultures and the consolidating of power in the hands of big, unaccountable corporations. U.S. film production is still hegemonic and fiercely capitalist, even if now more subtle and dispersed, and it affects transnational cinema not only in productive ways, as Maccarone and El-Tayeb experienced themselves: the original title of their film, *Hakuna Matata*, had to be dropped because it was preempted by the release of Disney’s *The Lion King*—perhaps in the end not every-thing will be fine.

Notes


8. Göktürk, “Turkish Delight—German Fright.” Fatih Akin’s remarks quoted earlier have to be seen as an attempt to escape being labeled a German-Turkish, or ethnic, director. Yet the struggle against such labeling is a difficult task. In conversation, Kutlug Ataman told me how relatively easy it was for him, a Turkish-born, U.S.-trained film director currently residing in London, to receive funding for *Lola and Bilidikid*, a drama set in the Turkish transvestite community of Berlin-Kreuzberg. Yet his plans to make a film about Sigmund Freud have not yet found support from German or Austrian sources because officials, Ataman suspects, do not trust an “ethnic” filmmaker with this material. Ataman’s model for filmmaking is Ang Lee, who can make films about Hong Kong with equal credibility as adapting a Jane Austen novel (*Sense and Sensibility*) or depicting a family crisis in small-town America (*The Icestorm*).

9. The best survey of the German cinema of the last decade is provided by Eric Rentschler, “From New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus,” in *Cinema and Nation*, 260–77. In order to underscore the political shortcomings of what he calls “a cinema of consensus,” he intentionally excludes more “offbeat voices and less reconciled visions” (of whose existence he is well aware), because “this cinema remains for the most a minority opinion and a marginal perspective” (275). Rentschler thus forgoes any discussion of the place of that more marginal cinema within German national cinema and, in particular, any speculation to what extent films by Turkish-German filmmakers question the very notion of the national as he employs it.


12. “I’ll join the Albanians. That’s what they call multiculturalism these days.”

13. “Silvio turned me into a negro. He didn’t trust me.”


15. Fatima El-Tayeb and Angelina Maccarone, *Alles wird gut: Das Filmbuch* (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1999), 31. *(Dieter:* Finally, a good film, not so predictable. And people say, Hollywood films have no social critique. *Kim:* You probably mean social kitsch. *Dieter:* Don’t give me that. At the end, with Julia Roberts in the slums—I was close to crying *Kim* [ironically]: Yeah, right. Julia Roberts as Mother Teresa, and Kevin Costner as her half-Indian lover. *Dieter:* Sometimes I just don’t understand you. The French woman’s film you found too eurocentric, and this one you didn’t like either . . . even though Kevin Costner was only half-Indian.)*