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### Citation

Alkin, Ö. (2013). Europe in Turkish Migration Cinema from 1960 to the Present. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/20536>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# EUROPE IN TURKISH MIGRATION CINEMA FROM 1960 TO THE PRESENT

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**ABSTRACT** – *Since the 1960s Turkey has produced a large number of films on the subject of emigration, which reflect and explore different images of Europe. These images of Europe go back to political and cultural reforms in the wake of World War I and were further influenced by Western mass media. Starting from the premise that Turkish migration films present a counter-example for Turkey in terms of modernity and prosperity, this article argues that the image of Europe as a place of wealth and modernity is principally at odds with the sense of displacement and alienation experienced by Turkish emigrants during the large-scale labour migration to Germany from 1961 onwards. However, this image of Europe in Turkish cinema has changed recently, reflecting the changes in social awareness brought about by Turkey's attempts to join the European Union. The article will conclude with a discussion of two of these recent films: *Avrupalı* (2007), which represents Europe as a projection screen for the stabilisation of Turkey's national self-image, and *Made in Europe* (2007), which evokes Europe as a place in which emigrants have differentiated experiences of globalisation.*

## GURBET – SORROWS OF DISPLACEMENT

1. *Passengers to Exile* [Turkish: *Gurbet Yolcuları*], directed by Sırrı Gültekin (San Film, 1962).

Sırrı Gültekin's film *Gurbet Yolcuları* (*Passengers to Exile*; 1962) opens with images of a Turkish village occupied by the French during World War I: its mosque has been closed and the villagers are forced to abide by the occupiers' laws.<sup>1</sup> We see three villagers talking about the impossibility of practising

their own cultural values in a place where they are forbidden to pray on a day as holy as the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed. This sense of inability alludes to a specific experience, namely to suffer from *gurbet*. There is no exact translation for this Turkish word in English, but it describes the experience of estrangement in a place far from one's home. The word is commonly used to refer to painful migrant experiences and it is no surprise that several Turkish films dealing with migration use this term in their title.<sup>2</sup> The notion of *gurbetçilik*, to live far from home, also involves what the three villagers in *Gurbet Yolcuları* are experiencing: strangeness, inconvenience and a yearning for oneself.<sup>3</sup> Their situation differs from typical *gurbetçilik* since they actually are in their own village, yet the foreign occupation has estranged the three men from their own home. They have become foreigners in their own village and can no longer perform their identity as they would normally do at home.

The films discussed in this article address the more typical notion of *gurbet*, the experience of forced displacement from home, and explore the theme of the socio-cultural consequences of migration to modern European nation states, Germany in particular. In addition they share a notable tension between the image of Europe and the representation of Germany: while this European country is associated with the actual experience of *gurbet*, Europe itself remains a positive ideal of modernity and prosperity. This tension points at a crucial gap between how Turkish migrants experience and represent their German displacement and how their relatives at home in Turkey imagine their emigration to Europe. This article will chart and map this complex gap between the 'European' ideals of the Turkish homeland and 'German' experiences of the diaspora, and relate it to the socio-cultural dimensions of Turkish migration film.

## THE CORPUS

The corpus analysed in this study consists of more than fifty films of different genres and periods that all explore the theme of emigration from Turkey to

2. See, among other films, *Birds of Exile* [Turkish: *Gurbet Kuşları*], directed by Halit Refiğ (Artist Film, 1964); *The Foreigners* [Turkish: *Gurbetçiler*], directed by Osman F. Seden (Haydar Film, 1974); *When A Brave Goes Abroad* [Turkish: *Bir Yiğit Gurbete Gitse*], directed by Kemal Kan (Arsel Film, 1977); *Song of Exile* [Turkish: *Gurbet Türküsü*], directed by Hulki Saner (Saner Film, 1965).

3. The Turkish noun *gurbetçilik* can be translated with 'being in the state of living in a place other than one's home'.

Germany and were produced by Turkish filmmakers between 1960 and the present. Much has already been written about films dealing with the emigration experience outside Turkey, such as the films by German-based director Fatih Akin, but this article will focus on Turkish films in which emigration is explored from the point of view of the homeland. My aim is not to exhaustively map and chart all the images of Europe painted in Turkish films, but rather to explore how images of Europe and the subject of migration feature and function in Turkish cinema. The article's main argument is that the image of Europe in Turkish migration films is multifaceted and generally positive, but at odds with the socio-historical dimensions of Turkish migration to Germany. The article will conclude with a brief discussion of two more recent Turkish films, both made in 2007, that reflect a new and more complex attitude towards Europe.

### IMAGES OF EUROPE – WEALTH AND MODERNITY IN THE WEST

Most of the films discussed in this article focus on the emigration of a single person. Young Turkish men, mostly fathers, emigrate to Western countries in order to improve their financial circumstances and plan to return to Turkey at some stage to enjoy a better life with their relatives. In some cases, the protagonists hope to build enough financial stability in Germany that will allow them to free themselves and their families in Turkey from the landowner (*ağa*), or be able to pay the large sum of 'head money' their future bride's father might demand to compensate for the loss of his daughter.

The Turkish classic *Davaro* (1981) focuses on such a fiancée, and it is to this film that we will now turn our attention.<sup>4</sup> The inhabitants of an Anatolian village welcome back Memo, who left the village for Germany three years before to earn and save the compensation sum for his future bride Cano. However, the villagers also hope to gain from his return: the repair of the school, the completion of the mosque and their own debts to the *ağa* are all to be paid with Memo's German Marks. At the village gate, the villagers watch out

4. *Davaro*, directed by Kartal Tibet (Başaran Film, 1981).

for the Mercedes that Memo posed with on a picture he sent to his future wife. When they spot a Mercedes, they start playing the drums and horns, but the Mercedes drives past the crowd. Telling each other that the car did not look that nice anyway, the villagers solemnly wait for the next vehicle. But the next car rushes through as well. Suddenly they hear the singing voice of a young man: Memo has arrived. No Mercedes, but a simple wooden coach brings the hatted *alamancı* to the village, and the crowd gives him a very grudging welcome.<sup>5</sup> Memo does not understand the astonished anger of the villagers and explains the situation: the Mercedes in the photo belonged to a friend. Three years of black labour barely yielded enough to save the head money, let alone buy a Mercedes. Their hopes dashed, the villagers leave in anger. Memo's mother stays behind and comforts her son, who does not understand why the villagers expected him to return a wealthy man. The image of Europe implied in the villagers' expectations is one of financial wealth and salvation. The emigrant is not just a returning son - he is a saviour.

It is important to note that the villagers' image of Europe and their expectations are largely based on their communication with the migrants abroad. The emigrants communicate through 'micro-narratives' (such as Memo's photograph with the Mercedes) that evoke an image of a modern and wealthy Europe that does not correspond with the migrants' real experiences in their host countries.<sup>6</sup> Alienation, lack of recognition, feelings of displacement, and yearning for home, loneliness - all experiences of *gurbet* - are what migrants are confronted with. Instead of prosperity, they bring back home negative experiences of displacement. Memo's return in *Davaro* is uncommon, in the sense that it does not reflect the reality of actual homecomings and in deviating from this reality, the film hints at the dynamics of image-building that actually occurs. Unlike Memo, most emigrants abroad do indeed present themselves in line with how they think the people back home want to see them, the result of which is a vicious circle. Those who return try to accommodate the expectations of the home front, based on their own earlier representations, by presenting themselves as financially

5. *Alamancı* is a colloquial word in Turkish used for people who emigrated to Germany.

6. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 10.

well-off. This, in turn, creates new expectations in the villagers which future emigrants will want to fulfil. In this way, the differences between the way emigrants present themselves to their home communities and what they really experience in their host countries keep growing and their self-representation is a performance that is increasingly incongruent with their precarious social situation abroad.

The representation of Europe through material attributes is a recurring feature of Turkish migrant cinema. In *Baldız (Sister in Law, 1975)* too, the returning migrant's car, as well as 'European' attributes, is charged with symbolical meaning. The migrant protagonist returns wearing a hat and a big golden ring and drives a green BMW: all symbols of the alleged prosperity and success of the emigrant during his displacement from the homeland. The protagonist of *Baldız* has even decorated his car with miniature flags of European countries to denote and emphasise his Europeanness. The story of *Sarı Mercedes (Mercedes Mon Amour, 1987)* is based entirely on the ambition of the migrant Bayram to return to his village in his yellow Mercedes.<sup>7</sup> He expects a celebratory crowd that will validate his success: he perceives himself as a man of high status who on his return will finally receive recognition for his hard labour abroad. At the end of the film, he will understand that he himself has changed, as well as his world. Rather than being welcomed and validated by a celebrating crowd, he finds an empty village where the only activity is that of a group of Western archaeologists' excavation.

Sometimes a migrant's return affects his perception of home in a negative way. In *Dönüş (The Return, 1972)*, for instance, Ibrahim returns home from Germany and is reunited with his wife Gülcan and his son, whom he had left behind in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> As in the films discussed earlier, the migrant's return darkens due to unfulfilled expectations. Yet unlike the homecomers in *Davaro* and *Baldız* (who do not receive the warm welcome they expected as they fail to fulfil the financial hopes of their friends and relatives) Ibrahim is confronted with a strange desire to return to Germany. His inner conflict ap-

7. *Mercedes Mon Amour* [Turkish title: *Sarı Mercedes*], directed by Tunç Okan (Odak Film, 1987).

8. *Return* [Turkish: *Dönüş*], directed by Türkan Şora (Akün Film, 1972).

pears best from a scene in which he takes a shower with the help of his wife Gülcan. In this scene, the village's meagre washing facilities are contrasted with images of Germany's modern showers. Ibrahim finds himself alienated from life in his home village. He yearns for German comfort and luxury and decides to return to Germany again in vain pursuit of a better life. The image this evokes of Europe is not an imaginary one: the German shower was part of Ibrahim's German experience and denotes the actual modernity and wealth that he lacks in his village.

So far, my analysis has shown how the films discussed construct an image of Europe as a place of modernity and wealth. They often do so through references to individual material objects and symbols (such as Mercedes, BMW and hats). The image of Europe they sustain appears as a collectively shared construction that remains unchallenged. In order to understand the fixity of Europe's image in Turkish filmic imagination, it is important to realise that the notion of Europe as a place of wealth and modernity is inextricably bound in with the history of the Turkish Republic and is both socially and historically motivated. It inspired, for instance, the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal 'Atatürk' to bring about and shape his political and cultural reform of Turkey. In fact, European modernisation formed part of the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. As Kemal's successful modernisation of Turkey according to European standards is part of Turkish national myth, the Turks can hold a generally positive image of Europe without flouting their patriotism. The name of Europe went on to evoke Western success and progress mainly as the result of the emergence of mass media in Turkey.<sup>9</sup> As Western mass media entered everyday Turkish life, mainly via television, Western films and series, they conjured up images of the West, which catalysed a complex cultural development in which the Turkish imagination was fed an image of Europe that would have a profound impact on the relationship between Turkey and the West.<sup>10</sup> Together the inextricable connection of Turkish identity and images of Europe and the diffusion of Europe as an icon of modernity and wealth via Western mass media in Turkey

9. Although I will not go into this subject in this article, it is possible to analyse these images of Europe as a specific form of exoticism and there are several films that explore or reflect this notion. For a discussion of the image of Germany as a form of exoticism, please see: Kayaoğlu Ersel, "Das Deutschlandbild im türkischen Film", in *Türkisch-deutscher Kulturkontakt und Kulturtransfer. Kontroversen und Lernprozesse*, ed. Şeyda Özil et al. (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2011), 95-106.

10. Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey. A New Critical History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

help to explain the unchallenged image of Europe as conveyed in the films discussed here.

#### ALMANYA – A PLACE OF GURBET IN A PROSPEROUS EUROPE

*Almanya* (i.e. Germany), understood as a specific liveable place and nation, is crucial to gain an understanding of the images of Europe in the films discussed in this article. As a result of the increase in Turkish migration to Germany following the 1961 Recruitment Accord between Germany and Turkey, Germany became a projection screen for the material dreams of the Turkish migrants as well as an opportunity to realise a European lifestyle.<sup>11</sup> The political process of nationalisation after World War I and the embracing of national myths accelerated the country's desire for modernity and wealth. In addition, the increase in mass media consumption and, in particular, the popularity of European and especially American TV and film stimulated such desires further.

11. Deniz Göktürk et. al., eds., *Transit Deutschland. Debatten zu Nation und Migration* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2011), 770.

12. *Almanya Acı Vatan*, directed by Şerif Gören (Fatoş Film, 1979) and *Almanya Acı Gurbet*, directed by Yavuz Figenli (Kalkavan Film, 1988).

13. See *Gurbet*, directed by Yücel Uçanoğlu (Sine Ay Film, 1984); *Gurbetçi Şaban*, directed by Kartal Tibet (Uğur Film, 1985); *The Immortal Tree* (= *Ölmez Ağacı*), directed by Yusuf Kurçenli (Maya Film, 1984); *Polizei*, directed by Şerif Gören (Penta Films, 1988); *Foreign Doors* (= *El Kapsi*), directed by Orhan Elmas (Umut Film, 1974).

As *gurbet* prevailed as the dominant experience of Turkish migrants, Turkish emigrant cinema generally abandoned the idea of Germany as a salutary and advantageous European country. While the image of Europe as a symbol of wealth and progress persisted, German emigration was now mainly associated with the experience of *gurbet*. This, for instance, is reflected in the films *Almanya Acı Vatan* (1979) and *Almanya Acı Gurbet* (1988).<sup>12</sup> These films stand in a cinematic tradition that present emigration to Germany as a *gurbet* experience and focus on the issues experienced by Turkish migrants in Germany, which include psychological and social problems caused by experiences of foreignness, unemployment, violations of social rights and the pain caused by being separated from relatives.<sup>13</sup>

*Almanya Acı Vatan* (*Germany, Bitter Home*) presents two emigrants trying to cope with their life in Germany: Mahmut, a man in his mid-thirties, and Güldane who accepts Mahmut's offer to marry him in exchange for a large

sum of money so that he is able to stay in Germany legally. They travel to Germany together, but Güldane leaves Mahmut on his own in the foreign country. As they are mutually dependent (Güldane needs protection when she finds herself harassed by a stalker while Mahmut needs his wife to prove that he is not an illegal worker) they decide not to end their marriage of convenience, but to actually create a pleasant life together. The more permissive German lifestyle entices Mahmut to enter liaisons with German women so that Güldane is left alone. While Mahmut is exploring his newly won German freedom, she is confronted with the harsh situation of the typewriter factory where she works. She finally refuses to work and rebels against the inhumane treatment of factory workers by the German supervisors who are trying to increase production efficiency.

Unlike *Almanya Acı Vatan*, the melodrama *Almanya Acı Gurbet* (*Germany, Bitter Land*) does not directly address the everyday circumstances of life in Germany. The film depicts displacement from home, or *gurbet*, as the cause for all migrant problems. Ceylan, a young Turkish girl, and her blind uncle Murat are staying illegally in Germany at the home of Ceylan's older sister Nilgün. Ceylan and her uncle are united through tragedy: Ceylan's parents died in the car accident in which Murat lost his sight. They are also united through music. Ceylan is a fabulous singer and Murat a good *bağlama*-player and together they are offered a job in a Turkish café.<sup>14</sup> They accept, in order to save the money needed for the medical treatment of Murat's eyes. When their success starts to threaten the café's other singers, Ceylan and her uncle are put under pressure by the competing singers' father. In the end, Ceylan is deliberately hit by a car and so badly injured that her doctors have little hope that she will survive. Thanks to Ceylan's sister Nilgün, Murat undergoes the surgery and recovers his eyesight. He decides to take revenge for Ceylan and shoots the singers' father. He does however get injured himself and in a state of mental disorientation, he takes Ceylan out of the hospital. Murat tries to bring Ceylan to Turkey, but Ceylan dies in his arms. Murat curses Germany, curses *gurbet* and then dies of his injuries. In these films, Germany is associ-

14. The *Bağlama* is a classical string instrument common in Turkish folk music. It belongs to the group of *saz* instruments.

ated with *gurbet* either because of the social situation of Turkish migrants there (*Almanya Acı Vatan*) or as a result of their belief that displacement from home is fate-inflicted (*Almanya Acı Gurbet*).

#### GERMANY AND EUROPE: TWO IMAGES

Most of the films discussed in this article (such as *Baldız* or *Dönüş*) identify Europe with wealth, progress and modernity. Europe is not identified geographically with a specific continent: the films' characters imagine it as a diffuse concept and ideal that may be gauged from the characters' attitudes towards Europe, how they talk about it and from the objects they associate with it (e.g. the flags in *Baldız*, Memo's hat in *Davaro*, the Mercedes in *Sarı Mercedes*). The notion of Germany as a country that engenders experiences of *gurbet* does not cloud the image of Europe in these films. Rather, mental images of Europe reinforce one another and together form a coherent product that, after the 1961 Recruitment Accord, could be obtained through emigration to Germany. To say that Germany means Europe is wrong, but if we understand how Turkish people deal with the desire for prosperity, then we are able to understand how Europe is defined in their eyes. Europe is not a space the migrants can actually go to and live in, but an image and an ideal that remains untouched by the experience of *gurbet*. While Europe is a largely implicit mental project shaping the process of modernisation in Turkey, Germany emerges as a liveable cultural place which is directly associated with *gurbet* because of the painful experiences of alienation there.

These images of Europe and Germany are not congruent and the relationship between the two is complex. Europe represents an idealised place, mythologised as a counter-space that offers the possibility to live a well-to-do life on an individual level, while on a social level it represents an ideal of modernity and progress. The negative life experiences in Germany cannot ruin Turkey's positive image of Europe. The films make the characters return to an image of Europe that is shaped by politics (the formal inclusion of Turkey

in Europe has been a Turkish ideal since 1923) and the media (the introduction of Western cultural products to Turkish TV in the 1980s). It is part of everyday discourse as well. These images are not visually explicit, but refer to an implicit collective imagination.

If we perceive cinema as a socio-cultural practice, it could be argued that the association of Germany with the experience of *gurbet* has a double function. The concept of *gurbet* indirectly strengthens the own position vis-à-vis the Turkish homeland as it is based on the feeling that nowhere is better than your own home. It also enables emigrants to shape their self-image on the basis of self-pity, stressing the involuntary displacement from home. This in itself relates to more complex socio-psychological and historical processes and ultimately leads back to questions of Turkish identity. These issues recur in filmic discourse about migration from the villages to cities and are also present in works about Turkish cinema and identity.<sup>15</sup> I feel that the notion of *gurbet* as a concept of identity displacement and of self-pity is rooted even more deeply, yet this is not the place to dwell on this particularly complex issue.

The film *Davaro* explores the intersection of the images of Europe and Germany and impressively presents the incommensurability of both images. In *Davaro* Memo does not meet with understanding for his sufferings in Germany as illegal employee, but rather with the impatient contempt of the villagers who have never really experienced Europe but, via Memo, do expect to receive material benefits from it. The villagers maintain their image of Europe as an abstract ideal, while Memo returns with real-life experiences of *gurbet* from Germany. Their images of Europe and Germany do not interpenetrate to form something new, but they are parallel lines that will never meet.

#### A NEW IMAGE OF EUROPE? COMPLEXITY BETWEEN GLOBALISATION AND NATIONALISM

To conclude I briefly want to discuss two more recent films: *Made in Europe* (2007) and *Avrupalı* (2007).<sup>16</sup> *Made in Europe* tries to represent the personal

15. See Colin Dönmez, *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008) and Asuman Suner, *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

16. *Made in Europe*, directed by Inan Temelkuran (Unknown, 2007) and *The European* [Turkish: *Avrupalı*], directed by Ulaş Ak (Muhteşem Film, 2007).

Ömer Alkin works as an associate research fellow at the Institute for Journalism and Public Relations at the University of Applied Sciences Gelsenkirchen. As a scholar of media culture he focuses on the process of film experience as a socio-cultural practice. In his Ph.D. thesis (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf) he analyses how Turkish (rather than Turkish-German) migration cinema depicts migration in order to better understand the perspective of the homeland.

experiences of migrants who live in different parts of Europe (Madrid, Berlin and Paris) by showing three dialogue-oriented episodes. The film sets out to go beyond the *Almanya*-image of migration and presents specific forms of subjective experiences of male Turkish emigrants in their host countries. In order to achieve this goal, *Made in Europe* tries to work out the specific differences between different forms of migration experiences in Europe as typical forms of experiences of globalisation. This is achieved by means of the classical unity of time and action that interconnects the episodes. The much-criticised comedy *Avrupalı* explores a more specific problem related to recent tendencies in Turkish and European politics. The protagonist of the film is a Turkish man, with traditional Turkish ideas and values, who has to deliver a speech at a European congress and is pressured by the American government to publicly admit Turkish responsibility for the Armenian massacre. The protagonist refuses to deliver such a speech and, instead, gives one in which he emphasises the importance of Turkey for the future of Europe and the world in general and in doing so rejects the European demands for Turkey's entry to the EU. The two films hint at a socio-cultural development, a new cultural image of Europe within the Turkish collective imagination: Europe imagined as a place in which emigrants have differentiated experiences of globalisation (*Made in Europe*) and Europe imagined as a national counter-place from where Turkey, after a history of emigration and idealisation, will finally emancipate.