GERMANY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN CROSSINGS: SUPPRESSING PAST TRAUMAS AND REVISITING PRESENT ONES IN BURHAN QURBANI'S *BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ*

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Abstract

In the most recent cinematic adaptation of Alfred Döblin's literary masterpiece *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Burhan Qurbani (2020) reimagines the figure of Franz Biberkopf as Francis, an African refugee who, after almost drowning at sea during his perilous voyage to Europe, is shown trying to rebuild his life in modern-day Berlin. While Döblin's novel focuses predominantly on issues of class, Qurbani's rendition centers on racial inequalities and Otherness. Upon his arrival in Germany, Francis does everything in his power "to be good" and succeed in the modern metropolis, yet he is set up to fail at every step. Francis's failure is largely due to the suppressed trauma of losing a loved one at sea and to the symbiotic relationship that forms between him and Reinhold, a German criminal who uses and abuses Francis for his own libidinal investment. It is a relationship of peculiar dependency that also embodies Germany's dependency on migrants and evokes Germany's colonial past. By analyzing the effect that trauma has on the protagonist, this essay aims to show that while Germany may be geographically distant from the Mediterranean (and often disassociates its own politics from the migrant crisis in the region), it is nevertheless affected by and tangentially involved in the tragedy that continuously unfolds in the region. By alluding to the contemporary politics of disassociation, the film emblematically portrays and underscores the notion that the Mediterranean has been a focal point of development for cultures since the antiquity and to this day remains a palimpsest marked by the incessant movement of people reaching and shaping destinations far beyond the countries touched by Mare Nostrum.

Keywords: German cinema, trauma, migration, racism, the Mediterranean crisis

Long before Burhan Qurbani, a young German filmmaker set out to give his own cinematic spin to *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Die Geschichte vom Franz Biberkopf* (Berlin Alexanderplatz: The Story of Franz Biberkopf) (1929), the famous literary masterpiece by Alfred Döblin, two other German film-

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makers had already attempted to recreate Döblin's novel on screen: Phil Jutzi with his *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1931) and the enfant terrible of the New German Cinema, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, with his 14-part series *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980). While Jutzi's version did not garner praise from its contemporary critics or later audiences, Fassbinder's version is still a well-known and critically acclaimed adaptation of the famous text. Interestingly, although Qurbani was familiar with the latter version, he primarily drew from the novel. In a blog published by the Goethe-Institut, Qurbani is quoted as saying that the project "began as an exciting thought experiment, a game with the idea of reinterpreting and updating the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin, that I loved and hated and still love and hate."[1]

By the time Qurbani's version came out, Germany had already been dealing with a refugee crisis for a few years. However, the impetus for recreating Franz Biberkopf, a German petty criminal and laborer as a Black refugee from Guinea-Bissau, who crosses the Mediterranean to come to Berlin, took on a wider meaning, which Qurbani discovered throughout the process. As he explains,

> it soon became clear that I wasn't just interested in a story about refugees in Berlin, but that I could tell something about the structures of racism. An imbalance of power. The undercurrent of oppression. With the choice of a black protagonist and his white antagonist, Reinhold, my story of Berlin Alexanderplatz changed to a postcolonial allegory.[2]

Consequently, in this paper, I analyze how Qurbani's cinematic text comments on contemporary German politics and society and on Germany's ambivalent attitudes toward the Mediterranean, or, more precisely, toward the people who cross it in order to come to Germany, i.e., Southern Others[3]. To support this reading, I will first give a brief overview of the events and processes that have shaped such attitudes in recent decades, and that form a backdrop against which Qurbani's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* must be analyzed.

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1 Jutta Brendemühl, "Burhan Qurbani on Berlin Alexanderplatz Then & Now," Goethe-Institut, September 27, 2021, https://blog.goethe.de/arthousefilm/archives/1007-Burhan-Qurbani-on-Berlin-Alexanderplatz-then-now.html.

2 Ibid.

3 The term Other has been widely adopted in scholarship on postcolonialism and cultural studies to designate individuals or entire groups that are perceived and constructed as alien, foreign, and exotic within the imaginary of a dominant culture. In this case specifically, the term pertains to those who, from the point of view of German dominant culture, are not recognized as German based on their origin, heritage, and/or ethnicity.

It is no secret or exaggeration to say that, throughout history, the Germans have had a long-standing conflicting relationship with the peoples from the South and their lands, one that is overwrought by complexities which I cannot address in their entirety with this essay.[4] Recent discourse and scholarship on the multidirectional and multifaceted influences between Germans and the Mediterranean are too vast to include here, but it can safely be said that in German cultural imaginary the Mediterranean is always constructed as the Other.[5] And while historical writing offers plenty of evidence of German hostility toward the Mediterranean, German art (particularly German literary tradition) underscores the sentiments that fall on the other end of the spectrum and date all the way back to premodern times.[6] This infatuation has continued well into modernity, for there is a large body of literary texts that center around traveling to and daydreaming of the far regions in the South (e.g., Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Italian Journey* or Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* to name a few).

Beginning with the postwar period, the Mediterranean has also held an important place in German imaginary as a warm, sunny destination for mass tourism, but also as the place of origin of thousands of "guest workers*"* who migrated to Germany first as part of the of 1950s recruitment agreement between Germany and Italy, and then through additional agreements with other Mediterranean countries (e.g., Spain, Greece, Turkey, Portugal, Yugoslavia, etc.) – an arrangement that Randall Halle refers to as "the contractual importation of foreign laborers."[7] Most recently, however, the Mediterranean has occupied a contested position in the German

4 From their famous victory against the Romans in Teutoburg Forest to the numerous subsequent invasions of the Roman Empire, the rule of Sicily, crusades, or attempts at colonizing Africa in the more recent past, there is an abundance of evidence of German interaction with their Southern counterparts in the form of wars, invasions, and also in the form of admiration, envy, and even cultural and economic exchange (e.g., commerce and diplomacy). For an in-depth study of the significance of the Mediterranean for various peoples and cultures throughout history, see David Abulafia's *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean.*

5 For an overview of recent discourse formation surrounding the term "Mediterranismus", see Tomislav Zelić's "Mediteranizam – kulturni imaginarij Sredozemlja" *Filozofska istraživanja*, 41, no.2/162: 229-245.

6 Falk Quenstedt, "Mediterrane Perspektiven. Die deutschsprachige Literatur des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit im Kontext maritimer Transkulturalität" in *Das Mittelmeer und die deutsche Literatur der Vormoderne*, ed. Falk Quenstedt, (Berlin/Boston: de Greyter, 2023): 3-41.

7 Randall Halle, "Inhabitant, Exhabitant, Cohabitant: Filming Migrants and the Borders of Europe" in *German Film after Germany*, (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008): 137.

public domain as one of the main migration routes for many who arrived in Germany in pursuit of safety and better living conditions. Germany and the Germans, of course, are not the only country and nation impacted by the Mediterranean since the beginning of time; nor has this impact ever been a linear, one-sided process. In his attempt to define Europe, Étienne Balibar succinctly describes the complexities and multifaceted interconnectedness of the region that persist to this day:

> not only are all countries, populations and civilizations on either side of the Mediterranean intertwined in a single dramatic history since time immemorial; not only are the dominant 'western' monotheisms (including Islam) sharing and struggling for the symbolic hegemony in the whole region, with locally dominant and dominated positions; not only are the current borders and distributions of ethnic groups on either side the result of even recent colonial and postcolonial settlements, but the societies themselves are today increasingly entangled into one another, both culturally and economically, even in the midst of bloody conflicts.[8]

The fact that Germany's geographical borders are not directly touched by the Mediterranean, does not mean that this country is in any way isolated from the political, cultural, and economic entanglement that revolves around the region. On the contrary, the Mediterranean remains central to Germany's current politics, culture, and economy.[9]

Of particular interest for this paper, however, is Germany's current, unresolved entanglement with the Mediterranean and its peoples, or, most importantly, the people who cross it. This entanglement, which only came into focus in the numerous public debates after the so-called "migrant crisis" of 2015, underscores the highly problematic (albeit not new or surprising) structures of racism and neocolonialism at work that not only remain uncontested but are often also unnamed (and denied) throughout Europe. In her writing on the construction of Otherness, Fatima El-Tayeb asserts that Germany – just like the rest of Continental Europe – has viewed itself as a colorblind society that acknowledges certain types of inequalities but fails to confront or even label them as racist.[10] El-Tayeb further explains that Germans have refused to separate themselves from the idea of German

8 Étienne Balibar, "Europe at the Limits," *Interventions*, 18, no. 2 (2016): 167

9 "Euro-mediterrane Partnerschaft," *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, May 21, 2005, https://www.bpb.de/themen/afrika/dossier-afrika/59080/euro-mediterrane-partnerschaft/.

10 Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft.* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016): 7-20.

identity as white and Christian, the consequence of which is the continuous racialization and exclusion, i.e., Othering of all those who do not (and will never be able to) conform to that idea. Since neither Germany nor the rest of Europe attempted to confront its colonial past in any significant way[11] – a phenomenon that Nicholas de Genova calls "an astounding postcolonial historical amnesia"[12] – the migrant crisis of 2015 was perceived as a surprising and unexpected occurrence, as if Germany and Europe had played no part in causing it.

Consequently, when former Chancellor Angela Merkel welcomed more than one million refugees from the Middle East in 2015, her decision was perceived as a symbol of an atonement of sorts for Germany's problematic National Socialist (albeit not colonial) past, but also as a political move that has polarized (and in certain parts even radicalized) German society.[13] As a result of this polarization, upon their arrival to Germany, many refugees did not find the safe haven that they were searching for; instead they were once again perceived as a threat to German society and so-called European (i.e., white and Christian) values, just like Turkish "guest workers" have been viewed as a threat since the 1960s and have continuously been Othered (i.e., racialized, marginalized, excluded, etc.) to this day. Here I do not wish to suggest in any way that the sudden presence of refugees is to be regarded as a cause of the surge in xenophobic violence, for as El-Tayeb explains, it is often forgotten that everyday racism exists and would continue to exist even if there were no "foreigners" in Germany, considering that it is a problem that is created from within society and not brought in by the arrival of migrants.[14] And while Merkel's gesture had been intended as part of "Willkommenskultur" or "welcoming culture" through which Germany tried to rebrand itself as a country with positive attitudes toward migrants,[15] it did not come without restrictions or an economic agenda. In a recently published article on immigration trends in Germany, Preetha Mitra argues

11 Ivi, 24-5.

12 Nicholas De Genova, "The "Migrant Crisis" as Racial Crisis: Do Black Lives Matter in Europe?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41, no. 10 (2018): 1769.

13 See Akira Igarashi's study on recent surge of ethnic violence against refugees, "Hate Begets Hate: Anti-refugee Violence Increases Anti-refugee Attitudes in Germany," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no.11 (2021): 1915.

14 Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft.* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016): 14.

15 Katrin Bennhold, "As Germany Takes In Refugees, It Also Rehabilitates Its Image," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/23/world/europe/as-germany-takes-in-refugees-it-also-rehabilitates-its-image.html?_r=1

that Angela Merkel's "approach to managing immigration and diversity has been guided by pragmatism."[16] Germany's unceasing need for skilled and unskilled workers served to justify Merkel's stance toward migration. In her article on migration and refugee governance in the Mediterranean, Sarah Wolff asserts that "[w]hile Germany has opened its door to refugees in September 2015, it has announced the reinstatement of border controls."[17] She further explains that

> [t]he Mediterranean "crisis" has revealed the incoherencies of Mediterranean transregional governance, which remains underdeveloped and maladjusted to the current international protection needs of refugees as well as of migrants. Over the past 15 years, Mediterranean migration and refugee governance has been mostly EU-driven and risk-averse, with the prioritization of the fight against irregular migration and the externalization of border controls.[18]

Under the 16-year leadership of Angela Merkel (2005-2021), Germany indeed played a pivotal role in Mediterranean transregional governance, often calling for distribution of responsibility among the EU countries when it came to welcoming migrants. According to Asli Ilgit and Audie Klotz, "Germany has been the country arguably most responsible for pushing a common approach."[19] The question that one must ask, however, is whether Germany's push for a common approach and its reluctance to prioritize the safety of migrants should be interpreted as a way of evading a full responsibility for all those who, almost by default, prefer staying in Germany as opposed to other EU countries.

The most recent trends show that Germany remains committed to a rather uncompromising approach to immigration; in the autumn of 2023, the current Chancellor Olaf Scholz agreed to tighten Germany's policies claiming that "too many are coming" and staying in Germany.[20] On another

16 Preetha Mitra, "Germany in Transition? An Appraisal of Immigration Trends and Identity Debates in the Context of the 2015-2016 Refugee Crisis" *International Studies* 59, no. 2 (2022): 171.

17 Sarah Wolff, "Migration and Refugee Governance in the Mediterranean: Europe and International Organisations at a Crossroads," *Istituto Affari Internazionali* (2015): 167, accessed October 16, 2023. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09850.13

18 Ivi, 168.

19 Asli Ilgit and Audie Klotz, "Refugee rights or refugees as threats? Germany's new Asylum Policy" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20, no. 3 (2018): 614.

20 Kirsten Grieshaber, "Chancellor Olaf Scholz and State Governors Agree on New Measures to Curb Migration to Germany," AP News, November 7, 2023,

occasion, he said that "[w]e must finally deport on a large scale those who have no right to stay in Germany."[21] The obvious unasked question here is: Who are those who have no right to stay in Germany? This discourse seems to apply predominantly to migrants arriving to Germany by the Mediterranean route, while the same policymakers remain untroubled by the arrival of numerous refugees from other parts of Europe (e.g., from the Ukraine), all of which raises the question of whether race plays a role in policy-making. To whom exactly is Scholz referring when he claims that Germans "must deport more and faster"?[22] It appears that those, who, according to Scholz, have no right to stay in Germany, seem to be by and large people of color crossing the Mediterranean.

Here I must once again return to El-Tayeb's claim that Germany's problematic attitude toward non-Germans (particularly those of color) – an aspect often only explored within the context of the scholarship on Third Reich (a regime whose atrocities are mistakenly regarded as an exception and not a reflection or consequence of persisting racist tendencies within Europe)[23] – must be considered in light of the German (and European) collective reluctance to acknowledge colonialism and its long-lasting effects on Germany.[24] It is in this light that we might look at the visit of the current German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier to Tanzania in November 2023, during which he asked for forgiveness for atrocities committed by German colonialists. Despite its late execution, this symbolic gesture may have indicated that Germany was finally willing to confront that painful part of its past. Yet just a few days later, a visit to Nigeria by Scholz revealed a different type of agenda, namely that of taking advantage of Nigerian resources under the umbrella of potential economic and migration partnerships. Again, Germany finds itself in the position of needing or, more accurately, seeking to benefit from the region(s) in the South. Scholz and Steinmeier's statements are in clear contradiction with Scholz's previous assertion that Germans need to deport "more and faster"; or else, one could argue that they re-

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https://apnews.com/article/migration-germany-asylum-agreement-government-scholz-67a042040f87aedf881de56b1b6a5fb8.

21 "Scholz Says That Germany Needs to Expand Deportations of Rejected Asylum-Seekers." AP News, October 20, 2023. https://apnews.com/article/germany-migration-scholz-deportations-opposition-b4ae3bfe5c24ae6aa0019d66adeeed6f.

22 Ibid.

23 Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft.* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016): 167.

24 Ivi, 24-5.

veal the exploitative nature and agenda (or, more accurately, problematic neocolonial pretenses) underlying the recent diplomatic missions. Here we should also consider the immense economic impact that the Mediterranean and Africa have had on Germany in recent decades (but perhaps less so the other way around), as evidenced, for instance, in the fact that Germany is considered one of Africa's largest trading partners,[25] which had in part been facilitated by the Barcelona Process and Germany's ensuing involvement in Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (also known as EUROMED).

The statements by Scholz and Steinmeier certainly bring to the fore how Germany's official stance toward migration has never been motivated by a concern for the safety of migrants, but instead has sought to keep them at bay, at the outskirts of Europe, far from Germany. The Mediterranean is supposed to remain the border that keeps the migrants on the outside, preventing them from reaching their preferred final destination, i.e., Germany. Should the migrants make their way to Germany, they will be instrumentalized, exploited, criminalized, and then deported. Or, as De Genova argues in his article on migrant "illegality", "[i]n spite of their apparent figuration as strictly politico-legal subjects, however, all migrants like all human life, generally are finally apprehensible from the standpoint of capital as always-already at least potentially the embodiment of labour-power, the commodifiable human capacity for labour."[26] Herein, I will argue that Qurbani's film recreates Germany's complex, ambiguous relationship toward migrants as well as the conditions in which those who cross the Mediterranean find themselves after arriving to Germany, by projecting them onto the problematic relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist.

The film that, just like the novel, bears the name of one of the most famous landmarks in Berlin, surprisingly does not begin in Berlin, but opens with an event that takes place in the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean. Coincidentally, Walter Benjamin's review of Döblin's novel – a critique that Qurbani is familiar with – also opens with the philosopher's reflections on the ocean and its parallels to the novel: "You can embark on a voyage and then, when you are far out, you can cruise with no land in sight, nothing but sea and sky. This is what the novelist

25 Auswärtiges Amt, *Deutschland und Afrika: Konzept der Bundesregierung*, (Berlin: Auswärtiges Amt, 2011), 7. https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/12804/1a1f8991061fc0ea10663e8df344075d/deutschland-und-afrika-konzept-der-bundesregierung-data.pdf

26 Nicholas De Genova, Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion," *Ethics and Racial Studies*, 36, no. 7. (2013): 1184.

does."[27] This is also what Qurbani does at the beginning of his adaptation; the very first scene is a shot of darkness accompanied by the sound of labored breathing, followed by a dialogue between the protagonist Francis (Welket Bunqué) and his lover Ida. Then the sound of turbulent water takes over, introducing an upside-down shot of the sea, with Francis and Ida treading water, struggling to stay on the surface, their figures reflecting the light of a red emergency flare. Ida pulls Francis under, and after a while, only Francis reemerges. This is a scene of drowning, emblematic of a common occurrence in the region for the last two decades, and synonymous with what De Genova calls "the unsightly accumulation of dead black and brown bodies awash on the halcyon shores of the Mediterranean Sea."[28]

The film *Berlin Alexanderplatz* is divided in five parts, which in its form evokes the typical segmentation of Greek tragedies, in another obvious connection to the Mediterranean as the birthplace of classical tragedy. Consequently, the Mediterranean is portrayed as the place of origin of Francis's tragedy as well. It will signify the painful locus of Francis's nightmares, drug-induced trips, and agonizing memories, for he will be haunted by the flashbacks of drowning at sea throughout the film, indicating a suppressed trauma that with each consecutive flashback reveals a little bit more about the event in which Francis reached Germany. Francis's suppression of his trauma will be paralleled to him pushing Ida away, further down into the depths of the sea. However, the suppressed trauma, just like objects pushed under that water surface, keep resurfacing in Francis's mind: Ida will keep returning to his thoughts and dreams, signaling the trauma that refuses to go away. Through these emblematic fragments, the film also allows the audience to piece together Francis's trajectory from Africa to Europe.

Right at the beginning of the film, a flashback transposes Francis back to Africa, with crosscutting shots of Ida dancing, along with a shot of a sacrificial ox before slaughter – a sequence that keeps resurfacing and points to a tragic loss of life that will haunt Francis and follow him all the way to Berlin. In what follows, Francis is being captured by the camera from bird's eye view exiting the sea and collapsing on a sandy beach where he makes a vow to God, promising to become good, "a new man,

27 Walter Benjamin, "The Crisis of the Novel" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 299.

28 Nicholas De Genova, "The "Migrant Crisis" as Racial Crisis: Do Black Lives Matter in Europe?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41, no. 10 (2018): 1765.

a decent man."[29] Francis's vow is conveyed to the audience with a voiceover narration by Mieze (Jella Haase), at this point only an omniscient narrator who becomes Francis's lover later in the film and the mother of his child. Mieze announces that this is the story of *her* Francis, who "washed up on the shores of a new life," and "survived, dripping with the sins of the past." According to Mieze's narration, Francis will come to Berlin, where he will stumble and fall three times, and Berlin will be the place that will eventually break him. The camera then shows Francis working a job at an underground construction site in the vicinity of the Alexanderplatz, surrounded by other workers and heavy machinery – reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* – indicating the beginning of the exploitation and mistreatment that will break Francis and symbolizes the continuation of colonial ties between Berlin and Africa via the Mediterranean.

Francis is subsequently shown at the migrant shelter: as he is showering, there are intercutting fragments of an underwater struggle showing him and Ida fighting for life beneath the water's surface; simultaneously, the sound of showering water is paired with Francis's heavy breathing signaling a panic attack induced by the presence of water. Then the water from the shower turns into blood dripping from Francis's body. Consequently, the camera shows Francis snapping out of the panic-induced episode and he leaves the common bathroom joining Ottu (Richard Fouofié Djimeli), a fellow migrant and co-worker. They pass an African woman smoking in the hallway who gives them a suspicious stare. As they stand waiting in front of an elevator, another African woman is seen exiting the elevator, holding hands with a white man. This scene serves as an allusion to the problem of the trafficking and subjugation of Black female bodies by white German men, for in another scene shown toward the end of the film, it will become clear that the migrant shelter is a place where German men go to have sex with migrant women. Subsequently, there is a sound of a man whistling "Oh My Darling, Clementine." This song – that narrates the story of a man losing his loved one to drowning – will be sung or whistled throughout the film, as a powerful and ominous leitmotif, i.e., a soundtrack to Francis's downfall and symbol of his past trauma. Ottu tries to stop Francis from entering the elevator, where we see a white man smoking in the corner. As Francis ignores Ottu's ominous "Don't!" and confidently enters

29 This and all subsequent quotes from the film are taken directly from the subtitles. On a few occasions, I transcribe the text in the original language, followed by my own translation.

the elevator, the camera reveals the source of the whistling tune. This is the moment when Francis has his first encounter with his nemesis, Reinhold (Albrecht Schuch) and unknowingly enters into the toxic relationship that will ruin him.

Reinhold is a nefarious character, a drug dealer who visits the migrant shelter in order to recruit hopeless men into his criminal enterprise. He is blond and blue-eyed, slender in stature and with a posture that is in a continuous twist; even in his appearance, he is the complete opposite of the tall, strong, and proud-looking Francis. While Francis's voice is deep and his speech measured and thoughtful, Reinhold's high-pitched voice, characterized by a perpetual whisper seems to hide a speech impediment (even in Döblin's novel, Reinhold appears as "der Stotterer" [the stutterer]) and is marked by his continuous code-switching between German, English, and French, to which he adds phrases in Latin. His outward appearance seems to mimic his diabolic personality, all of which him make him reminiscent of a Babylonian creature. Upon laying eyes on Francis, Reinhold already reveals his predatory instinct: "You are new here." Ottu, apparently already familiar with Reinhold, tries to stop this interaction by saying: "Leave him alone. This one isn't for you." In a shot-reverse shot sequence, Reinhold, however, continues his prodding with guesses about Francis's provenance by naming African countries that were part of the former German colonial enterprise: "Angola? Mozambique?" Francis stops him by revealing his homeland: "Bissau." Upon hearing this, Reinhold offers an offensive phrase in Francis's native tongue that leaves Francis at first confused but then smiling at the inaccuracy of Reinhold's statement. Ottu's fear and concern are soon proven legitimate, as Reinhold almost immediately starts to lay claim on Francis. Accordingly, behind Reinhold's initial curiosity about Francis and their growing co-dependency, a devious plan unfolds, for it soon becomes clear that Reinhold seeks to appropriate and utilize Francis for his own agenda: handling his women, preparing meals for his drug dealers, and assisting him in burglaries. In a sense, from the very beginning of their relationship, Reinhold sets out to colonize Francis first by offering him a job (that Francis initially refuses because he wants to be good), and then slowly by luring him deeper into his criminal activities. It eventually becomes impossible for Francis to succeed in Berlin, primarily due to his past trauma and to Reinhold's actions that lead to the mutilation of Francis's body and ultimately to the death of Mieze and his incarceration.

Their connection – at times loaded with homoeroticism that is not unlike the relationship depicted in Döblin's novel – resembles a Faustian agreement in which Reinhold seduces Francis with the promise of a new, more

prosperous life, but the audience knows from Mieze's ominous narration that Francis is the one who will lose in the end. Just like Mephistopheles, Reinhold has two sides: one that is friendly and helpful toward Francis and the other that wishes him harm. On the one hand, Reinhold repeatedly refers to Francis as "my brother," but on the other, he berates him by calling him "my gorilla" or "my faithful ox," just as their boss, Pums (Joachim Kròl), does. In several scenes throughout the film, white men in position of power resort to the same terminology. The language they use not only reveals a blatant racism, it also evokes Germany's past and present colonial aspirations. Herein, I argue that Qurbani projects onto the figure of Reinhold, the current attitudes of the host country, namely Germany – a country that is plagued and crippled by its past but also needs to find a new source of strength. For the last two decades, Germany has been seen seemingly acting in the best interests of immigrants, all the while exploiting them before they can be discarded, i.e., deported. Francis, conversely, stands for the unwelcome visitor, Southern Other, whose only purpose in the eye of the host seems to be to complete Germany's dirty work.

In his writing on the intersections between migration and racism in Europe, Balibar points out the major contradiction that characterizes immigration processes: "[t]he modern state […] opens the door to 'clandestine' circulation of the foreign labour force, and at the same time represses it."[30] This is best exemplified by another scene set at the construction site in Berlin, where it becomes evident that Francis is a part of a crew of undocumented workers – most of whom seem to come from Africa and the Middle East – all managed by a merciless German supervisor, who also calls Francis a "stupid ape." The imbalance of power is best displayed here: Francis is used as a poorly paid laborer who can be deported at any point. When his co-worker – a man from the Middle East – gets hurt on the job, Francis is warned against calling an ambulance and seeking any medical help, for it will create problems for their German supervisors. Francis and his co-workers are thus a disposable workforce who must remain complicit in their own illegality. This only further thwarts Francis's goal to become good and decent, for after he loses this job, he will have no other choice than to join Reinhold in his criminal endeavors. There is also a clear spatial division at work in this scene: the underground hides Black and brown men, who build the city from the ground up. As illegal workers, they are hidden from the unsuspecting, "law-abiding" citizens, or from those who,

30 Étienne Balibar, "Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa: Racism and Politics in Europe Today" *New Left Review,* no. 186 (1991): 16.

according to Scholz, have the right to stay in Germany. Right after work, as they emerge from the underground, they are transported in a van to the outskirts of Berlin. Their labor and misfortune are invisible to the eyes of those above ground (just as they remain invisible to the eyes of the law until they get apprehended) while the white men who employ them take all the credit for and profit from their labor. As modern-day slaves, they clearly serve the unsuspecting Germans who live their lives undisturbed above ground, in the streets of the Berlin, yet, ironically, they remain invisible to the audience of Qurbani's film. The film thus comments on the fact that the splendor of contemporary Berlin, that we see throughout the film via beautiful night shots of the skyline and empty streets, was made possible by those oppressed by systems both past and present, who are excluded from enjoying it. Sadly, despite some recent public attempts at raising awareness about Germany's colonial past, present-day Berlin still has streets named after German colonialists and works of art on display that show Germany's shameful involvement in the colonial project.[31]

Germany's colonial past and present-day racism are explicitly put on display in a scene with a drug- and alcohol-fueled party at Reinhold's apartment that starts with Reinhold waking Francis with a menacing chokehold. The murderous gesture soon turns into Reinhold's cheerful invitation for Francis to join the party with him and his female German friends. As the camera spins around the room to the sounds of techno music, Reinhold's friend asks laughingly: "Francis, what kind of name is that? Sounds like a woman." Another friend comments: "Francis, so heißt doch kein Mensch!" ("Nobody is called Francis!") This statement, however, literally translates as "*no human* is called like that." Francis understands the retort's literal meaning and asks: "Denkst du… ich bin kein Mensch?" ("Do you think… I am no human?") The girl insists that she did not intend to offend Francis, and even Reinhold agrees that they did not mean anything by this, yet Reinhold continues in the same offensive tone: "Es wird Zeit, dass du *eingemenscht* wirst" ("It is time to make you a human"). Both girls agree: "Etwas Stabiles, Deutsches, wie Christian oder Markus" ("Something stable, German, like Christian or Markus"). Reinhold and his German girlfriends see no issue with their words, as they carry on with their playful search for what they think would be an appropriate new name for Francis, i.e., one that would work with the color of his skin. Finally, Reinhold proclaims: "Du bist Franz" ("You are Franz"). What follows is a

31 *Afro.Deutschland*, directed by Jana Pareigis, Susanne Lenz-Gleißner, Adam Ulrich, *Deutsche Welle*, 2017, https://corporate.dw.com/en/film-afrodeutschland/a-38990283.

drunken act of baptism, during which Reinhold, holding Francis by his throat and pouring alcohol over his head, bestows Francis with a new, German name. Again, the words used in German reveal that this is not just an act of renaming Francis, but of turning him into a human, or, as Reinhold calls him: "Menschenkind" ("human child") implying that he was not one beforehand. The word "child" also underscores the patronizing tone of Reinhold's interaction with Francis. Soon thereafter, Reinhold will also proclaim that "Francis was his slave name. Now his name's Franz. And he can even speak German." Consequently, Reinhold, as Francis's German host and benefactor, holds not only the power of naming him but also that of granting Francis his status as human. This act of renaming Francis to Franz, or making somebody (i.e., human) out of him, is an unequivocal allusion to the relationship between colonizers and their colonial subjects. It represents Francis's rite of passage into "civilized" society, but it also brings to mind present-day Germany's immigration procedures, i.e., that immigrants who are not granted legal status in Germany are neither considered nor treated as human beings.

Qurbani further highlights the problem of racism in contemporary Germany with the figure of Eva (Annabelle Mandeng), the Afro-German owner of a nightclub emblematically named "Neue Welt" (New World) who will become Francis's friend and protector. As soon as she meets Francis, the issues of race and identity come to foreground. In the conversation about their respective origins, Francis/Franz tells Eva that she must not have grown up in Nigeria, the country of her father, for she dances like a German. While he sees her as German based on her body language and demeanor, Eva is aware that she is always perceived as the Other due to the color of her skin. During a love scene that is intercut with fragments of their conversation, Franz brings up the issue of race with Eva: "There is so little sun here in Germany. I am getting more and more pale. Soon I'll be white." Eva's response, however, is less metaphorical: "People look at me and all they think is black. But then they hear my voice. And it is white. My words are white." Francis, with his newcomer's naïveté, calls her racist but Eva, who has spent her entire life in Germany is more discerning: "I see the world through their eyes, as if I were white. But even if everyone were blind, I would still know I'm black. And that it makes a difference. Because it does make a difference." Thus, Eva may be a financially independent and successful businesswoman whose mother tongue is German, but the color of her skin just as her openness toward the Other (e.g., migrants and her transgender lover Berta) set her apart within the white mainstream Germany. She is not a fully integrated member of the society, for she still

represents a limited success, circumscribed to the underbelly of Berlin. Moreover, she belongs to the group of people that – according to El-Tayeb – will never be able to assimilate no matter how German they may be, for they will always have to explain their provenance to the white Germans (even after living in Germany for generations).[32] However, her existence on the outskirt of society is precisely what provides her with a critical voice regarding contemporary Germany. She is both German and non-German; and this duality (of belonging and not-belonging at the same time) allows her to recognize the issues within German society, i.e., to see through the patterns of abuse to which Reinhold subjects Francis.

Reinhold – just like Germany in the wake of the migrant crisis – acts as Francis's benefactor, but he continues to reject Francis as well, literally pushing him out of a speeding car after a fight during which Francis rebels against being called "an ape." Following the accident is a dreamlike cross-cutting sequence, in which Francis is again transposed back to Africa where he faces an ox. In one shot, Francis is the one holding a machete as he approaches the ox held by two men, with Reinhold appearing in the background while in the next one, Francis is on his knees and being restrained by the same two men while Reinhold holds a machete against his neck, the entire sequence accompanied by a non-diegetic, elegiac vocalization. As Reinhold cuts Francis's throat, there is an intercut of the kneeling Francis being hit by a car in a tunnel in Berlin. Consequently, the invisible psychological trauma of the drowning in the Mediterranean becomes the visible physical trauma of Francis's crippled body, for upon waking up following his accident, Francis discovers that he is missing his left arm. While Döblin's Franz lost his right arm, Qurbani's version delivers a more impactful symbolism, linking Francis's missing left arm to his heartache over losing Ida, for, as Mieze, who enters the plot at that point, soon explains, the pain from his missing left arm was spreading directly to his heart.

Francis's reaction to the trauma of the accident is marked by sorrowful and unintelligible cries that persist even after the camera switches to show a beautiful evening skyline of Berlin and continues to follow the movement of a luxury car that carries Francis lying in Eva's lap. The iconic television tower, or Fernsehturm, first visible in the sequence's establishing shot, can now be seen as a reflection in the window of the car and through Francis's eyes as he keeps gazing at it. The tower is an unequivocal symbol of the city that was built at the expense of everyone else. Mieze's voice-

32 Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft.* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016): 217.

over narration tells the story of another fall from grace, i.e., foreshadowing Francis's falling even deeper into the throes of Reinhold's dominion and announcing her own involvement in the plot. Thus, it is no surprise that Francis's goal – ultimately, the only reason why he agrees to work for Reinhold – is to obtain a German passport, a document that would allow him to enjoy the splendor of Berlin and make him somewhat equal to Reinhold, at least in the name of the law.

The parasitically symbiotic relationship between Reinhold and Francis is reminiscent of Germany's public efforts to portray itself as a nation that has learned from its transgressions and attempts to rectify the atrocities committed in the past, e.g., by setting a positive example within the EU at the beginning of the migrant crisis. At the same time, however, in the most recent years, Germany continues to employ the politics of disassociation and deflection when it comes to migrants stranded in the Mediterranean. Recent debate between Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni and German chancellor Olaf Scholz about Germany's financing of sea rescue NGOs, and Scholz's subsequent, publicly voiced reservations about guaranteeing the financial help are a case in point.[33] This public feud has turned into a shouting match between the two nations about who has carried a heavier burden, i.e., accepted more migrants. Meloni has openly criticized Germany for overstepping its areas of remit by becoming involved in Italy's affairs; and by financing sea rescue NGOs, Germany has tacitly admitted its own responsibility for and role in causing the Mediterranean crisis. Moreover, by financing organizations that help migrants on Italy's soil as well, Germany also in a sense washes its hands of direct responsibility for those migrants and seeks to prevent them from reaching Germany.

An early tub scene also mirrors the problematic relationship between Germany and the regions in the South: as Reinhold joins Francis for what seems like a moment loaded with an unreciprocated homoeroticism, he nonchalantly denounces the system that they are both part of by saying that he is also the rejected one: "I am garbage to them. White trash." His statement could also be read as echoing a criticism that Germany has been facing within the European Union during the last decade for trying to define a different path with regards to migration. At the same time, Reinhold's self-deprecating comment subsequently turns into criticism

33 Der Spiegel, "Olaf Scholz distanziert sich von öffentlicher Finanzierung von Seenotrettung," *DER SPIEGEL*, October 6, 2023, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/scholz-distanziert-sich-von-oeffentlicher-finanzierung-von-seenotrettung-a-f28b10b8-f46f-477a-972f-66415ffbb746.

of Germany and its problematic involvement in global politics: "This country sells weapons to dictators. Is this good? Everything you see here was built at the expense of others. You know where you'd be if we paid three euros for a liter of gas instead of one-something? Home, that's where. In your own house, which you paid for. With a full stomach and a family in peace. […] Of course we pay the bill, but you pay the price." This statement explains the film's perpetual conflation of the images of Francis with that of a sacrificial ox, for Francis is a mere casualty of the globalized economy.

Despite his criticism of global injustice, Reinhold does not want Francis to succeed in Germany, just like Germany does not want Black migrants to become fully integrated members of modern German society; for as El-Tayeb explains, the German (i.e., white) society finds nothing more irritating than "das Deutschsein" or "Germanness" of the racialized migrants.[34] This is best portrayed toward the end of the film, when Francis/Franz takes Reinhold's role at the shelter for migrants and gives his jubilant speech (his own reiteration of Reinhold's recruitment speech from the beginning of the film): "I hate when they call me a refugee. Call me new arrival, call me immigrant, but don't call me refugee. I've run all of my life, and I came here to stay here. To build something for me. I'm not a refugee and I am not going anywhere. When I look at you, I see myself. Young, strong, and proud men who want to stay here. To have a life here." Despite being ridiculed by the migrants initially on account of his new German name, at that point, Franz wins their attention by recounting his difficult journey: "Money rules the world. When I arrived in Germany, I had nothing […] Now it's completely different. I can say I am the German dream! I make my own money. I drive a German car. I have a German woman. I even have a German name." He concludes with powerful statements that have the crowd cheering: "I have made it here. I'm here. Black, strong, and fearless. I am Germany." However, as Franz gives his passionate speech, the camera ominously delivers glimpses of the pregnant Mieze at the doctor's office, and simultaneously also of Reinhold sitting in on Franz's successful performance, clearly displeased with his words. This sequence underscores the sentiments of envy and resentment felt by Reinhold, onto whom Qurbani projects the host country's prevalent sentiments toward Black immigrants, for as Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson point out, it appears that Germany (just like

34 Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft.* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016): 15.

the rest of the EU) "wants Africa's labour, but not the Africans, at least not in the form of prospective rights-bearing citizens."[35] With his speech, Francis/Franz dares to boast about his rightfully earned place in German society; however, Reinhold/Germany cannot accept Franz's success and happiness and will deliver his final blow to Franz by murdering Mieze and framing Franz for her death in the end.

The film's most explicit commentary on German postcolonial fantasies is finally underscored in a sequence that shows Franz at a costume party organized by Reinhold at Eva's club. Franz is given a gorilla costume and is surrounded by other Black migrants wearing stereotypical African military uniforms with red berets and machine weapons. Eva finds the entire set up humiliating, but Franz laughs it off, seemingly unaware of the offensive implications and of the downfall that Reinhold had already orchestrated for him. Reinhold appears at the party too, dressed in a German colonial uniform requesting to talk to Franz. He ceremoniously gives Franz a German passport, along with tickets to Tenerife, but behind this seemingly benevolent gesture hides Reinhold's, i.e., Germany's ultimate wishful thinking: to get rid of Franz. With this move, Reinhold/Germany seeks to expulse the new Black citizen not just to the outside of Europe, but to the other side of the Mediterranean, almost back to where he came from.

At that point in the plot, it becomes obvious that Franz's presence in Germany can no longer be tolerated by Reinhold, for Franz, despite his mental and physical trauma, is perceived as a rising threat to Reinhold. He not only serves as a powerful witness to Germany's postcolonial disillusionment and persistent racism but also to Germany's perpetual dependency and perverted fascination with the Other that only works if the Other stays subjugated and weak, i.e., in fear of deportation. When Balibar wrote about racism in the aftermath of Germany's reunification, he accurately prophesied that "the future 'iron curtain' and the future 'wall' threaten to pass somewhere in the Mediterranean, or somewhere to the south-east of the Mediterranean, and they will not be easier to bring down than their predecessors."[36] The Mediterranean that once served as a connecting point between German colonialists and their goals in the South, now keeps separating migrants from their final destination, Germany. In that same essay, Balibar also announced that "Berlin, as the political-geo-

35 Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, "EU Migration Policy Toward Africa," in *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe: Contexts, Practices and Politics*, eds. Sandra Ponzanesi and Gianmaria Colpani, (London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2015): 54.

36 Étienne Balibar, "Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa: Racism and Politics in Europe Today" *New Left Review,* no. 186 (1991): 9.

graphic centre of a historical area encompassing London, Stockholm, Warsaw, Moscow, Budapest, Istanbul, Baghdad, Cairo, Rome, Algiers, Madrid and Paris, cannot become the capital of the new Germany without also being the 'centre' of political tensions emanating from the various regions in this space."[37] With Francis's crossing of the "iron curtain" of the Mediterranean and the film's repositioning of the migrant crisis to the middle of Berlin, Qurbani highlights both points made by Balibar, but his film also underscores the disquieting notion that Germany keeps failing the migrants in the Mediterranean. With trauma being brought to Germany and relived in the middle of Berlin, the film indicates that no matter how far Berlin may be from the Mediterranean, Germans cannot disavow the tragedy that takes place far away at sea. Yet, despite this geographical distance and politics of disassociation, the connection between Berlin and the Mediterranean is particularly visible at the end of the film, which in itself represents a strong deviation from Döblin's novel. Qurbani explains the motivation behind this directorial decision: "I made a very clear choice for a happy ending, almost like a utopia of arriving. Because I think, especially nowadays with the AfD and other populist and right-wing forces getting stronger, I decided to sacrifice the more elegant ending for one that has more meaning to myself and the character."[38] The end of the film is accompanied by the voiceover of the already deceased Mieze who, just as elsewhere in the film, reads fragments of Döblin's text and announces that Franz has settled his debts and can start a new life in a new world. After being released from Tegel Prison and reunited with his daughter, the final scene shows Franz sitting at the edge of the Neptune Fountain; then the movement of the camera away from his face reveals the object of his gaze: the Berlin *Fernsehturm*, the metaphor for Alexanderplatz and the city of Berlin. The Neptune Fountain evokes the Mediterranean one final time and its connection to Berlin is made obvious by the camera moving away from the water of the fountain to *Fernsehturm* and then back to Francis, only to settle on the water one last time. Francis is no longer triggered by the presence of water for his optimistic gaze implies that he has worked through and overcome his trauma. Qurbani thus allows the audience to imagine a better future for Franz and his child – a child of a German woman and an African migrant, and as such an unequivocal symbol of the utopian future Germany that Qurbani

37 Ivi, 11.

38 Burhan Qurbani,"*Berlin Alexanderplatz*: Berlinale Hit Director Interviewed," interview by Yony Leyser, *Exberliner.* July 31, 2020, *https://www.exberliner.com/film/burhan-qurbani-interview*

envisions with his happy ending. The major problem with Qurbani's ending, however, is the fact that the Mediterranean remains a painful locus of trauma for thousands of migrants, while Germany, despite holding a central place in today's Europe, keeps pulling away from an active engagement in this very European tragedy.

While Qurbani's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has by and large been ignored by scholarship[39], it holds an important place in its contestation of Germany's current discourse on migration and race and its confrontation of Germany's colonial past. Unlike the public debates in German media over the last two decades, in which Germans have not only denied the presence of structural racism in present-day Germany (and Europe) but also refused to admit that they (and their own identity) are at the root of the problem and not the migrants, this film opens up an important alternative space not only for questioning the current idea of German identity but also for naming and confronting racism openly. In his portrayal of the relationship between Reinhold and Francis, Qurbani successfully underscores the troublesome dynamic between the host country and its unwelcome guests, i.e., between the white Germans and the racialized migrants from the South. Reinhold (just like Germany) acts as a benefactor and helper toward Francis, as someone who supposedly wants to make Francis's life in Germany easier by demanding of Francis that he assimilate, both knowing that Francis will never be able to assimilate and fully integrate into contemporary Germany (as it sees itself) and – more importantly – not really wanting for him to do so either. The end of the film seems to suggest that Francis can only become visible (i.e., German) once Reinhold is out of picture, implying that migrants may only be able to be seen as a constitutive part of German society once Germans finally separate themselves from the idea of Germans as only white and recognize that non-white Germans have already been an integral part of this country for a long time. For this to happen, Germans must begin to confront their colonial past and acknowledge that there is an indisputable link between the legacies of colonialism and Germany's responsibility for the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean.

39 There is a growing body of scholarship on migration across the Mediterranean in film: Áine O'Healy's *Migrant Anxieties: Italian Cinema in a Transnational Frame*, Claudia Berger's *Making Worlds: Affect and Collectivity in Contemporary European Cinema,* Christian Rossipal's "Poetics of Refraction: Mediterranean Migration and New Documentary Forms", Randall Halle's *The Europeanization of Cinema: Interzones and Imaginative Communities*, Sandra Ponzanesi's "Of shipwrecks and weddings: Borders and mobilities in Europe" and many more.

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