

Casting Post-migrant Identities in Berlin Films

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Abstract

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit dem Thema Casting sowie damit verbundenen Praktiken wie Proben und Synchronsprechen in drei Filmen über Berlin: Gespenster (2006) von Christian Petzold, Stadt als Beute (2005) von Irene von Alberti, Miriam Dehne und Esther Gronenborn und Der schöne Tag (2001) von Thomas Arslan. Casting wird hier als für verschiedene Versionen der postmigrantischen Identität, auch in ihren intersektionellen Beziehungen, als besonders signifikant betrachtet, wobei die mehr oder weniger explizit markierten postmigrantischen Figuren die Grenzen dieser Identitätskategorie auf unterschiedliche Art und Weise auf die Probe stellen.

Title

Casting von postmigrantischen Identitäten in Berlin-Filmen

Keywords

Berlin in film; theatre; post-migrant condition; intersectionality; hauntology

While notions of identity as scripted and rehearsed – in short, as performative – are well established, and applicable in one form or another to all social groups and the individuals that constitute them, they have a particular bearing for identities cast in relation to what might be called the postmigrant condition. It is arguably not for nothing that the term ›postmigrant‹ was coined – by director Shermin Langhoff – for the theatre, describing the innovative performance culture that she and her collaborators developed at the Ballhaus Naunynstraße in Kreuzberg and have subsequently expanded into the more mainstream venue of the Maxim Gorki Theater in Mitte.¹ Postmigrant subjects are social actors who are also particularly required to act in a theatrical sense, inhabiting prescribed roles within the social apparatus and potentially adapting or subverting the same and extending their possibilities. This applies not least to the negotiation of urban topographies, following the performative logic of Michel de

1 See also the essays by Ela Gezen and Friederike Oberkrome in this volume.

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Certeau's practices of everyday life, as set out in his classic essay, ›Walking in the City‹, whereby »migrational« counter-movements slip into and complicate »the clear text of the planned and readable city« (Certeau 1984: 93).

Postmigrant subjects of different kinds, with a variety of provenance and genealogical relationship to the direct experience of migration, will experience the acts that are demanded of them in these terms in diverse ways. ›Post-‹ here stands at once for different degrees of coming after migration, but also of continuity with its historical experience, so that the acts in question are perhaps best understood through the modality of hyphenation: as post-migrant. This is to introduce a typographical gap into the term, standing at once for separation and continuity between its two elements. At the same time, the acts of post-migrant subjects are complicated by the particular intersectional character of given identities, where the post-migrant is inevitably crossed in multiple ways with such ramified categories as race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, (non)belief and (dis)ability. Indeed, this sort of intersectional concern – not least the intersection of postmigrant and queer – is built into the constitution of post-migrant theatre, as developed by Langhoff and her co-workers.

If a particular condition of the acts of post-migrant subjects is the degree of capacity to move freely, in the face of the limitations put upon social and cultural mobility (and complicated by intersectional affiliations), then film – as the most explicitly mobile of cultural forms – can serve as a particularly telling medium for addressing questions of how post-migrant identities move, and with what degrees of freedom or duress. It can be particularly apt for showing how these identities are cast in relation to the negotiation of urban space and what work is required of them in such casting. We might think here of the terms set out by Mireille Rosello (cf. 2018) in her reading of urban mobility and its cartographical vicissitudes in *Les Untouchables* (2011), through the odd-couple double act of an able-bodied, black post-migrant from the Parisian *banlieue* and his socio-economically privileged, tetraplegic, white employer. And what Rosello argues for complications of identity categories, orientation and motion in the context of Paris, a city of the Global North traversed by connections – historical and contemporary – with the Global South, certainly also applies to Berlin. Post-migrant acts are never simple for the subject who performs them, but they also stand in complex relations, »intracategorical« and intersectional (ibid.: 187), to the acts of others in the affective and epistemological production of urban topographies.

Ghosts Abroad in Berlin

This essay builds upon arguments I developed in relation to the theme of casting in Christian Petzold's 2006 feature, *Gespenster* (cf. Webber 2011; 2014). The central film in Petzold's so-called *Gespenstertrilogie*, concerned with the spectral character of lives lived in conditions of displacement, *Gespenster* turns on a scene where one of the ›ghosts‹ in question – Nina, played by Julia Hummer – performs alongside her new girlfriend, Toni, for a casting session in one of the blocks of Berlin's Mediaspree development. For the arguments in question, casting – with its connotations of throwing – served as an operative term, caught between the possibilities and the precarity of thrown-ness (freely after Heidegger) as a condition of being. The performance for the camera in the casting session is a particular form of a more general performance

of being as thrown (away) in that sense, not least as registered in the function of CCTV as part of a system of surveillance, on the look-out for such cast-away ›ghosts‹ as Nina, abroad in the commodity space of the Potsdamer Platz Arkaden.

In what follows, I will return to *Gespenster* in order to elaborate a post-migrant perspective on the urban vagabondage it depicts, as well as considering the two other films with comparable casting scenarios that were referenced in that earlier work: *Stadt als Beute* (2005), directed by Irene von Alberti, Miriam Dehne, and Esther Gronenborn, and Thomas Arslan's *Der schöner Tag* (2001). As I argued there,

the motif of casting raises fundamental questions about the ontological condition, the liveness, of lives in the city. The three films, with their thematics of displacement, haunting, and exploitation, recast the performative configuration of identity and topography in today's Berlin, exploring the possibilities for new turns and the constraints upon these. (Webber 2011: 70)

While casting as such will be at the base of the continuation of the argument here, the discussion will extend to a thematic cluster around that practice of pre-production selection for performance in film and theatre – including rehearsal processes and the post-production function of dubbing and other forms of voice-over. In all cases, what is at stake here is a testing of capability to perform as prescribed. Questions of ontological possibility according to the topographical terms of Berlin, of what it might mean to *find ways* to be in the city, will be to the fore in those terms.

Gespenster might, at first sight, seem anomalous as a starting point for a contribution to a discussion of post-migrant culture, given that its protagonists, Nina and Toni, however marginalized and precarious their situation, nonetheless seem to be aligned with the dominant, settled culture of Berlin, unmarked for the purposes of migration. Indeed, the drama of the narrative – which turns on whether Nina is the daughter of a white French couple visiting Berlin, and ostensibly abducted from a supermarket trolley as an infant – relies on the indeterminacy of her appearance as white Northern European (along with that of the general cast list of the film). Even if Nina is indeed Marie, the lost daughter of a Parisian couple who lived in Berlin during the period around the *Wende*, we might hesitate to recognize her as a post-migrant subject in any substantial sense, given the relative interchangeability of the appearances of the ›host‹ culture (Nina as just another ›indigenous‹ Berliner) and the migrant in such circumstances.

Part of the terms of this film, however, is precisely a deep uncertainty as to provenance, genealogy and settlement. When Nina and Toni approach the institution where Nina is living, set in a non-descript location, there is a telling exchange about it, indicating at once the shame of admitting that she lives in a ›home‹ and the fact that an institutional home of this kind can only approximate home as such (Toni: »So'n Heim«; Nina: »Nein, kein Heim – so was Ähnliches«). It is in a continuum with the ›Ayslbewerberheim‹ or the sort of ›Wohnheim‹ for migrant workers that is subject to deconstructive language play as »Wonaym« in the mimicry of Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (1998: 11). No alternative family structure is proposed for Nina, begging the question: if she is not the daughter of the French couple, then whose daughter is she? She is placed in an indeterminate relationship to the conventional categories of nativity and alterity that organize the social space of a post-migrant order. The marks by which she is identified by her putative mother – a mole and a scar – can also

be understood as signifying a lack of marked origin. Of course, the scar has a particular bearing for narratives of origin and itinerance, given its pivotal function as a device of anagnorisis in perhaps the foundational version of such stories: *The Odyssey*.² And in the context of this latter-day variation on that trope, it rather seems to stand for the lack of secure marking in relation to genealogy, place of origin and belonging.

Gespenster can be seen to be part of a general questioning of settled identity in Petzold's work. I have called this unsettling hauntological, according to the model developed by Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* (cf. Webber 2011: 77-79), whereby the subjects of Petzold's film world inhabit conditions of being that are inherently spectral. In terms that Derrida borrows from his key source, *Hamlet*, they are »out of joint« in relation to both time and place. And this is a mode of being that, following Mark Fisher, might have particular application to the post-migrant condition.³ This places Nina, as a subtle kind of post-migrant subject – undertaking what I called »topographical turns« (Webber 2011) in the ill-defined spaces around Potsdamer Platz – in a disjointed version of what Derrida calls the ontopological dimension. »By *ontopology*«, Derrida writes, »we mean an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being [on] to its *situation*, to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general.« (Derrida 1994: 82) That is, all dimensions of identity need to rest on a secured position in territorial terms, and this, of course, is what is radically dislocated in the experience of migration, with after-effects – hauntings, we might say – for the post-migrant condition. Indeed, we can extend Derrida's pun on ontology, to suggest that the relationship of migrant and post-migrant subjects to the coordinates of being, as regulated by nativist assumptions, is a hauntological one. The hauntological condition can, in its turn, be understood as having a particular bearing on questions of affective topography, as a shifting of embodied being in the city towards what Avery Gordon (2008) has called the »ghostly matters« of social dispossession. The »ghost« here is less a figure of uncanny possession of urban space than of muted dispossession, also with regard to the affective environment in which it is abroad.

The notion of hauntological being can certainly be applied to the wandering figure of Nina, moving in a state of disjointure between recognizable architectural locations and the city's *terrain vague* (cf. Sola Morales 1995), and with fluctuations between the two. If her relationship to the post-migrant condition is, however, somewhat attenuated, then it is worth considering how *Gespenster* sits in relation to other Petzold films. This would mean to extend further the argument of Jennifer Hosek's application of a »postmigrant aesthetics« (Hosek 2021) to a set of Petzold films, whereby his work is seen to register the embedded character of postmigration as a condition of modern Germany and of European politics and cultures at large.⁴ We could consider, for instance, the second film of the *Gespenstertrilogie*, *Die innere Sicherheit* (2000), which

2 The fact that Nina's scar is on her ankle places her between Odysseus (scarred on his leg) and Oedipus (scarred on his foot/ankle, and an itinerant figure whose fate is driven by lack of knowledge about his parentage).

3 Fisher (2012: 24) draws on the work of John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective, in order to consider how hauntology relates to how »traumas of migration (forced and otherwise) play themselves out over generations, but also about the possibilities of rebellion and escape.«

4 Building on the work of Regina Römhild, Hosek argues that »[t]he postmigrant condition fundamentally constitutes Europe.« (Hosek 2021: 52)

presents the perpetual migrancy of ex-terrorists – Germans who have become extra-territorial through their acts on home soil and against homeland security. Their plan is to engage in counter-migration from Global North to Global South and a new life in Brazil. It is arguably telling that for the role of the German youth, Heinrich (a name explicitly marked in the diegesis as ›deutsch‹), who develops a relationship with Jeanne, the daughter of the ex-terrorist couple, Petzold casts Bilge Bingül, who had previously featured in the Turkish-German Berlin films of Thomas Arslan, *Geschwister – Kardesler* (1997) and *Der schöner Tag*. And this is reflected in the scene where Jeanne (with German parents, but a French name) finds herself among a group of illegal migrant workers at a motorway service stop, only for the police to round up that group and miss the fugitive terrorists. The construction of post-migration into the broader conditions of being German resonates, in turn, with one of the films that Hosek discusses, the pre-war drama, *Transit* (2018), where Germans, Jews and non-Jews alike, are caught in a condition of perpetual (non-)migration from the Southern shores of a Europe in the thrall of National Socialism, their predicaments interlaced with those of North African migrants in contemporary France. What is largely implicit in *Gespenster*, in terms of the relationship of the protagonist to (post-)migrant conditions, is made explicit in the strategic anachronism of the later film.

Against this background, Nina's performance in the casting session at the centre of *Gespenster* can be understood as having a bearing on our concerns here. Specifically, it opens up one of the key intersectional dimensions for post-migrant culture, affording a hauntopological connection between the condition of migration and the negotiation of queer identities, each of them entangled with questions of rootedness and of genealogical inheritance. The casting session is focused on the theme of friendship, with pairs of young women, wearing sweatshirts emblazoned with ›Freundinnen‹, required to narrate the coming into being of their relationship. And for Nina, the performance in question can be described as both crypto-migrant and queer (turning on the ambiguity of ›Freundin‹ as girlfriend). It is a distillation of her experience of displacement in the spaces of Berlin that are her haunting-ground and of her emerging relationship with Toni, as recorded in the text-and-image narrative she keeps in her diary, serving now as a kind of story-board for the film that she envisions in the casting session.

Nina's story starts with a recurrent dream, a version of the attack on Toni by two men that she had witnessed in the opening scene of the film, with her own traumatic sense of being unable to act to help, then turned into a fictional account of their encounter ›in real life‹ as girls in the same class of one of the many schools she has attended. The ›Freundinnen‹ story is told with quiet power, marked by the iterative use of ›und‹ as a connective unit that is at once urgent, also in its affective charge, and precarious. Toni had told Nina that the secret of a successful casting is to tell your story in a way that is ›unheimlich lebendig‹, and in Nina's enactment of hers the declaration of love on the part of one homeless subject for another is also mixed with the ›unheimlich‹. This is the phantom condition between living and death that is at the core of *Gespenster*, with Nina as the embodiment of a daughter pronounced dead by her father (›Marie ist tot‹). As she wanders off alone into the *terrain vague* at the end of the film, the hauntopological character of Nina's being in the city can also provide a particular perspective, from its edges, on the post-migrant condition.

Testing Roles for Street and Stage

Julia Hummer also features in the cast list of *Stadt als Beute*, where she plays a performance role (as Babe, a sex worker and pole-dancer), not one of the actor-characters at the centre of the film, but cast in a particular, performative relationship to one of them. If *Gespenster* presents Berlin as haunting-ground, *Stadt als Beute* mobilizes the topos of the city as hunting-ground (cf. Webber 2011: 79), with similar questions of competition and exploitation, and of possibilities of belonging together in spite of these, at its centre. The film's three interactive parts, directed by Irene von Alberti, Miriam Dehne, and Esther Gronenborn respectively, focus on the social and theatrical performances of a group of actors, brought together for rehearsals of a production of the post-dramatic *Regietheater* event of the same name by René Pollesch, who plays a version of himself as its director. The play, produced by Pollesch for the Volksbühne at its Prater venue (as seen in the film), is drawn from a text of his from the *Wohnfront 2001-2002* collection, which asks questions about the livability of the contemporary city, under the sign of neoliberal capitalism, and the structures of exploitation to which both the city itself is subject (»Stadt als Beute«) and those who inhabit it – and not least those who operate in its cultural sector. It tests the possibilities of creativity, individual and collective, in those conditions, and what it might mean to work together, in performance, against their strictures. As Katrin Sieg puts it, what Pollesch aims to foster in his work with actors and activists at the Prater is »an internally democratic, minoritarian, itinerant counterpublic that seeks to articulate itself to other spaces« (Sieg 2008: 111), both proximate (the streets of Berlin) and global.

The film is set up in ways that mark its attachment to the streets of Berlin, insisting upon the connection between the negotiation of spaces outside the theatre with what happens within it, following the logic of Pollesch's engagement with the spaceLab urban design collective, whose text *Die Stadt als Beute* (1999) he develops as a performance piece to be enacted by a »Kommune« of Berliners. The opening credits are accordingly deployed through a representation of a city plan, at first generic and then recognizably that of Berlin, with the credits inserted playfully, as if street names, for orientation in the film theatre/theatre film that will follow. The Berlin street map focuses on the locations that will provide the starting points for the second and third episodes of the film, organized around the experience of two of the actors – Lizzy (Mitte) and Ohboy (Potsdamer Straße) – before homing in on the Kastanienallee, and the Prater Theatre, in order to launch the first, named for Marlon.

While the aspiring young actor, Marlon, newly arrived in Berlin, has already been cast for his role, his situation exposes the precarity of the lines between casting and rehearsing, where a given cast member might always be cast away. If the Kastanienallee has become known as »Casting Allee«, as a haunt for screen and stage hopefuls, then his place on it is precarious. Even if he has already been cast for his role, the process of rehearsal (as »Probe«) becomes an extended form of the testing of capacity involved in casting. His episode establishes a pattern for the others, in a variation on method acting. Before he can take his rightful place in the cast, he needs to have been in the city in a particular way, so that he can be himself – or imitate his own experience successfully – even as he inhabits his role, and hence give felicitous performative authority to the embodied speech acts required of him.

Specifically, for Marlon as for the two other lead protagonists, the experience in question is that of being ›Beute‹, falling prey to the city or becoming a participant in the city as prey to market forces. In this first film it is largely on the level of relations among those subsisting as part of Berlin's performance sub-cultures. He is given charge of the son of his new landlady in a not yet gentrified building off the Schönhauser Allee as she heads off for a performance in Vienna, and then cannot get hold of her dancer girlfriend, who has travelled to Belgium for a casting call. He is waylaid by a young woman, who takes him unbidden to an alternative music club, shows him a painful set of scars on her arm, and abandons him in her car next morning, only for him to find the car in a later sequence, complete with the latex ›scar‹ which had so upset him, and for the woman to cycle by without make-up as a picture of Prenzlauer Berg conformity. If the scar serves as an embodied sign for potential anagnorisis in *Gespenster*, here it is a theatrical prop. A brief scene when he struggles to contain a talking parrot in one of the apartments he enters during the night presents a wry perspective on the practices of imitation, the parroting of other voices, needed for both casting and stage performance as such. While Marlon's part requires him to ventriloquize the voices of ›Stadtmanagement‹, the announcements on the part of the city that govern his character's subjectivity, he is subject to a series of voices, both embodied and disembodied (answerphone messages) in his long Berlin night of initiation. When he eventually arrives back at the theatre, bloodied by his experience, he enters into the part he has to play with new elan, joining a formation of his fellow-actors to re-enter the theatre, proclaiming their text to his cue, and leaving the flatmate who had inveigled his way into casting to replace him looking on.⁵

For Lizzy, the part she has to play is that of a woman subject to sexual exploitation, one that Pollesch assumes she will take to from her own experience. She then also has a nocturnal sequence of (mis)adventures, stealing a designer coat on display in a gallery-style boutique in order to appear in it at a premiere party. She ends up in an up-market sex-club and drinking champagne, snorting cocaine, engaging in three-way erotic relations with the young man (Julian) and woman (Babe) she finds there, and executing a pole dance in place of Babe. If Marlon's episode is organized around voicing, also in mediated forms, Lizzy's follows a particular logic of screening, with her experience mediated by CCTV (as she steals the coat, captured on screen like Petzold's Nina before her), television (footage of the premiere party on a screen at the club) and references to film, from Hollywood to the prize-winning porn films of Babe. Julian introduces himself as being in charge of the club, owned by a ›Türke‹ younger than he is. And if Lizzy's rejoinder serves to confuse him with the putative Turkish owner, it seems suitable for the post-migrant conditions at work here, as Julian is played by Croatian-German actor, Stipe Erceg, who passes as a ›native‹ German Berliner, but could also be the ›Türke‹ in question.⁶

5 The flatmate survives on doing voice-overs and advertisements.

6 Erceg has ›German‹ parts in his credits (e.g. Holger Meins in *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex*, 2008) as well as a Serbo-Croat role in the Serbian-German co-production, *Zena sa slomljenim nosom* and the part of migrant youth Damir in *Der Albaner* (both 2010).

Post-migrant identity intersects with gender and sexuality here, as queer possibilities are discussed and explored,⁷ but also with the ambiguity of economic relations between three young Berliners, turning on the question of who pays whom for what, or for whom. For Lizzy, the experience turns out to have been a transaction of which she was unaware, having been worked by sex-workers.⁸ And she engages in counter-exploitation of that experience when she returns to the theatre, giving an interview in which she appropriates the life-story of the post-migrant subject, Julian, and embroiders it for her own purposes. At the end of the film as whole, when the performers are about to take the production of *Stadt als Beute* onstage for its premiere, Lizzy is dressed in a version of the costume and wig that Babe wears at the club; that is, she plays herself as other, exhibiting the kind of »Selbsttechnologie«, or (re)working of the self, within structures of exploitation that is the crux of her text. Babe had told her that in her performances she would never show the audience who she really is, and Lizzy seems to have reached a compromise between being and not being her character.

As Lizzy returns to the rehearsal of *Stadt als Beute* with a new sense of what it might mean to be sexual prey, cast in intersectional complexities, the third film turns to Ohboy, who takes *Stadt als Beute* into closer, if also ambiguous engagement with the post-migrant conditions of Berlin. David Scheller, who plays Ohboy, is a Turkish-German actor perhaps best known for playing Kemal Özbek in Lars Becker's *Kanak Attack* (2000), based on Feridun Zaimoglu's docufictional account of drug-dealing among young (post-)migrants, *Abschaum. Die wahre Geschichte von Ertan Ongun* (1997). While his »Migrationshintergrund« is never mentioned, Ohboy is marked out as unlike the others, picked up »von der Straße« and accordingly likely to cause organizational trouble for the project, according to co-actor Ricarda. We first encounter him with his partner, Tanya, who is of East Asian heritage (played by Thai actor, Eve Natthawat-Kritsanayut) and speaks imperfect German, while he himself might almost pass as »native« German, with subtly accented speech patterns. When she prompts him with key lines from his text that she has memorized – »Sony ist seßhaft in Afghanistan oder Indien. Dieses Sony-Gebäude steht hier gar nicht« – his speech on the globalized location of Sony is accordingly mediated (in a form not quite in keeping with the script that Ohboy is holding) by a voice marked as in a more immediate relationship to the »migrant« in post-migrant than he is.

Ohboy is set once more in an ironic relationship to (post-)migrant conditions in the first of a series of encounters as he walks haphazardly along the Potsdamer Straße. He stumbles over a crate in front of a »Turkish« shop, where the son of the owner is sweeping the pavement, dropping the remains of a McDonald's take-away, only to be berated by the youth (sporting a BERLIN sweatshirt), who asserts his ownership of the street and his occupational autonomy: »Bin ich deine Putzfrau?« Intersecting stereotypes of gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality are invoked, as the youth calls for back-up from his father (in a mixture of Turkish and German) and Ohboy calls the father a »Spießler«, when told to clear up his rubbish, before being seen off by the son in a stream of homophobic invective and »gangster« threats. Ohboy may come »from the street«, but his

7 For a queer perspective on Pollesch's work, also in intersection with postcolonial critique, see Dreyse 2011.

8 On her way to the club, she finds herself among a group of extravagantly outfitted sex-workers, street-walking in the hyperbolic style of drag performance.

place on it is itinerant and contested (he passes portentous street signs – ›Future‹ and ›Minus‹), and with it the viability of his identity as a non-conforming post-migrant subject, seeking a future in the Berlin cultural avant-garde.

Ohboy's journey along the Potsdamer Straße takes him to the site that was evoked as not really being there in the lines prompted by Tanya, the Sony Centre, and hence to the haunting-ground of Nina in *Gespenster*. His text describes the Sony building as one of the city's »Geistertürme« (see Pollesch 2002: 9), and he too is cast in a kind of hauntopological condition here, even as the remaining cast members back at the Prater make a pantomime out of his ghostly absence from what has become a phantom rehearsal. If Marlon and Lizzy have immersed themselves in particular forms of Berlin life in ways that ready them for their roles in the *Stadt als Beute* drama, for Ohboy the immersion becomes literal, as he lies down in the Sony Centre fountain pool, before being chased off by security. Not for nothing does the pool scene take place in this space branded for Sony as global corporation, against the backdrop of the Filmhaus and a plasma screen, as Ohboy seeks to retrieve the set piece of his Sony Centre lines from memory and give them site-specific meaning. He improvises variations on the text, first spoken inwardly and in close-up, then declaimed to the arena, with a camera that rotates around the space, in montage with a gyrating sequence from the rehearsal. His »große Scheiße!«, addressed at the building, is delivered with more pronounced accenting, as a more explicitly post-migrant evaluation of the corporate management of contemporary Berlin.

The sequence of screens in the Lizzy episode culminate here in this what Sieg calls Pollesch's concern with »the corporate, screenic organization of subjectivity« (Sieg 2008: 138). While Ohboy's immersion in this screenic management of urban space enables him to return to the Prater, it is only to be told by Ricarda »Er gehört ja doch nicht hier«, as the ensemble collapses into a carnivalesque melee of misogynistic, homophobic and classist insults and a water fight, caught between real and mock affect, in the men's toilet. Tension is broken, along – it seems – with the hold that the screenic might have on the action of the film itself,⁹ as water drops dashed across the screen expose the cinematic apparatus. Whether this also means a resolution of the implications of the post-migrant condition in such progressive cultural practice is another matter. What the film shows, both on the streets and in the theatre that is seeking to connect with them, is that condition as a particular kind of predicament in the city as prey, cast in an intersectional network of prescribed roles and prejudices. That the word ›Migration‹, as part of the script,¹⁰ appears briefly in one of the text montage sequences, but remains unvoiced, only serves to highlight its bearing on the film's representation of Berlin and the vicissitudes of its cultural life.

9 Though, ironically, Sony Ericsson appears among the credits for the film.

10 As the play text has it, »Da draußen fährt alles diesen diskriminierenden Migrationskurs« (Pollesch 2002: 9).

Voice and Voice-over

When Ohboy tries to call Pollesch to explain his lateness, while maintaining the kind of autonomy that is expected of him, he does so with ›street‹ bravado. This post-migrant figure, cast away on the streets, depicts himself as part of a group that navigates them with leisured ontopological authority: »cruise da ein bisschen durch die Stadt mit meinen Kumpels«. In Arslan's *Der schöne Tag* a closer approximation to such cruising across urban topography is at work, also extending cruising to its indicatively queer sense of the practice of bodily and optical manoeuvres between potential sexual partners. That this combination of two forms of cruising should be undertaken by a young female post-migrant subject (Deniz, played by Serpil Turhan) is clearly not arbitrary.¹¹ As Arslan says in interview with Gabriela Seidel, his intention with this film was to shift the focus from the young male protagonists at the centre of the first two films in his trilogy about young Turkish-Germans in Berlin (*Dealer*, 1999, and *Geschwister*) onto a young woman, asking a question that combines the epistemological and the ontological, knowledge and being: »Was kann man von ihr wissen und wie könnte sie ihren Tag verbringen.« (Arslan 2001) The film is careful to keep the level of knowledge that might be acquired of Deniz in check, creating a tension between her frankness of expression and the degree to which we can know what she is thinking and feeling at any given time. And the question of how she might pass her day is of the essence, asking what level of freedom of movement she might enjoy.

Arslan is clearly interested in moving beyond reductive post-migrant stereotypes here:

In ›Der schöne Tag‹ ist die Figur der Deniz in ihrer Gesamtheit zwar nicht repräsentativ für eine ganze Bevölkerungsgruppe, aber in einem Punkt steht sie sicher für die Erfahrungen von vielen anderen ihres Alters: Sie hat noch etwas anderes zu tun, als sich ständig mit ihrer Identität zu beschäftigen. Mir war es wichtig, sie nicht im Hinblick darauf zu definieren, was vermeintlich ›fremd‹ an ihr ist. Die vielbeschworene Zerrissenheit zwischen zwei Kulturen entspricht nicht ihrer Lebenserfahrung. Sie bewegt sich mit Selbstverständlichkeit durch die Umgebung, in der sie lebt. Sie ist eine Person mit eigenen Geheimnissen, Widersprüchen und Besonderheiten, die sich nicht auf ihre Herkunft reduzieren lassen. (Ibid.)

However, if Deniz is not reducible to her background, exercising considerable personal autonomy, that is not to say that her post-migrant identity is not a factor in those secrets, contradictions and particularities that account for her person. In one of the episodes of the film, she enters the open courtyard of the apartment complex in Kochstraße where she lives and where we see her move freely in a number of sequences, and passes a group of three Turkish-German youths, undertaking self-appointed policing duties. One makes a sexually suggestive comment in Turkish as she passes; she turns back and challenges this act of speech, forcing him to take responsibility and apolo-

11 Natalie Lettenewitsch situates the roles played by Serpil Tuhan in *Geschwister* and *Der schöne Tag* between flânerie and cruising (understood as urban freewheeling without a car) as practices reviewed in the light of the postmigrant »Perspektivenwechsel«, in particular for the female subject (Lettenewitsch 2017: 181-183).

gize for what he has said, but also then accepting the insistent offer of protection from the group's leader as she walks to her block. The free movements of this urban subject are also aligned, at times at least (she dismisses the escort ahead of reaching the block), with having to go through the motions of prescribed cultural gender norms. If Deniz is an actress (and her escort shows particular interest in this), she also has to perform versions of everyday socio-cultural constraints.¹²

The film begins with Deniz leaving the apartment of the sleeping man she has spent the night with. This is Jan (played by Florian Stetter), as emerges when she listens to his call on the answerphone back in her own apartment, rather than taking it.¹³ The establishing sequence sets up the logic of topographical agency for this post-migrant female subject, as the film follows her everyday movements, marked by a self-contained but determined sense of direction, through the environment in the slow cinema mode that has come to be identified with the Berliner Schule.¹⁴ Arslan is concerned to show that such urban motions, enacted in a mode that reveals his allegiance to *cinéma vérité* traditions (»Sie sollten sich nach der realen Topographie der Stadt richten«), are not »tote Zeit« for cinema (Arslan 2001), but a sustained, performative expression of identity. The avoidance of creating a topographical confection of Berlin, for cinegenic effect, is of the essence here.

Having had breakfast in her apartment, Deniz takes the U-Bahn, exchanging a series of serious, intent looks, frontal and averted, with a young man (Diego, played by Bilge Bingül) on the opposite platform. She then heads to her workplace, and the voice recorded on the answerphone has made ready for her to speak for the first time, also within a system of recording. It transpires that she does voice-over work for a media company, and the introduction to this – as she dubs the voice of young woman from a French film (Éric Rohmer's *Conte d'été*, 1996) – is telling. Dubbing is subject here to rehearsal, so that the screened film is appropriately matched. She is asked to repeat the words she has to say twice and with adjustments, before they can proceed to record them, and the words in question relate to her character (this young Frenchwoman, played by somebody else) accusing her male lover of treating her as interchangeable with other girls.

On the one hand, the voiced speech act has a bearing on the relationships in the broader plotline of *Der schöne Tag*, in particular providing a kind of template for the break-up of Deniz and Jan (as though Arslan were giving similar directorial instruction to these actors as Deniz and her co-worker received for their dubbing work). At one point, Deniz offers to speak to the waitress on Jan's behalf, extending the dubbing function to more general acts of ventriloquism. The dubbing scene also relates to the bilingual character of the film, in which Deniz resolutely maintains a German voice, so that in the episode when she visits her mother, who addresses her throughout in Turkish, she is engaging in a constant act of simultaneous interpretation in this bina-

12 This form of everyday acting is the subject of her conversation with Diego later in the film, where she cannot say for sure whether or not she is playing a part.

13 It is telling that the recorded voice is the first to be heard in the film, except for an indistinct call from an unseen child as Deniz climbs the stairs in her apartment block.

14 The shots from the back of her walking across the green space between apartment blocks can be compared and contrasted with those of Petzold's Nina, whose arms barely move in a kind of inert perambulation (cf. Webber 2014: 217).

ry abstraction of communication in a mixed-language household.¹⁵ And the dubbing sequence raises more particular questions about how interchangeable, or not, people may be under post-migrant conditions (when Deniz confronts Jan with his interest in another girl, she is described as blonde). As the Turkish-German dubs this role, invisible and unaccented, she asserts herself as passing for German in her vocalization, with her distinct Turkish looks hidden from view. In her execution of ›native speaker‹ language skills, Deniz pronounces a kind of shibboleth, but one which relies precisely on non-distinction, allowing her to be the agent of transaction of foreign-language culture into the linguistic space of German. The post-migrant subject performs felicitous speech acts (subject only to routine refinement of tone and pace in relation to the demands of the film being dubbed), albeit only in a secondary function.

What the dubbing sequence also highlights, in an effect of *mise-en-abyme*, is the particular presentational style of the film in which it is embedded. The strategically under-spoken style (»ein bisschen heftig, versuch's nochmal« says the dubbing director) is maintained throughout, with limited emotional modulation. Thus, Deniz's line »Du hast mich erschreckt«, when she awakes to find Jan sitting on her bed, barely registers the affect in question. While *Stadt als Beute* adopts a post-dramatic style that pushes the voice in its outbursts to an exhaustion of its dramatic potential in a kind of hyper-performance, this is the post-dramatic in a more ascetic mode, more unpronounced still than Nina's performance in her casting session. The unaccented speech is also lacking in affective accentuation, in keeping with the ways in which she moves around both interiors and external spaces in the city, establishing a particular form of unaccentuated or ›cool‹ affective topography. The delivery of lines, often with barely any breaks, at once bespeaks a certain kind of fluency (also for post-migrant subjects) and a particular form of estrangement of the speech acts in question as the routine repertoire of narrative cinema in its romantic genres, and with it what Sabine Müller has called »the ideology of emotion-generation« that they maintain (Müller 2014: 326). Arslan's concern is rather with the sort of »phenomenological experiments« (ibid.: 327), the subtle testing of experiential structures, that is characteristic of the Berliner Schule across the variety of its practices. In the pursuit of this experimental strategy, patterns of speech align both with the largely restrained corporeal behaviour of the actors and with the general styling of the film, its natural lighting, the austere, unadorned character of its *mise-en-scène* and the carefully disciplined camerawork.

If the dubbing sessions introduce an element of self-reflexiveness into the film, at once giving a picture of an everyday working environment and operating on a meta-dramatic level to ask questions about how film works, then this is also the case for the casting episode. While Deniz has a confident sense of her professional status as an actor, it is clear that her ability to enact it is limited, with only minor television roles and the dubbing work available for the CV she can present for any casting session. Dubbing, as economically driven activity, represents her separation from, rather than association with, the visible acting roles of the feature film on screen. As for the aspiring actors Nina and Toni in *Gespenster*, the casting session accordingly represents the

15 The workings of the structure of communication in this scene are shown to be too efficient to be true, when the mother argues for the importance of partnership, and Deniz responds by questioning the term »Partnerschaft« (»was für ein schreckliches Wort«), as though this German word had been uttered by her mother.

possibility of a transformation of her existence. As the director (played by actor, director and writer Hanns Zischler) indicates,¹⁶ they are casting a leading role, and while he might ask the question as to whether she thinks she is capable of it of any candidate for the role, an unspoken question about her appearance and background might also be bound up in this. We can only speculate as to whether the casting is aimed – consciously or unconsciously – at the sort of phenotype that dominates such roles (as seen in the young women either side of Deniz in the casting process, one of whom she musters in a way that may or may not register this). When she introduces herself, she simply says her (Turkish) name, age, occupation as actor, and that she lives in Berlin (this, her averred ontological condition).

Like the dubbing sequences, the audition is mediated by the apparatus of film – here in the function of a kind of screen-testing. In the initial exchanges between the director and Deniz, she is visible for us only on a small screen on his side, against a blue background. In a way that recalls the casting session in *Gespenster*, but without the same programmatic framework, Deniz is asked by the director to recount something, and when she asks for more precise instruction, he suggests something that she has experienced or perhaps a film she has seen recently. She considers carefully, before embarking on an account of the plot of a film that is evidently Maurice Pialat's *À nos amours* (1983), which thus sits alongside the Rohmer intertext as an orientational framework from the French new wave. It is surely not by chance that Deniz's account of the Pialat film focuses first on the rehearsals for a play in which the protagonist is acting, and that love is introduced as a function of a part to be spoken (»In dem Text, den sie spricht, geht es um die Liebe«). If the casting story that Nina tells is in the mode of personal dream and attachment (expressing a new love), in the case of Deniz it is in a form mediated by film (whether one that she has dubbed we can only speculate – she suggests that she has happened upon it on television after work). Like the scene from *Conte d'été*, the exposition of *À nos amours* prompts questions about the scriptedness of love and the interchangeability of its objects.

Deniz's unswerving rendition of the film's plot finishes with »So endet der Film«, and she expresses surprise that this also marks the end of the audition (and thus of the film of it playing on the screen within the screen). As she leaves the casting studio, tracked by the camera, which remains behind, she strides over to the door of the waiting room in her signature style, eyes fixed ahead, and opens it, even as the door of the studio is simultaneously closed upon the camera behind the next candidate in this iterative process of selection. Whether the casting can have been successful remains uncertain when the film itself ends, but its predominant logic is clearly one of exclusion, of closed doors, without an indication of whether the post-migrant subject is particularly likely to be excluded by the screen-test. The logic of testing is also carried over into the narrative of the day's experience as it continues outside the studio. There follows the sequence of looks and pursuit on the S-Bahn that leads to her encounter with Diego, who now reveals both his name and his Portuguese heritage,¹⁷ in a part of the

16 The assistant director is played by Simone Bär, who was responsible for casting in *Der schöne Tag*.

17 While Diego was born in Lisbon, Deniz asserts her identity as not new to Berlin (in the aspiring-actor manner of Marlon in *Stadt als Beute*): »Ich bin in Berlin geboren.«

Tiergarten that is an established ground for queer cruising.¹⁸ When she later suggests that Diego has spoken to her »auf der Straße«, she misrepresents the encounter, as it is she who speaks first as he emerges at her side, asking him whether he has been hiding. The gendered agency in these acts is cast ambiguously between these two post-migrant subjects.

The final main episode of the film focuses on a conversation that Deniz strikes up in a café with an academic historian (played by writer Elke Schmitter) on historical constructions of love as everyday phenomenon, with ideas partly drawn from Niklas Luhmann (cf. Arslan 2001). While Deniz speaks for an essentialist view of love and other emotions as transferable across time, the historian sees them as conditioned by their times. That love could also be subject to post-migrant conditions, and accordingly work differently for Deniz with Jan or Diego, is perhaps the subtext here. Deniz speaks of her problems in talking about love without it seeming hackneyed and repetitive, produced according to a script; and when she tries to suggest that gestures and looks might be more authentic, the historian sees the argument but also makes claims for the importance of language nonetheless. The scene is bookended by a return to the dubbing studio and the Rohmer film, with Deniz once more voicing her role in a drama of love, with its iterative, transactional patterns.

In these last scenes of the film, Deniz is dressed in the approximate colours of the German flag, perhaps in a nod to her status as just a young citizen out and about in her home city on a fine day. Whether this in turn gestures towards a kind of colour-blind order of things, where ethnicity and migration background as »Herkunft« can be secondary to personal experience, as Arslan suggests, is something of an open question. This would place *Der schöne Tag* in proximity with the feature *Auf den zweiten Blick* (2012) by Nigerian-German director, Sheri Hagen, where race as »where you come from« does indeed seem to be rendered as just one element in a complex intersectional network incorporating gender, sexuality and (visual) dis/ability, and the logics of racialization appear susceptible to suspension.¹⁹ That is to say that, while the casting of Arslan's film seems to require the lead role of Deniz to be played by a Turkish-German actor, much as Hagen's film needs to have a cast drawn substantially from actors of colour in a matter of strategic (counter-)normalization, the films nonetheless work to challenge the assumptions that go with conventional casting practices.²⁰ Clad in her German colours, Deniz returns to the urban transportation network that has been her location-in-transit for much of the film, her gaze once more engaging with that of a young man in an act of cruising that places her outside the presumptive boundaries of her apparent identity. In this testing of self and other for potential encounter and relation, relying on the unvoiced looks and gestures to which Deniz had referred in the conversa-

18 The scenes are set close to the cruising-ground experienced by the young, queer, post-migrant protagonist in the opening sequence of Kutluğ Ataman's *Lola und Bilidikid* (1999).

19 For an account of the film's exploration of race and visualization, see Landry 2017. The question of colour-blindness (intersecting with the rendering unseen of visual disability) partly focuses on the invisible performance of the female, mixed race protagonist Kai Herzsprung as radio presenter. A counter-vision of contemporary Berlin in these terms is provided by Burhan Qurbani's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (2020), where the black refugee protagonist is subject to hyperbolic racialisation, enacted through »casting« in carnivalesque black and white masks.

20 Thus, for instance, the white mainstream archetype of »Herr Meyer«, who shouts »Ruhe!« from his window at the mixed-race trio playing football in the courtyard, is cast as black.

tion with the academic, a kind of more everyday casting practice is at work, and with it a strategically extended version of the post-migrant condition.

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