

## The Filmic Realization of a Third Space in *Vatanyolu* (1987)

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### The Liminal Phase in the History of Turkish-German Cinema

In his groundbreaking book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and diasporic filmmaking* Hamid Naficy confronts the reader with the argument that new contents and film production styles and thus a new genre are emerging from “diasporic, exilic and postcolonial filmmakers” all over the world.<sup>1</sup> Observing that these filmmakers are involved voluntarily or involuntarily in migration and/or colonialism, he argues that their films often deal with issues of displacement and territoriality. Naficy calls this film genre “accented cinema” because “the accent emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes.”<sup>2</sup> He supports his argument with the help of some case studies, one among them Turkish-German cinema, which is the result of the labor migration of Turks to Germany since the 1960s. Naficy aims to show that “independent transnational films” share the feature of the “configuration of claustrophobic spaces as one of the chief iconographies.”<sup>3</sup> This is valid for the first Turkish-German films, such as *40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland (40 square meters of Germany)*, dir. Tevfik Başer, FRG, 1985).<sup>4</sup> The film tells the story of a Turkish woman who is kept imprisoned in an apartment by her husband because he fears that his wife could succumb to the sexual temptations of non-Muslim German society (Figure 1 & 2).



Figure 1 & 2. Turna is observed by her husband Dursun, who does not let her leave their apartment.<sup>5</sup>

Later films from the 1990s depicted different iconographies, especially open and mobile spaces, hinting at the lability of national or cultural identity.<sup>6</sup> Turkish-German cinema after the millennium is a global transcultural cinema. Films made by the second generation Turkish-German directors like the Şamdereli Sisters, Fatih Akin, Thomas Arslan, Buket Alakuş and many others focus on issues which communicate that migrant culture is a benefit for the transcultural social and cultural majority in Germany, rather than a social problem. The latest examples of Turkish-German cinema are ethno-comedies like *3 Türken und ein Baby* (*3 Turks and a Baby*, dir. Sinan Akkuş, Germany, 2015)<sup>7</sup> and genre films such as the youth drama *Hördur* (dir. Ekrem Ergün, Germany, 2015)<sup>8</sup> or the romantic mystery drama *8 Sekunden* (*8 Seconds*, dir. Ömer Faruk Sorak, Germany, 2015),<sup>9</sup> films which represent migrant culture as a constitutive part of German society.<sup>10</sup> The academic discussion unswervingly reproduces this narration of two-phase history of Turkish-German cinema: in the first phase of Turkish-German cinema migrants were shown as victims in limiting spaces such as prisons, shared people centers or factories. After 2000, these representation strategies shifted: migrants have been depicted as a self-evident part of society in Germany and as subjects who move freely and self-confidently in space.<sup>11</sup>

The binary model of Turkish-German cinema falls short as the history of Turkish-German cinema is far more complex than this shift, from a victimizing “cinema of the affected”<sup>12</sup> to a transcultural cinema, indicates. For example, a large corpus of films about Turkish-German migration were produced in Turkey from the 1960s to the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> Honour killing dramas such as the German *When We Leave* (dir. Feo Aladağ, 2010)<sup>14</sup> or Turkish *Mevsim Çiçek Açtı* (*Blossom Season*, dir. Ali Levent Üngör, 2012)<sup>15</sup> show that a victimizing “cinema of the affected” still continues to exist: in both films, women are depicted as victims of an archaic patriarchal Turkish culture. The former film even represents German culture as modern and enlightened and thus reproduces the trope of the superiority of a modern West. Such representation strategy leads to an Orientalism which earlier films reproduced as well.<sup>16</sup>

The present analysis will reassess the plausibility of this binary and progressive film model of Turkish-German cinema by studying a film which was hardly discussed in

academic discourse: *Vatanyolu – Die Heimkehr* (dir. Rasım Konyar, Enis Günaydın, FGR, 1987).<sup>17</sup> *Vatanyolu* not only has an important role in the indication of the transformation process of Turkish-German cinema in the 1990s, but also serves as one of the earliest products of a cinema of “pleasures of hybridity.” Even if *Vatanyolu* reproduces sexual and generational prejudices about the migrant family in the spatial policies of the film: By transforming the idea of a living space as a necessity for negotiations of a bearable life *Vatanyolu* transforms the idea of a rather representational concept of *third space* into a filmic vision and shows that cultural hybridity is not solely a question of identity, as the binary model of Turkish-German cinema implies, but also a spatial issue.

### The Plot of *Vatanyolu*

*Vatanyolu* tells of the Koç family’s emigration from Germany to Turkey. Yusuf, the father, accepts a repatriation grant (German: *Rückkehrprämie*) to establish a grocery in his former home town. The rest of the family does not share Yusuf’s enthusiasm. Temel, the son, does not want to leave Germany, but prefers to finish his on-the-job training as gardener. Selvi, the older daughter, lives together with a German, and Yusuf has excluded her from the family. The youngest son, Ömer, dreams about migrating to America because his hero and idol, Rambo, lives there. The family does not change Yusuf’s mind. On the way to Turkey, the family has an accident with their minivan in some kilometers distance from the city of Frankfurt (Figure 3). The axle of the vehicle breaks at a rough country road next to an uninhabited field. Son Temel is sent to the city in order to buy a working axle, but even with the help of his uncle Hasan he cannot find one.



Figure 3. Father Yusuf tries to convince his family that the way back to Turkey is best for them all.<sup>18</sup>

After Temel buys seeds to plant in the field where they had the accident instead of buying an axle, Yusuf and his wife Havva go to Frankfurt the next day themselves. Because Yusuf misses the Turkish tea house, he decides to go there while Havva is visiting Selvi (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Daughter Selvi doing prenatal exercises, her German husband, and her mother Havva

One of Yusuf's former workmates starts an argument with him in the tea house. He fears that the Turkish migrants could be judged as ungrateful guest workers by Germans because Yusuf has taken the repatriation grant, yet has not left Germany. Even the proprietor of the tea house concurs with Yusuf's colleague. Yusuf and his former workmate. Finally, he realizes that there is no place for him in the city anymore and returns to the field with a bottle of raki. He is depressed and rapidly drinks the high-proof spirit (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Nephew Hasan, raki drinking Yusuf, son Temel.<sup>19</sup>

Unable to continue their migration to Turkey, the family is forced to settle at the field. A challenge between Yusuf and his son, Temel, signals that their stay at the field will be lengthy. Father and son divide the field into two areas: on one side Yusuf plants cucumber seeds and on the other his son Temel plants tomato seeds. Either of them is sure that his choice of seeds will result in better harvest. Not only is one of the consequences of the game that the family will stay at the field for weeks, but at the same time the game makes it possible for Yusuf to keep his role as the head of the family—because his plan to return to Turkey seems not to be canceled, but rather just delayed. After Hasan has found the well which Yusuf has water-witched before, they can water the field and the family has water for their daily needs. Step by step they turn the field to a space to live which seems to give them a better life than the one which they have left behind and the one which lies ahead of them. With the permission of the owner of the land, a seventy-year-old German man called Stolze. They build a large hut (Figure 6). He even supports them by giving them a small panel van. Hasan and Temel earn income for the family by selling the harvested tomatoes at the city using the van. Selvi gives birth to her daughter in their small hut when she visits her family there. After the birth her German husband arrives. Yusuf throws away his grief and anger about his daughter when he sees the baby and even accepts Selvie's German husband. When two German hunters discover the family at the field, they call the police. This means the end of the family's new home. Hasan is the only one who can flee in time.



Figure 6. The self-made hut of the Koç family – A filmic materialization of a *third space*?<sup>20</sup>

### **Turkish *Gecekondu* Cinema and the Films of the Liminal Phase: From Identity to Space**

*Vatanyolu* tells how a family creates a living space for itself within the movement of migration. The quick building of provisional housing on uninhabited land by migrants is not only dealt with, but references one of the most striking phenomena in the cities of Turkey and an extensively covered issue in Turkish cinema. The Turkish word for the buildings at the edge of the larger cities (similar to shanty towns), *gecekondu*, marks the way in which they have been built: “put up overnight.” These buildings resulted from the necessity for a living space for the migrants in the wake of the inner migration wave since

the 1950s. The *gecekondu*s served as housing for almost half of the city's population in Ankara and Istanbul in the 1970s and 1980s and are still a contemporary phenomenon. Just as in the case of *Vatanyolu*, this housing is the product of an emergency and is always precarious: the *gecekondu*s can be knocked down at any time.

Muammer Özer's film *Bir Avuç Cennet* (*A Handful of Heaven*, Turkey, Sweden, 1985) is a paradigmatic example of this "*gecekondu* cinema."<sup>21</sup> It tells the story of a Turkish family that migrates from its village to Istanbul.<sup>22</sup> When the family arrives there the promised accommodation turns out to be a lie. The family finds shelter in the wreck of a bus that has been lying at the outskirts of Istanbul. The rest of the film revolves around the family's struggle to find a flat and to defend their new living space against the dangers of the metropole. There are features of *Bir Avuç Cennet* that connect it to the construction of a living space in *Vatanyolu*: the housing results from an emergency and lies at a place which is at the periphery. The longer the duration of occupation, the more the space gives feelings of safety and happiness for those living there.

This example of *gecekondu* cinema proves that a transnational handling of issues of migration, which really looks at the cinema culture in both nations, remains the exception in Turkish-German cinema, but is necessary if Eurocentric and postcolonial dynamics are to be avoided.<sup>23</sup> Looking at film cultures from a national framing, but with a polycentric view that focuses on both film cultures opens the analytical space and enriches the discussion. Both "*gecekondu* cinema" and films from the liminal period of Turkish-German cinema, can be considered as a 'cinema of *third space*' which shift the focus from issues of identity to issues of space: Something that is essential as the "[...] scholarly attention to space enables the reconstruction of the history of Turkish, German, and Turkish-German cinema based on the intersection of aesthetics and politics beyond identity categories."<sup>24</sup>

### **A Filmic Realization of a *Third Space*?**

With regard to "identity categories," *Vatanyolu* does not represent a progressive cultural model of a Turkish family. However, its hybrid position within the binary model of Turkish-German cinema becomes obvious when one considers the simultaneity of the representation of the social hegemonic and normative structure within the family and the construction of a *third space* of cultural hybridity through film aesthetic means and the narration of a *gecekondu* at the edge of the city.

The framing of the film very often arranges the characters, and the architectural space in such way that the position of each family member remains clearly visible.<sup>25</sup> The social interaction of the characters remains visible and so do the operations on the space, such as harvesting crops or digging the well. The spatial arrangement of the visual elements is organized in such way that the even ground of the field is very often visible. It almost works as a stage, which enables the visibility of the social interactions of the characters. Very often we see Yusuf in the foreground, son Temel in the middle ground, the broken minivan, which serves as kitchen for mother Havva in the background, and dark trees of the forest behind the minivan form the limiting instance of the background. A scene that presents mother Havva in the foreground shows her framed by the dark inner of the minivan. The order in which the father, son, and wife as elements are positioned in the image can be read as a hierarchic logic which mirrors the power relations in the family: father as head of the family, the sons as the second head, and mother Havva as the woman in the background who serves the family. The counter shot framing Havva from inside a

minivan positions her in the limiting interior space.<sup>26</sup> The spatial order also reproduces an archaic social order, here as a patriarchal natural society in which men are placed in the outer space, the women are positioned in the inner space and the nature provides the borders of the living space. An important indicator of the location of female characters in interior spaces is the hut which the family builds. The building itself is not presented in detail, but anticipated by shots which show how some hands mix loam and straw with water. Only when daughter Selvi arrives to visit her family is the hut shown. No establishing shot introduces the hut, but the shot in which nephew Hasan welcomes Selvi shows the façade. The women are shown in the inner of the hut, which is dark and constricted. This spatial organization mirrors the hegemony within the family which is constructed along sexual difference: a strategy that could resonate with Bourdieu's complex analysis of the Berber house which reminds us that this binary model of sexual difference and the mirroring in the spaces (house, field, village etc.) is in itself dialectically structured:

In opposition to man's work which is performed outside, it is the nature of woman's work to remain hidden ('God conceals it'): [...]. The opposition which is set up between the external world and the house only takes on its full meaning, therefore, if one of the terms of this relation, that is to say, the house, is itself seen as being divided according to the same principles which oppose it to the other term. It is therefore both true and false to say that the external world is opposed to the house as male is to female, or day to night, or fire to water, etc., since the second term of these oppositions divides up each time into itself and its opposite. [...] The married woman also has her east, within the man's house, but her east is only the inversion of a west: is it not said that the 'maiden is the Occident'?<sup>27</sup>

However, focusing on the features of the camera movement reveals a dynamic space concept beyond socio-spatial binaries and their (doubled) "inversions." The camera movements are almost always fluid: crane and dolly shots and steadycam dominate the whole film. All of these three types of camera movement are characterized by their lissomness. This lissomness can also be regarded as a fluidity of the 'camera eye' through the architectural space. Dolly and crane shots and even steadycams present a mechanical and machinist vision that human vision could never reach in such precision, especially regarding the lissomness of movement (the human gaze cannot remain fixed in movement).

The spaces in the second half of the film seem not to be limited, but to be endlessly wide. Especially the crane shot making the actions of the family in the field visible shows that the natural space at which the family remains is open. It is not covered by trees, but by nothing but the sky: the crane moves up and up. These open spaces are sometimes counteracted by limiting spaces such as the inner of the minivan or their former flat which the family leaves behind, the botanic garden where Temel works, the bordello where Hasan works.

However, these limiting spaces dominate the first half of the film which tells that the family has not decided to realize their living space on the field yet. Even if the configuration of the spaces affirms the hierarchic and hegemonic organization of the family along sexual and generational difference, the patriarchic family structure does not traverse the construction of a *third space*. It is the new living space as third space which enables all family members to operate as buoyant subjects within the given familial order.

The space, which the family creates for themselves, has its specificities, of course. From a geopolitical perspective the place they reside in is still German territory. From a legal perspective it is property of a German owner and from a city-geographical perspective it is the edge of the city. The place is in these senses, legally, geographically, and geopolitically determined. Furthermore, it was unoccupied and has not been a social space so far. How the place become a *third space* for the migrant family, then?

The field and later the hut do not only offer a living space at the periphery of the city, but the field has even become such a flexible space that it gives each family member the possibility to locate themselves beyond restricting dynamics. Migrants are dependent on “strategies of locating in the situation of displacement.”<sup>28</sup> The film shows that such locating strategy is dependent on places characterized by indetermination or at least flexibility. Although the land is German property, it is unoccupied and while it is some distance from the social center of the city, it is still close enough that the family can shop there and they sell their vegetables. The film shows the field where the family makes itself a home as a green environment with trees and bushes. The road is not visible because trees cover it and in front of the family there is an even field.

As such socially undetermined natural place it can be considered as a *blank place* from which the strategies of living of the family can evolve without too many restrictions. It is helpful to refer to Michel de Certeau’s heuristic differentiation of place (“lieu”) and space (“espace”) here. It reminds us that a place is “an order (no matter what type), according to which elements are divided into relations of coexistence. [...] A place is thus a present constellation of fixed spots. It contains a reference to a possible stability” whereas space is “a place that is operated.”<sup>29</sup> The area where the family created their life is a specific “fixed spot,” a German place, but it is transformed into a space by settling, living, and building a small hut—by “operating” the place.

This “operating of a socially undetermined space” can be regarded as a specific case of a conflict-free negotiation through what Homi K. Bhabha called a *third space*. In Bhabha’s analysis the *third space* is a space of potentiality: “[...] the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘*third space*’ which enables other positions to emerge.”<sup>30</sup> This *third space* is not a hybridization of two possible positions, in our case between a Turkish and a German one, but a *potential space* enabling negotiations.

The Koç family’s new home enables them to configure living conditions that fulfill their demands: Yusuf’s wish to be the owner of his own grocery store is fulfilled by selling vegetables in the city; Temel’s wish for a life as gardener is realized because he is the one who tills the soil; the mother’s demand for a face-to-face relationship with her daughter is fulfilled because of the vicinity of the field to the city. They are not migrants anymore that are surrounded by a social space in which they can only exist as ‘sad’ and displaced subjects, but they are located in such a space in which they can perform their identities without restrictions coming from the social (the German society not acknowledging them as an integral part of society, but as temporal guests) and institutional (illegal residence status).

What remains effective is the social and normative structure of the family: Yusuf as patriarchal father, Havva as submissive housewife, the sons, Temel and Ömer, as children



subordinated to the father. However, the film shows how actions of migrating subjects do not only rely on a *third space* of “enunciation,” as Bhabha conceptualizes it, but on concrete geographical and social living spaces as well. Whereas the binary model of Turkish-German cinema would criticize the representation of the family as reproducing cultural imaginations about Turkish families as being archaic, old-fashioned, restricting, and traditional, analyzing the “politics of space” suggests subversive identity strategies in the kind of third spaces even in earlier films of Turkish-German cinema which seem to reproduce victimizing representations of oppressed women and a culturally different patriarchal, Muslim Turkish culture.<sup>31</sup>

*Vatanyolu* shows how a family creates a space which enables them to leave behind the social restrictions of a situation of displacement. This illustrates that it is not identity practices, but spaces which afford identity in the first place. The narration unfolds the validity of the thesis of the “policies of placement as identity production.”<sup>32</sup> By shifting the focus from issues of identity to issues of space, by telling the story of the creation of a space, which enables negotiations for the migrant subjects’ strategies of identification, the film shows that questions of space rather than identity are crucial for an understanding of the dynamics of transnational cinema.

## Notes

- 1 Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8.
- 2 Hamid Naficy, “Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre,” *East-West Film Journal* 8, no. 2 (1994): 4.
- 3 Naficy, “Phobic Spaces,” 1.
- 4 *40m<sup>2</sup> Deutschland (40 square metres of Germany)*, dir. Tevfik Başer, Studiocanal, Germany, 1986. See Rob Burns, “Turkish-German cinema: from cultural resistance to transnational cinema?,” in *German cinema: Since unification*, ed. David Clarke, 127–50, *New Germany in context* (London, New York: Continuum, 2006).
- 5 Set photographs, private archive of the director. I thank Tevfik Başer very much for the permission to use the photos.
- 6 Deniz Göktürk, “Turkish delight - German fright. Unsettling oppositions in transnational cinema: Reframing ‘Minor’ Cultures – from subnational to transnational,” <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0101/goektuerk/en> (accessed September 25, 2012).
- 7 *3 Türken und ein Baby (3 Turks and a Baby)*, dir. Sinan Akkuş, Wildbunch Germany, Germany, 2015; see also *300 Worte Deutsch (300 Words German)*, dir. Züli Aladağ, ZDF, Arte, sperl+productions, Germany, 2015 and *Einmal Hans mit scharfer Soße (One Serving of Hans with Hot Sauce)*, dir. Buket Alakuş,, Germany, 2014.
- 8 *Hördur*, dir. Ekrem Ergün, Storming Donkey Productions, Germany, 2015.
- 9 *8 Sekunden (8 Seconds)*, dir. Ömer F. Sorak, BKM Film, Böcek Film, Galata Film, barefoot films, Germany, 2015.
- 10 See Karin E. Yeşilada, “Turkish-German Screen Power – The Impact of Young Turkish Immigrants on German TV and Film,” *German as a foreign language*, no. 1 (2008), [www.gfl-journal.de/1-2008/yesilada.pdf](http://www.gfl-journal.de/1-2008/yesilada.pdf) (accessed November 25, 2015).
- 11 See Rob Burns, “The Politics of Cultural Representation: Turkish–German Encounters,” *German Politics* 16, no. 3 (2007): 374–5 (accessed July 29, 2014).
- 12 Rob Burns in *German cinema*, 128–30.
- 13 See Ömer Alkin, “Re-Writing Turkish-German Cinema from the Bottom-Up: Turkish Emigration Cinema,” in *Turkish Migration, Identity and Integration*, ed. Ibrahim Sirkeci, Betül D. Şeker and Ali Çağlar (London: Transnational Press, 2015).
- 14 *When We Leave*, dir. Feo Aladağ, Independent Artists Filmproduktion, Germany, 2010.
- 15 *Mevsim Çiçek Açtı (Blossom Season)*, dir. Ali L. Üngör, Yalınayak Film, Turkey, 2012.

- 16 Said states a third meaning of Orientalism. This meaning refers to practices reproducing a cultural alterity between the West and the Orient, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Princeton, NJ: Vintage, 2008 [1979]), 3. See Ömer Alkin in *Turkish Migration, Identity and Integration*, 125–27.
- 17 Ulrike Irrgang analyzes *Vatanyolu* in order to understand whether humor breaks up stereotypes in the film, Ulrike Irrgang, “Von despotischen Türken und kaltherzigen Deutschen. Zur Inszenierung und Destruktion kultureller Stereotype in der Komödie (About Despotic Turks and Cold-Hearted Germans. On the Production and Destruction of Cultural Stereotypes in Comedy),” *Global Media Journal* 3, no. 2 (2013), [http://www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate-28718/GM\]6\\_Irrgang\\_final.pdf](http://www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate-28718/GM]6_Irrgang_final.pdf) (accessed April 26, 2016). *Vatanyolu - Die Heimreise (The Homecoming)*, dir. Enis Günay and Rasim Konyar, Filmverlag der Autoren, FGR, 1987. *Vatanyolu*, a Turkish word, does not mean ‘homecoming’, as it is indicated in the German additional title, ‘Heimkehr’, but rather ‘way to home country’. Thus, the Turkish title hints at the arduousness of the way and not so much on the fact of going back ‘home’.
- 18 Photo from Press Material ‘Filmverlag der Autoren’, *Vatanyolu*.
- 19 Photo from Press Material ‘Filmverlag der Autoren’, *Vatanyolu*.
- 20 Film Still from VHS, *Vatanyolu*, 1:24:53.
- 21 *Bir Avuç Cennet (A Handful of Heaven)*, dir. Muammer Özer, Mine Film, Devkino, Belge Film, Turkey, Sweden, 1985.
- 22 Engin Yıldız, *Gecekondu sineması*, (Balmumcu, İstanbul: Hayalet Kitap, 2008).
- 23 Ömer Alkin in *Turkish Migration, Identity and Integration*, 125.
- 24 Barbara Mennel, “The Politics of Space in the Cinema of Migration,” *German as a foreign language*, no. 3 (2010): 42.
- 25 I refer here to Éric Rohmer’s differentiation of three spaces in film: architectural, image and film space, cf. Éric Rohmer, *Murnaus Faustfilm: Analyse und szenisches Protokoll (Murneau’s Faust-Film: Analysis and Scenic Protocol)* (München: C. Hanser, 1980), 7–11.
- 26 *Vatanyolu*, 0:31:51.
- 27 P. Bourdieu, “The Berber house or the world reversed,” *Social Science Information* 9, no. 2 (1970): 159, 170.
- 28 Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, *Intellektuelle Migrantinnen: Subjektivitäten im Zeitalter von Globalisierung: eine postkoloniale dekonstruktive Analyse von Biographien im Spannungsverhältnis von Ethnisierung und Vergeschlechtlichung (Intellectual Migrants: Subjectivities in the Age of Globalization: a Postcolonial Deconstructive Analysis of Biographies in the Tension of Ethnicizing and Gendering)*, *Geschlecht und Gesellschaft* Bd. 21 (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1999), 209–10.
- 29 Michel d. Certeau, *Kunst des Handelns (The Practice of Everyday-Life)* (Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1988), 217–18.
- 30 Jonathan Rutherford, “The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, culture, difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, 207–21 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 209.
- 31 Mennel, *Politics of Space*.
- 32 Gutiérrez Rodríguez, *Intellektuelle Migrantinnen*, 211.

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