TURKISH GERMAN CINEMA IN
THE NEW MILLENNIUM
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Chapter 2

THE OBLIVION OF INFLUENCE: MYTHICAL REALISM IN FEÖ ALADAĞ’S WHEN WE LEAVE

David Gramling

I love silence because it creates space for an audience to interpret for itself. (Feö Aladağ in Jenkins 2011)

I don’t know any Turkish families who talk that little at the dinner table. (Incredulous spectator [Hikmet Kocamaner] of When We Leave)

Hatun Sürücü, age twenty-three, died on 7 February 2005 at the hands of her brothers Mehmet and Alpaslan, near a bus stop in Berlin-Tempelhof. Two days afterward, the Berliner Kurier newspaper’s editorial staff saw fit to refer to the murdered woman in its headlines by first name, with the intimate paternalism of a state-appointed guardian: “Did Hatun have to die just for leaving her husband?” (2005). The Berliner Zeitung saw and raised the Kurier’s rhetorical bid, nominalizing what was alleged about that one winter Monday with the front-page declaration “Execution in Broad Daylight” (2005). Even before her funeral, Ms. Sürücü had been claimed, repurposed, and narrativized into a proprietary social fable about postmulticultural Germany, one that seemed predestined to find its way into the annals of mythical realism. Nearly five years prior to the January 2010 release of Feö Aladağ’s Kreuzköln milieu tragedy Die Fremde (When We Leave), the public narrative about Ms. Sürücü had already unhinged itself from the historical and forensic record, and become the property of myth. The compulsory message those first headlines conveyed about this young German citizen’s death was thus no longer assessable in terms of accuracy or inaccuracy, truth or equivocation; the signifying structure of myth had put both Sürücü and the crime she sustained “at a distance, and... at one’s disposal” (Barthes 1973: 118).

In the half-decade between the Sürücü murder and the Aladağ film, a tectonic shift took place in the German-speaking debate on Islam and multiculturalism, as commentators from Henryk Broder to Monika Maron zealously converted to a rigid Enlightenment fundamentalism (see Göktürk et al. 2011: 349–54). Concurrently racist diatribe treatises (Sarrazin 2010) and ex-Muslim coming-out testimonies (Kelek 2005, 2010) flew off the shelves of German train station bookstores, while the bellettristic “literature of migration” in domestic trade publishing sold only sluggishly. The genre of applied social romanticism, which had sustained such vigorous critique and carnivalesque ridicule in mid-1990s Germany, seemed to have proven its automaton-like staying power on the market in Germanophone narratives about Islam and Turkishness (Göktürk 1994; Kanak Attak 1998; Terkessidis and Holert 1996). In the same period, Turkish, and particularly Turkish-speaking Islamic, mass media have invested in strategies of governing the family through television and film, through a kind of Huxtablization of Islam. Private cable and satellite channels have shifted programming away from Qur’an-based, didactic broadcasts and toward neoliberal edutainment that foregrounds pious yet modernist depictions of Muslim Turkish family lifeworlds.

When We Leave is a revelatory moment in German film history because it offers a crystallization of all of these concurrent sociopolitical developments, without critiquing any of them. Its German original title, Die Fremde, conveys a telos of transhistorical foreignness—whether as gendered subject, alien territory, or both, i.e. “the (female) foreigner” or “foreign domains”—and by way of this ambiguity is able to lay out a flexible alibi for the dysphoric postmulticultural discourses that flourished in Germany between 2005 and the film’s high-profile international release on the festival circuit in 2010.

In this essay, I propose that an understanding of the signifying operations at work in this film requires an approach that goes beyond a concern with stereotypes and depictions at the level of the signified. Such a corrective criticism would be insufficient because the cunning, interpellary realism of the film preempts the critiques that would emerge from such an intervention. Instead, I turn to Roland Barthes’s post-World War II essay “Myth Today,” translated in the collection Mythologies, in which he claims that myth is something profoundly different than a mere origin story of dubious heuristic value, shared throughout the generations among an imagined collectivity (1973). Rather for Barthes, “myth is a type of speech”—i.e., a kind of utterance structure, an applied syntagm of a particular pragmatic sort, independent of and indifferent to truth-value. In what follows I suggest not only that When We Leave epitomizes and builds on the semiotic logic of myth as Barthes describes it, but also that Turkish German cinema has always—since Helma Sanders-Brahms’s Shirins Hochzeit (Shirin’s Wedding, 1976) at least—been a primary contestatory threshold upon which mythologization and demythologization have been negotiated. At the close of the essay, I suggest how the high-profile stars cast in When We Leave strain onscreen against its myth, creating an
uncanny iconographic surplus that is steadily becoming a regular feature of Turkish German film and literature.

**Realism in the Service of Myth**

In his essay, originally published in 1957, Barthes strongly objected to the reductionist characterization of myth as either an inherited, strategic inaccuracy or an originary genre that helps a society recognize itself in periods of turmoil. Barthes tells a contravening anecdote about “myth today,” one based on his early confrontation with a Latin grammar textbook, where he encounters the sentence “quia ego nominor leo” (because my name is lion), borrowed from Aesop or Phaedrus. He realizes this clause has very little to do with its first-order signifieds, but rather that the sentence is “a grammatical example meant to illustrate the rule about the agreement of the predicate.” Barthes observed: “I am even forced to realize that the sentence in no way signifies its meaning to me, that it tries very little to tell me something about the lion and what sort of name he has; its true and fundamental signification is to impose itself on me as the presence of a certain agreement of the predicate” (1973: 115).

For Barthes there is nothing necessarily duplicitous or pernicious in the “true and fundamental” illocutionary force that *quia ego nominor leo* bears, as a grammatical example for a Latin pupil. Still its force of meaning is necessarily of a second order; it “leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains” (1973: 115). Such an evacuation of history, and of first-order signification, is indeed also the meaning-making principle of Aladağ’s *When We Leave*. In lieu of, say, a story about Hatun Sürücki’s life and murder, Aladağ’s film instead compels the “presence of a certain agreement of the predicate”—a predicate whose subject is the collectively imagined, young Muslim German Turkish woman. The predicate to which this subject is made to agree is the inevitability and omnipresence of patriarchal violence toward each and every Muslim woman—regardless of whether she is in Turkey or Europe, whether she wears a headscarf or does not, or whether the perpetrator of that violence appears integrated into, or hostile toward, proper Northwest European secular liberalism. *When We Leave* is the strategic rehearsal of this absolute subject-predicate agreement.

If myth is indeed a motivated, syntagmatic, and performative arrangement of ordinary signs, the primary connective term for myth’s utterance in *When We Leave* is the cuddly, messianic figure of Cem. The film’s establishing shot, or rather sound, is the dying voice of this oracular child, calling out “Anneçığım?” (mommy?) to the protagonist Umay Aslan, who has not yet appeared on screen. With his simple declarations in both Turkish and German, Cem is established early in the film as the embodiment of unsentimental, universalist justice, beyond any cultural disposition or pretense. With unprompted questions like “Where were you, Mommy?” and “Why can we not go to Rana’s wedding?” as well as his epic, unstudied judgments about the Aslan family’s emotional toxicity, Cem quickly becomes the film’s delivery-device for moral universalism.

Like any good element of mythic signification, the boy Cem appears ageless, transcendent, and impervious to the influence of context. In a workplace face-off with his mother’s boss Gül, while the latter is babysitting for Umay in a pinch, the four-year-old Cem staunchly refuses any sort of childish diversion—whether in the form of coloring, games, jokes, or small talk. While Cem’s obstinacy forces Gül to ignore her paperwork and raise the politeness of her tone, in order to convince him to busy himself with something childlike, Cem expresses very little resembling childhood affect, functioning rather as a kind of moral punctuation for the violent episodes that fuel the narrative. It is this absence of anything disorderly, unreasonable, inexplicable, or juvenile in the character of the child—except when provoked by an adult’s own unbecoming child’s play—that allows him to function as a kind of syntagm of rational causality, an *ergo* that connects and arranges a string of mythic speech elements. His accidental murder, at the beginning and end of the film, both dissolves and memorializes his conjunctive role in the “sentence” that *When We Leave* issues.

Just as there is nothing tangential or unmotivated about Cem’s Christ-like presence in *When We Leave*, silence functions in the film not as an empty space (Leerstelle) for heterodox viewer responses, as Feo Aladağ herself proposes above, but rather as a kind of mythic hygiene, constituting the foreignness of Turkish Germans. While Aladağ expresses a preference for silence, on the basis that her audiences can then better pursue their own interpretations, interpersonal talk in the film proceeds according to a rigid thematic economy—not primarily a diegetic economy of intrafamilial, social power on the level of the signified, but one of strict topical relevance vis-à-vis signs. What at first appears to be the silence of patriarchal

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*Figure 2.1 Cem (Nizam Schiller) in When We Leave, DVD capture*
repression and enforcement turns out to be the silence of the narrative design of the film. What is being suppressed by the film’s silences is not any given character’s social inability to assert his or her right to speak when the Aslan family assembles. Rather, it is the film’s overarching mythic bearing that requires and regulates a strict economy of relevant topics among the characters’ spoken exchanges. The mythical realism of the film is thus one that sanitizes or excludes impurities. In stunning contrast to the aesthetic and ideological bearing of most Turkish German films of the 2000s, When We Leave is an orthodox regime of signifiers rather than an illustration of orthodox signifieds.

Not only is there little in the way of uncompelled spoken discourse among the characters, the meager volume of casual talk, unmotivated banter, and lighthearted gossip only serves to emphasize the coerced restraint on the part of the film’s foreign, i.e., nonethnic-German characters. In this film foreignness is a territorial or characterological constant; it is not contingent upon one’s current subjective position, as in films such as Akin’s Auf der anderen Seite (The Edge of Heaven, 2007), where Nejat’s or Ayten’s foreignness is critically contextualized. In When We Leave, Turks are foregrounded through silence, both in Germany and Turkey: the speech of Turkish-marked characters, whether speaking German or Turkish, is always characterized by restraint, apoplexy, extreme emotion, or despair. Meanwhile German-marked characters speak freely, casually, affectionately, and independent of coercion.

This tone is set during Umay’s abortion procedure early in the film, in an Istanbul doctor’s office on the European side of Istanbul’s Bosphorus Strait. The practicing physician is not seen on the screen, and he has only one word to exchange with Umay, “Tamam mı?” (ok?). In shaping the scene in this particular way, the film places Umay in the position of verbally enacting the abortion procedure, as if the male physician were a passive bystander with no procedural instructions to convey. The fading sound of the fetus’s heartbeat is then selectively emphasized among the ambient sounds, in juxtaposition to the arpeggiated, minor-key neoromantic piano accompaniment that serves as nearly the only nondiegetic musical motif throughout the film. Turkish music only rarely appears, and in such cases it conveys coerced communitarian atmospherics.

The film’s practice of image doubling serves as the other pole of this exoticized, austere topicality. Intrafamilial hierarchies are established through two dining tables, one belonging to Umay’s in-laws in suburban Anatolian Istanbul, and one belonging to Umay’s own parents in Berlin’s East Kreuzberg. These dining-room tables, of roughly the same shape and configuration, are shot from the same camera angle in both settings. There is no narrative explanation for the fact that Umay and Cem are seated in the same positions at both tables in both Istanbul and Berlin and are positioned in the same quadrant of the long shots. The two shots set up an absolute equivalence between Turkish family life in suburban Turkey and Turkish German family life in urban Berlin; these two modern patriarchal Muslim families are aestheticized identically, regardless of their current country of residence. Rather than underwriting the familiar dichotomy between a progressive, secular Germany and a patriarchal, pious Turkey, this doubling enframes Umay and Cem within a dystopic house-of-mirrors, in which Turkish Turkey and Turkish Germany are indistinguishable. Migration and its feted hybridities are no match for the irredeemism of the patriarchal dinner table.

Further instances of doubling ensue. Both the Turkish husband Kemal and the elder Turkish German brother Mehmet strike nearly identical blows to Umay for her immodest speech, such that she ricochets off her right shoulder against a piece of furniture and cries out with a nearly identical loud grunt. Hostile Turkish male figures repeatedly kidnap Cem by snatching the boy up over their left shoulders such that his chest faces into the men’s left arm. In a further, fascinating instance of neo-baroque recitation, Umay slams her own left wrist in precisely the same cross-body gesture as Kekilli’s character Sibel in Fatih Akin’s Gegen die Wand (Head-On, 2004). Whereas in When We Leave, Kekilli as Umay performs this suicidal rite to protest her father’s unwillingness to release her from an arranged marriage, as Sibel in Head-On she does so to protest Cihat’s unwillingness to enter into a show-marriage with her, in order that her parents might relent in insisting she find a nice Turkish husband. Meanwhile, the municipal bus driver who kicks Sibel and Cihat off his bus for fighting, after her initial suicidal attempt, reappears in When We Leave at her younger sister Rana’s wedding in the role of her future father-in-law.

This mythic plenitude of iconographic repetition suggests that, while most press discussions have focused on the film’s explicit ideological claims as a realist milieu drama, When We Leave is equally ripe with semiotic tutelage and dramaturgical doubling—meaning-making operations that may be best understood within the traditions of baroque, or perhaps neo-baroque, mannerism. And yet the film gained political praise for its iconoclastic, closeup portrayal of Turkish identities, generational differences, and migration itineraries. Surely it would be impracticable to say that the film invents unrealistic portrayals of quotidian Berlin—whether a Berlin that is autochthonous, transnational, German, Muslim, Turkish, or a combination of these. When We Leave’s strategic myth lies not in antirealism, but in how it parasitically appropriates a certain species of local, semiotic capital—whether that of the successful, dauntless Turkish-speaking business woman, the ethically non-Turkish Berliner who speaks Turkish as an occasional lingua franca, the moderate Muslim woman who wears a piously styled headscarf according to situational needs rather than personal conviction, the nationally indifferent German man who appears uninterested in perceiving Umay as Turkish, or the elderly heterosexual Turkish couple who make private decisions collaboratively, even if they appear to subscribe to patriarchal regularities in the presence of their
children and friends. Each of these emblems results from an intricate tradition of semiotic precedent and refinement within Turkish German film since the 1970s. Nonetheless these emblems recede, reluctantly, behind the second-order signification of the film. In proper didactic style, the film pronounces the mythic narrative at its outset, then spells it out letter by letter in the intervening 110 minutes, and then reiterates the violence, in a modulated intonation, at its close.

The trompe l’oeil in When We Leave is one that harvests local realism for the purposes of myth, i.e., it appropriates three-dimensional figures that are familiar to many viewers and transmogrifies them into flat conveyors of fable. Its mythology lies in how these realistic images, poached from familiar Berlin sites such as Hermannplatz and the Landwehrkanal are set for a very specific mythological signification. The multidimensionality of the figures is conscribed and enthralled to the myth for the duration of the film. It is revealing that Hatun Sürücü’s father’s name is changed for the film from Kerem (virtue) to Kader (fate) and, correspondingly, that his profession is changed from a garden assistant to a floor worker at the local newspaper Berliner Woche—Berlin’s premier distributer of localized, neighborhood news narrative. A vocation (taking care of plants) that would have been difficult to embed into the film’s myth is thus transformed into a hyperlocal means of narrative dissemination. Each day the Berliner Woche distributes specific street-by-street content for thirty-one Berlin districts. As the accidental mastermind of a now legendary Neukölln crime, Kader is implicated in the productive forces enabling the distribution of local, urban news, including the honor killing of his own daughter, which in turn reinforces Kreuzkölln’s notoriety throughout the Federal Republic.

The Poverty of Mythic Realism

Through a procedure of semiotic attenuation, the data that organize the film’s realism are prevented from signifying anything else than that Muslim women are never and nowhere safe from violence, with or without headscarf or other expressions of piety, with or without German institutional aid or personal companionship. Furthermore the condensed effect of the myth is to insist that cultural pluralism itself is always exposed to the same degree of bare, mortal fragility as Hatun Sürücü embodied one day in 2005 at a bus stop in Berlin-Tempelhof. Ines Kappert puts it succinctly in her 2010 review: “Ultimately, the film gets entangled in clichés of the dark, eternally incomprehensible Turk, who looks friendly to be sure, but is a de facto time bomb for the enlightened German parallel society.”

Rather than considering such “entanglements” of cliché as a flaw, equivocation, or immoderation in the film, I read them as the internally coherent, underlying structure of its narrative design. Almost no sonic, verbal or visual data appear on screen that do not underwrite this imposed syntactic agreement between young Muslim women and inevitable violence. Despite the camera’s relatively wide social and aesthetic aperture upon cosmopolitan Berlin, there is no extra signifying material that is not made relevant to the myth. Contemporary Berlin and its cultural plurality are incidentally depicted—whether in the form of Keith Haring posters or beer drinkers on the Admiralbrücke—but their potential to signify is suffocated by the exhaustive seamlessness of the film’s one mythic statement. Rather than providing nuanced contextualization, these details are mobilized and subsumed. As Barthes claims, myth has no particular difficulty appropriating and subduing dissident impulses.

Because of its realist depictions and opportunistic attempt to portray an ambivalent, three-dimensional Muslim woman, Aladağ’s verité has met with admiration in a gamut of press reviews. The director’s well-publicized creative magnanimity in inviting her Turkish-speaking actors to improvise their dialogues and shape their characters autonomously, initially exempted her from charges of ideological heavy-handedness (see Helmcke 2010). Despite the aura of a democratized representational project that admits authorial and authoritative plurality, this naturalistic effect is in the end a trompe l’oeil, which nourishes itself on, and then disposes of, any Berlin or Istanbul milieu data that do not pertain syntactically to When We Leave’s overall mythic utterance.

Barthes continues his account of myth by insisting that one, “any material can arbitrarily be endowed with [mythic] meaning,” two, that no phenomenon is more naturally or transhistorically prone to mythologization than any other, three, that myth “points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us,” four, that it appears neutral and authentic, and five, that it is “speech (parole) stolen and restored; ... a brief act of larceny” (1973: 110–25). The critical reception of When We Leave thus far in Germany and elsewhere, whether admiring, faint, or damning, has generally been capitivated—and I choose this word carefully—by what transpires on the level of the signified. The historical accuracy of the narrative, the plausibility of the dialogue, the authority with which the film’s director animates a particular vision of Turkish German families and their private realms—each of these patently contestable arenas of critical judgment have left the structure of the film’s significations largely unaddressed in journalistic reception. Kappert’s doorknob confession, for example, “Great—but somehow also cliché” (2010) or Der Spiegel’s praise—that the film forges the “folklore of veiling” by exploring the lifeworlds of so-called “integrated” Turkish Germans (Buß 2010)—each of these assessments nods briefly to the power of symbolic systems, and then flees back to pro-and-contra arguments about accuracy and authenticity in socioromantic realism. In Buß’s review in Der Spiegel, the film wins the designation “uncompromising” because it refrains from dispatching incorrigible Islamist fanatics, as in The Edge of Heaven, or affectless agoraphobic homemakers, as in Kutluğ Ataman’s
Lola + Bilidikid (Lola and Billy the Kid, 1999) to propel the narrative pathos along, instead opting to feature female entrepreneurs of Turkish descent and male Muslims of moderate, unspectacular, and complex piety.

That Umay’s journey of return is not from Germany to an ancestral Turkey, but rather from a coerced marital resettlement in suburban (Anatolian) Istanbul to her preferred childhood home in central Berlin, also nourishes the film’s political aura of iconoclasm, innovation, and commitment to debunking stereotypes through radical authenticity. The film goes so far as to display an ethnic German actor speaking Turkish with her Turkish German supervisor. Beyond the diegetic realm, public attention to Aladağ’s own background—as a blonde, white Viennese with the Turkish surname of her Turkish German husband, filmmaker Züli Aladağ—tends to lead would-be detractors to the notion that When We Leave is no less than the logical result of all the hybridity critics and politicians during the 1990s had been appealing for. And yet it is not. Buß is certainly on stable footing in describing the film as an “absolute” or “unconditional” (bedingungslos) cultural statement. While this commendation clearly issues in a spirit of admiration for the director’s commitment to an unequivocal narrative program—of, say, telling the story of Hatun Sürrücü, once and for all, without pandering to institutional euphemizations of any sort—the unconditionality of this film lies elsewhere, in its myth-making structure: imperious, arresting, and interpellative.

The Iconography of Witness

The mythic form of Aladağ’s film is nourished, and troubled, by an iconographic peculiarity that has persisted in Turkish German film since the 1990s and found its most crystalline expression in Fatih Akin’s 2009 film Soul Kitchen, namely the performative blending of actors with their roles (a point also explored by Berna Gueneli in this collection). Elsewhere I have argued that the actors in Soul Kitchen are playing themselves: the main character Adam Bousdoukos (who had played Costa in Short Sharp Shock twelve years prior) suffers back pain throughout the movie, indexing how the tropes and personnel of Turkish German film are themselves aging (Gramling 2010). This productive matrix of iconic Turkish German film stars tactically or unwittingly blending their own public personae into the narrative world of the film takes a fascinating turn in When We Leave, a film in which no fewer than four primary roles are occupied by actors whose signifying valence in other films overdetermine, and at points subsume, their current roles. Simultaneously, however, those actors’ (and their previous roles’) iconic presence stand in critical witness to When We Leave’s narrative legitimacy. Sibel Kekilli (Umay) and Nursel Köse (Gül Hanım, Umay’s boss at the catering company) have both played major roles in the canon of German Turkish film—Kekilli as Sibel in Head-On and Köse as Jessi/Yeter in Auf der anderen Seite (The Edge of Heaven, 2007). Meanwhile Settar Tanrıöğen (Kader, Umay’s father) and Derya Alabora (Halyme, Umay’s mother) have taken major film roles in Turkey as well. The way in which this cast is constructed, and particularly the way each of the actors appears visually before the camera, produces a collective signature of witness beneath the mythic narrative of the film.

This is however a semiotic rather than ideological signature. Kekilli’s choice to take the role of Umay has met with rancorous, perplexed responses. In lieu of evaluating whether it is appropriate for her to pursue the right to “criticize Muslims” (Helmcke 2010), I consider Kekilli’s (and especially Köse’s) presence in this film from a purely iconographic point of view, regardless of their stated feelings about the role or the film as a whole. The surplus value of Kekilli’s media presence—from her tactical inversion of wedlock for the sake of polyamory and hedonism in Head-On to her public vilification for having acted in pornographic films—implicitly intrude on the hermetic fable of When We Leave. The Hürrüyet newspaper, for instance, hailed the arrival of the film in Turkey on 21 March 2010 with the derisive headline “Sibel Kekilli türbana girdi!” (Sibel Kekilli puts on a turban)!

Similarly Nursel Köse’s sudden materteral appearance in When We Leave resurrects the slain prostitute Jessie/Yeter from The Edge of Heaven in an iconographic bid to redress the fatal domestic violence that her character in that film suffered, and consequentially to chaperone and vouchsafe the cinematic representation of Hatun Sürrücü’s life. Clearly to pursue critically this ongoing, iconographic problem of personal signature in Turkish German film is not the same as asking: “Why would these artists want to be involved in such a film?” Rather, it is again a question of the mythical, second-order signification that those artists bear when they are situated within a particular arrangement of signifiers.

Figure 2.2 Gül (Nursel Köse) and Umay (Sibel Kekilli) in When We Leave, DVD capture
Perhaps Kekilli’s most poignant gesture toward the tactical inversion of myth occurs when her blond male German coworker Stipe invites her to a certain spot in Berlin-Friedrichshain, on the Oberbaumbrücke. Stipe, the unassuming, gentle, accidental savior of this Turkish German woman-in-crisis (see Ewing 2006), had wanted to share with Umay one particular panoramic view of Berlin that he holds dear. When they arrive at the spot, Umay asks Stipe, “What did you want to show me?” to which he answers, “This here.” Umay makes no further request, nor seeks further clarification, I propose, because she is the iconic Turkish German actor Sibel Kekilli and has seen it all before.

As noted above, Aladağ reports that she encouraged her actors to improvise broadly upon their dialogue scripts (Jenkins 2011), and this particular moment, as the two lovers gaze (or do not gaze, as it were) upon the mythic ciphers of the city, offers a laconic, yet crucial instance of the unwitting critique of myth in the film. The composite persona(s) of Umay Aslan and Sibel Kekilli, together, ask the prototype liberal middle-class ethnic German interlocutor, what exactly it was that he sought to show her. What he wants to show, particularly to her, and from a standpoint literally bridging East and West, is the diorama of reunified Berlin—an historiographic myth-unity that compulsorily signifies the struggle for emancipation—from monarchy, fascism, American hegemony, Soviet rule, and by extension any other forms of self-imposed immaturity or entrapment. And yet, Kekilli/Aslan registers perplexity at having been shown it; they already know it, they do not need it to be shown. This is perhaps one of the few moments that express incredulity toward the surface grammar of the film’s myth.

This leads to a broader question: what mood or political temporality has made such a film as When We Leave possible or compulsory, such that an impressive showing from among the small cadre of celebrated Turkish German (and Turkish) film stars both gravitate toward and tacitly, tactically resist it? One may wonder whether something fundamental has shifted since the moment of Ataman’s Lola and Billy the Kid, Hüssi Kutschuc’s Ich Chef, Du Turnschuh (Me Boss, You Sneakers!, 1998), or even Fatih Akın’s Im Juli (In July, 2000), such that self-referentiality, anti-essentialism, and speaking-back have been defrocked of their critical viability. To a great extent, many of the same actors, though older and suffering back pain as in Soul Kitchen, are both critiquing and partaking in this transformation from anti-identarian rupture to neo-baroque cultural fetishism. And yet in Soul Kitchen it was the monolingual Turkish naturopath, Bone Cruncher Kemal who solved the problems of the aging cast of German migration film by wrenching its momentary ringleader’s spine back into place, in a way that no neoliberal German health care institution would have permitted. Such a mood of renunciation and correctness seems to be currently holding sway over this arena of filmmaking. One wants to undo the ideological entanglements of previous decades; one wants to seek a sober alternative.

Of course, this mood corresponds very well to a broader disciplinary ritual—and here I mean disciplinary in the Foucauldian sense—of issuing judgment on the stylistic, rhetorical, and ideological excesses of the 1990s, an endeavor I think of as a “very new sobriety”. This mood, or stance, seems to have made its way quite potently into film production, where both Michael Haneke and Turkish German filmmakers (here represented by Feo Aladağ) have made an aggressive, peripetetic break with their predecessor films, in a bid to render a newly sober, newly authentic portrayal of social phenomena that had previously been fodder for shrill dispute and deconstructive reinscription (see also Daniela Berghahn in this volume).

The ambient discursive field surrounding When We Leave, as well as the academic reception and public discourse poised to greet it, exhibit the aesthetics of a postironic mood, one which soberly delights in taming the (ludic or tropic) negativity of preceding decades’ filmic and literary interventions. Whether this moment might enter the critical history of Turkish German film as a labor of strategic essentialism—or, perhaps, as strategic mythology—is not yet clear. What When We Leave demonstrates most profoundly is that the pleasures and displeasures of hybridity (Gökturek 2001; Malik 1996; Ewing 2006) are just as susceptible to mythological expropriation as any other semiotic domain. The current decade of Turkish German filmmaking will be a crucial proving ground for this struggle between hybridities and mythologies, a struggle in which When We Leave has staked an unequivocal claim.

Notes

I am particularly grateful to Jessica Nicholl, Sabine Köhler-Curry, Hikmet Kocamaner, and Patrick Carlson for sharing their insights on the film.

1. Kreuzkühn has come to denote the cultural milieu encompassing East Kreuzberg and North Neukölln in central southeastern Berlin.

2. In reference to the NBC’s The Cosby Show of the mid-1980s (for a discussion of genre and family imagery in the American television show, see Taylor 1989: 13–28).

3. I thank Hikmet Kocamaner for this observation.

4. Directly below this headline, the Hurrejepost.com Arts and Culture editorial staff gruesomely underscored their announcement by placing two still photographs in immediate juxtaposition to one another: on the left, a closeup headshot of Kekilli in When We Leave, grinning slightly, wearing a tight headscarf traditionally associated with pious Sunni Islam and, on the right, a slightly blurry, low-quality shot of her in the midst of sexual intercourse with an unnamed male porn actor.