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Postmodernism, Post-Marxism, and Mass Media in Aras Ören's Berlin Savignyplatz

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Postmodernism, Post-Marxism, and Mass Media in Aras Ören's

_Berlin Savignyplatz_

by

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B.A., Metropolitan State College of Denver, 2010

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Postmodernism, Post-Marxism, and Mass Media in Aras Ören’s *Berlin Savignyplatz*

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Dr. Beverly Weber

The following thesis is a study of Aras Ören’s 1995 novel *Berlin Savignyplatz*. This novel moves away from the New Left’s discourse on guest workers as helpless victims and toward a view that refuses to essentialize identities. The text does this by using instances of mass media to expose contradictions in the New Left’s discourse on guest workers, by signaling poststructuralist understandings of the subject, and by showing the decline of a Marxist worldview.

In addition to scholarly works that speak to the writings of Aras Ören, this thesis utilizes secondary literature on media representations in society, postmodernism and postmodernist writings, poststructuralism, post-Marxism, and globalization. The first section “Aras Ören and Media” gives a brief biography of Aras Ören and explores some of his experience with different forms of media. “Mass Media in *Berlin Savignyplatz*” is an in-depth investigation of the concept of mediated reality and identity and mass media’s presence in *Berlin Savignyplatz*. “Postmodernism and Post-Marxism in *Berlin Savignyplatz*” contextualizes this novel within a changing political and historical landscape using the concepts of postmodernism and post-Marxism. Finally, “Conclusion: Ören in Various Literary Contexts” attempts to locate Aras Ören and the novel in question within Turkish German literature, German literature, and also European literature.
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Introduction

Lebt im Grunde nicht jeder von uns, als drehe er einen Film zu einem Szenarium seiner Phantasie, in dem er selbst die Hauptrolle spielt? (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 93)

This quote points to how subjects in postmodern societies perceive themselves through their own fantasy, which is structured by forms of mass media like film. Aras Ören’s 1995 novel Berlin Savignyplatz undermines the idea of identity and explores the constructed nature of the subject. The novel also emphasizes the changeable and contradictory nature of this construction as it is influenced by both individual and collective imagination and by the discourses that circulate through forms of mass media.

Arjun Appadurai, in his book Modernity at Large, discusses how imagination, both on an individual and collective level, functions in an age of globalization: “The work of the imagination . . . is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern”(4). Mass media representations have an important influence on individual and collective imagination as dynamic “space[s] of contestation.” Berlin Savignyplatz explores the ways mass media impact individual and collective imagination, especially when it comes to imagining self and others.

One might ask, what exactly is “contested” through the work of imagination? Physical and historical spaces are always centers of ongoing contestation and the right to these spaces is also often structured in notions of identity. But although identity often seems to be a permanent fact about a person or group of people, it is actually an unstable concept. Another area of contestation that Appadurai indicates above is modernity: what does it mean to be “modern” and is there more than one form of modernity? Berlin
Savignyplatz explores how mass media in Germany promote an exclusive form of European modernity that relies on constructing an other who cannot attain this modernity.

The novel reinforces neither notions of ethnic, nor cultural, nor any static notions of identity, but instead demonstrates how reality and identity are constructed. It moves away from the discourse of the New Left on guest workers as helpless victims and toward a view that refuses to essentialize identities. The text does this by using instances of mass media to expose contradictions in the New Left discourse on guest workers, by signaling poststructuralist understandings of the subject, and by showing the decline of a Marxist worldview. These tendencies in the novel interconnect with each other in important ways. The proliferation of mass media both in the novel and in society epitomizes a postmodern plurality of signs that transmit contradictory discourses and that do not allow for an easy and coherent explanation of life and the world. Contradictory and competing discourses as they appear in mass media also become more influential than totalizing worldviews like Marxism in constructing the subject.

There are several reasons why a closer look at Ören's Berlin Savignyplatz is in order. First of all Aras Ören’s more recent writings have received little critical attention. Although some of his earlier works from the 1970s have been acknowledged for their importance as pioneering works of Turkish German literature from the perspective of the Gastarbeiter (Chin 82–84), and his 1982 novella Bitte nix Polizei received some scholarly attention (Cheesman, Novels of Turkish German Settlement; Adelson, “When Sincerity Fails: Literatures of Migration and the Emblematic Labor of Personhood”; Mani; Ackermann), Ören’s Berlin Savignyplatz, which in many ways critiques some of his earlier work, has not received the critical attention due to it as a complex exploration of issues not only relating
to Turkish Germans, but also issues relevant to German and other contemporary consumer societies. In her book *The Turkish Turn*, Leslie Adelson has at least traversed the usual boundaries of cultural identity and difference in her discussion of *Bitte nix Polizei*, but she does not even allude to the prevalence or function of forms of media in Ören’s work.

Secondly, because Ören writes in Turkish and because scholars and critics have categorized *Berlin Savignyplatz* as minority literature, it has not been studied within the context of German literature. The novel is a *Wenderoman* and its title also references Alfred Döblin’s now classic German modernist novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Neither of these aspects, nor other aspects that point to the novel’s place within German and also European literature, have been given adequate attention.

Thirdly, Ören is an important author to study because he was the first to reach a larger German audience with what at the time was called *Gastarbeiterliteratur* (Chin 32, 78). Why did Ören receive so much positive attention when he published *Was will Niyazi in der Naunynstraße*? Why did he fall off the radar of critical attention as time passed even though he continued to publish in Germany? How has his work evolved and changed through the years? These are all relevant questions within the field of Turkish German literature that need to be answered in depth.

Of course, this thesis cannot fully answer all of these questions, but there is certainly a need for more study of Ören’s work. This thesis will explore aspects of Ören’s *Berlin Savignyplatz* that have yet to be considered by scholars. Recently published works discussing Ören have often focused on his novella *Bitte nix Polizei* and have highlighted issues of multicultural (mis)communication, intercultural differences, and the status and identity of the *Gastarbeiter* in Germany. Some scholars, however, are beginning to step out
of the typical paradigms. Adelson, for example, has reframed *Bitte nix Polizei* to go beyond notions of cultural identity and to consider the main character in the light of an economy of imaginative labor and cultural capital (The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature 139–149). My approach differs from Adelson’s in that I do not focus on the economic motifs of capital and labor; rather I explore how *Berlin Savignyplatz* destabilizes the notion of identity under the influence of poststructuralism within the context of postmodernism and post-Marxism. Like Adelson, I hope to go beyond typical paradigms, but I will diverge from the work of other scholars by focusing on this under-studied novel and by investigating the centrality and function of forms of media in the novel.

Although there is some secondary literature that focuses on the recent works of Aras Ören, this list is not extensive. There is more secondary literature that mentions Ören and his writings in passing and within the frameworks of Turkish German or Gastarbeiter literature. I contextualize the existing secondary literature on Aras Ören and German Turkish literature with secondary literature on media representations in society, postmodernism and postmodernist writings, poststructuralism, post-Marxism, and globalization.

One issue that many scholars have grappled with is if an author who writes in Turkish should even be considered within the field of German literature. How in the world can Ören consider himself “a German writer” (Loentz 99)? Scholars have pointed out several important facts pertinent to this issue: Ören writes in Turkish, but he usually publishes in German first (Mani 112; Ören, *Privatexil ein Programm?* 63); he most often addresses the German rather than Turkish context; he also uses the German version for public reading of his literature (Mani 112); and his audience is primarily German, Germany being the place
where he gained his reputation as a writer (Hohoff and Ackermann 2). Some scholars have avoided this issue by focusing only on second and third generation Turkish German authors who write in German.¹ But this tendency ignores important questions that need to be asked and important work that is still being written.

A more complex investigation is needed that explores and questions the very boundaries and definitions of the national identity of literature. How important is it that an author was born within the political boundaries of Germany? Do his/her parents also need to be “biological” Germans? Should the subject and themes of the works be related to the German context? Must the work be written in German? Is it possible that a work of literature falls into multiple national categories or none? Should literature even be labeled by national categories any more? All of these and more questions lie behind the anxiety about placing an author like Aras Ören within the framework of German literature.

For better or worse Ören has been labeled a minority writer. One obvious reason for this is the prominence of “axialist” themes in his texts: themes that pivot on “issues pertaining to cultural, ethnic, class difference etc.” (Cheesman, “Juggling Burdens of Representation” 483–84). He himself has acknowledged the importance of these themes in his work (Ören, Privatexil ein Programm? 40). And yet, he also refused to limit himself to Gastarbeiterliteratur (Torossi 10; Hohoff and Ackermann 7). Ören received the first Chamisso Prize, which lent him some critical attention, but also seemed to fossilize his categorization as a minority writer. Scholars have debated whether the Chamisso prize helps writers gain more critical attention or whether it limits the critical attention they receive (Cheesman, “Juggling Burdens of Representation” 472). The German reception of

¹ See, for instance, Fachinger 2001.
Ören’s work has also led to his narrow categorization. In the 1970s he became the media poster boy for Gastarbeiterliteratur (Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature* 141; Hohoff and Ackermann 6) and has received different sorts of praise and scrutiny based primarily on his status as a “Turk” (Loentz 105–06; Wertheimer 61).

Rita Chin writes about how Ören was one of the first minority writers to successfully target a broader German audience with *Was will Niyazi in der Naunynstraße?*, a narrative work of poetry (32). Although Ören had directed *Was will Niyazi* at a more general German audience, its success led him to obtain a more influential voice in German media addressing Turkish Germans. This first successful book led to a film version and eventually Ören was offered the direction of the first-ever daily Turkish-language radio show in Germany (80).

There are four primary sections that compose this thesis. The first will give a brief biography of Aras Ören and explore some of his experience with different forms of media. The second section is an in-depth investigation of the concept of mediated reality and identity and mass media’s presence in *Berlin Savignyplatz*. The third section contextualizes *Berlin Savignyplatz* within a changing political and historical landscape using the concepts of postmodernism and post-Marxism. Finally, the fourth section concludes the thesis by attempting to locate Aras Ören and the novel in question within Turkish German literature, German literature, and also European literature.

**Aras Ören and Media**

Although Ören’s experience with mass media will not determine a certain interpretation of mass media instances in his novel *Berlin Savignyplatz*, it serves as a valuable context to the strong presence of forms of mass media in this text. Aras Ören was born in 1939 (Mathes 23; Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*
and grew up in Bebek ("Vita"), then a diverse, cosmopolitan neighborhood of Istanbul (Ören, *Privatexil ein Programm?* 10). He began writing poetry in 1957 and prose in 1958 ("Vita"; Ören, *Privatexil ein Programm?* 63; “Aras Ören”). At the age of twenty he joined a theater troupe (Mathes 23; “Vita”) and was involved in theater for the next ten years (Ören, *Privatexil ein Programm?* 63).

Theater was the first medium with which Ören seriously engaged. Influenced by Bertolt Brecht’s view of art and theater as effective tools for raising political consciousness among laborers (Chin 69; Mathes 23; Hohoff and Ackermann 4), he at that time saw this medium as an outlet for his political views (Chin 69). In the early 1960s he travelled with a theater troupe to West Berlin to perform at the Frankfurt New Theater (Mathes 23; Chin 69). After returning to Turkey to fulfill his obligatory military service for two years in Ankara, he went back to West Berlin in 1965 and attempted with friends to establish a theater collective whose purpose was to perform plays for guest workers (Mathes 23; Chin 69; Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature* 140). When this project failed, Ören went back to Istanbul where he continued to act and write plays (Mathes 23; Chin 69). At the beginning of Ören’s career, he understood theater as a powerful tool of influence and resistance. In the future he would leave theater and focus on his literature and on forms of mass media.

Rita Chin, in her chapter “Aras Ören and the Guest Worker Question” situates Ören’s political views as akin to those held by the New Left in Germany in the late 1960s and early 70s. But although the New Left was beginning to address the question of the guest worker, Chin maintains that Ören diverged from and went beyond the New Left discourse on guest workers in important ways (70).
Chin points out that where New Left literature and films typically portrayed guest workers “as abstract figures with no individual identities,” Ören’s literature portrayed guest workers as individuals “with specific histories, dreams, plans, and disappointments” (70). One of the New Left’s primary focuses was critiquing capitalism. The figure of the guest worker served both as a symptom and as an “exotic” victim of “unbridled” capitalism. Racism or ethnic conflict, however, was criticized as the problem primarily of other nations (70–71). By contrast Ören’s early work specifically highlights “ethnic tensions” as a reality in Germany and as an obstacle to class solidarity (71–72).

The New Left was also preoccupied with the legacy of fascism in political, economic, and cultural life and Germany’s failure to truly work through its Nazi past (Chin 76). Ören seemed to share this concern, but he portrays “a fascist mentalité” not as something characteristic of the past that has never been effectively dealt with, but as characteristic of post-war Germany due to “the ethnic essentialisms of exploited workers.” That is to say, laborers were prone to see workers from other nations or cultures as essentially different: as competition rather than as fellow workers (76–77). In these important ways Ören diverged from the typical New Left discourse.

Yet, there was not always a clear line dividing Ören’s work in mass media from the New Left’s discourse on guest workers. So it might be more helpful to see Ören not outside of, but as part of the New Left, which was after all not a completely cohesive movement, and to see the New Left as part of a larger transnational Left movement in Europe and other places in the world at the time.

In the mid 1970s Ören acted in films and television shows in Germany and in Turkey (“Vita”). Film is one form of mass media where the line between Ören’s work and the New
Left discourse on guest workers blurs. For example, the film *Shirins Hochzeit* (1976)—in which Ören played the role of the betrothed who abandons the main character—is an at times problematic portrayal of a victimized guest worker oppressed by ethnic, class, and gendered discrimination in Germany. She is ultimately driven to prostitution. A disembodied female narrator often speaks for the protagonist Shirin, rendering her unable to speak for herself in her broken German. Here we see Ören implicated in a more typical New Left discourse on guest workers, whereas his writing often gave a more complex view of them.

Another film in which Ören played a part was *Otobüs* (1976). This film recounts the story of a group of Turkish men hoping to find work in Sweden. These men are swindled, their passports are stolen, and they are abandoned in a parked bus in a busy district of Stockholm, Sweden. The film attempts an aesthetically stylized (rather than a realistic) portrayal of the anguish and confusion of these men and their entrapment in the European stereotype of Turks as barbaric and animalistic. The men by and large do not speak in the film and the viewer learns little of their personal histories or motives for emigrating from Turkey. Using primarily his facial and bodily expressions, Ören plays the role of one of these victimized men and performs a gripping parody of the Turkish guest worker as a helpless victim reduced to an embodiment of animalistic instinctual fear. The ambiguity between Ören’s assuming this animalistic role and at the same time questioning the role by over-performing it reflects the ambiguity between his writing and his compromises in film and television in portraying Turkish guest workers.

Permanently settling in Berlin in 1969 (“Vita”), where his wife resided, Ören worked as a bartender and doing manual labor in factories for the next couple of years (Mathes 23;
Chin 69; Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature* 140). Soon he was able to establish himself as a writer and journalist. His first big success was *Was will Niyazi in der Naunynstraße?* (Chin 69; Mathes 23). This book focused on a working class neighborhood in Berlin and chronicled the interwoven stories of both ethnic Germans and migrants living there. Ören received widespread praise in Germany for this work, receiving reviews in major newspapers and selling 12,000 copies over the next 10 years (Chin 78). His success was bittersweet, however, as critics saw him as the representative of Turkish guest workers in Germany, a role which he rejected (Hohoff and Ackermann 6–7). Nevertheless, Ören had reached a wider German audience, which Turkish migrant writers up until that point had not been able to do.

Ören did not label his literary work *Gastarbeiterliteratur*. In fact, he declined to join the group PoLikunst, which asserted this label for its literature, and instead joined a group called Rote Nelke West Berlin (“Aras Ören”; Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature* 141; Torossi 10). More focused at that time on class difference, than on ethnic difference, he was nevertheless already engaged in how these identifications interact with one another. Ören, therefor, didn’t just write for and to guest workers; his literature targeted a much wider and more diverse audience.

*Was will Niyazi in der Naunynstraße?* not only brought Ören literary success, it also opened other doors into mass media for him. Sender Freies Berlin (hereafter SFB) produced a television film based on the book within a year of its publication, this time calling it „Frau Kutzer and the Other Inhabitants of Naunynstraße“ (Chin 80). Although the emphasis of the story had certainly changed (another instance of negotiation between Ören’s writing and a more mainstream New Left discourse) and although the critical
response to the film centered on the German actress who played Frau Kutzer (Chin 80), the film opened an opportunity for Ören to begin working at SFB on a permanent basis in 1974 ("Vita"; Ören, Privatexil ein Programm? 63). The company asked him to manage the first-ever daily Turkish-language radio program in West Germany, thus giving him “a more prominent, authoritative voice among Turkish migrants” (Chin 80). Ören continued with SFB for many years and in 1996 became editor-in-chief of Turkish programming ("Vita"; Ören, Privatexil ein Programm? 63).

Although Chin argues that “Ören helped transform West German public debate about guest workers” (84), it is nevertheless important to recognize the paradox that Ören’s attempt to reach not only migrants, but also Germans in general resulted in his being offered a position of power in broadcasting to the Turkish German community. Although Was will Niyazi sold a surprising 12,000 copies (78), this number also shows that it was by no means popular among the German public. This situation is symptomatic of the limitations that existed for Turkish German authors, where their writing counted primarily as special-interest literature, not as an integrated and respected part of German literature (Cheesman, “Juggling Burdens of Representation” 472, 478; Wertheimer 61).

Ören’s background in mass media gives the reader of Berlin Savignyplatz some context for his nuanced presentation of different forms of media. Mass media are pervasive in this text and not only influence the characters, but are also at times the source of re-imagination of self, of other, and of reality. Problems arise when mass media representations establish specific bounded identities that are portrayed as permanent and unchanging. This fixing of boundaries in representation is inevitable, and essentialization, especially of minority identities, becomes a trap difficult for forms of mass media to escape
in the novel. Now I will turn to the concept of mass media and two important mass media instances in Berlin Savignyplatz.

**Mass Media in Berlin Savignyplatz**

Mass media in Aras Ören’s novel *Berlin Savignyplatz* mediate the characters’ (and most especially Ali İtr’s) realities and identities. I will use the term *media* from now on to mean forms of mass media, such as television, film, magazines, and newspapers, because mass media have a dominant presence in the novel as the type of mediation that trumps and influences all other types of mediation in the novel.

Mass media in *Berlin Savignyplatz* tend to essentialize minority identity. This essentializing is a product of the New Left discourse on guest workers going back to the 1960s. But certain key contradictions become apparent in these instances of mass media, which then force the reader to question mass media portrayals of minority identities as unchanging and inherently other.

Mediation and mass media are by no means simple concepts in the novel. Exploring a few key concepts about media will aid the reader’s understanding of the complex role mass media play in helping to construct subjects. Lawrence Grossberg suggests that the process of mediation (which includes mediation through mass media) is itself the coming into being of reality; this is an example of “a theory of reality constructing itself” in the very process of mediation (190). In *Berlin Savignyplatz* the space between reality and fantasy (or imagination) collapses again and again with mediation playing an integral role in this process. The thought passes through the narrator’s mind, "Ich bemitleide dich (mich), weil du versucht hast, Phantasie und Wirklichkeit zu trennen, dabei ergänzen sich beide doch gegenseitig . . ." (Ören, *Berlin Savignyplatz* 140).
This is not to say that whatever is portrayed through mass media necessarily reflects reality or is bound to become actual. Mediation is “the space between the virtual and actual, of becoming actual” (Grossberg 191) and discourses, as they propagate themselves through mediation, make a great deal of practical difference "producing real effects, moving bodies from one set of relations—both actual and potential—to another" (191). So mediation, especially in the discourses that circulate in and through mass media, produces material relations of power between subjects.

Grossberg avoids a simplistic view of mass media by suggesting that mediation itself and its relationship to what he calls euro-modernity needs to be rethought. If mass media can be considered (at least in part) phenomena of culture, then mass media as they function in Berlin Savignyplatz may be characteristic of a European form of modernity that the novel seeks to contest. Grossberg describes culture as a "dimension of all human activity" insofar as it uses thought and imagination to create meaning out of the chaos of reality (184). He maintains that the very concept of culture is a product of euro-modernity and its primary function is to define what is "human." The European concept of culture constructs itself as the most advanced and superior form of “human” and at the same time constructs others outside of that concept as being closer to "nature" and as "traditional" rather than modern (182). Mass media instances in Berlin Savignyplatz are exemplary of this type of promotion of a euro-modernity.

Mass media are not simply good or bad in Berlin Savignyplatz. The omnipresence of mass media in the characters’ lives does, however, determine, not what they think, but how they think about themselves and their world. Arjun Appadurai in his book Modernity at Large discounts the belief that “electronic media are the opium of the masses” and the
death of people’s power of imagination (7). In this Appadurai seems to be disagreeing with Adorno’s idea of the mass media or “Kulturindustrie” as completely imposed on the masses from above (337). Berlin Savignyplatz similarly illustrates how the pervasiveness of mass media actually increases the characters’ tendency to live their lives through their imaginations by perceiving their identities through the lens of an invisible camera: “Lebt im Grunde nicht jeder von uns, als drehe er einen Film zu einem Szenarium seiner Phantasie, in dem er selbst die Hauptrolle spielt” (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 93)?

Appadurai makes a fundamental distinction between imagination and fantasy, holding that imagination is more tied to action than is fantasy, thus implying that fantasy has less of an impact in actual everyday life (7). Berlin Savignyplatz, however, does not make this distinction between imagination and fantasy, but it does hold in common with Appadurai that “the work of the imagination” is “a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” (Appadurai 3). The novel also corresponds with Appadurai’s claim that “it [imagination] has entered the logic of ordinary life from which it had been largely sequestered”(5).

Appadurai also emphasizes collective imagination’s potential to create and sustain communities (8), but in Berlin Savignyplatz mass media portrayals serve as the primary expression of a collective imagination, although this sense of the collective is often exclusionary. Mass media as collectors and producers of collective imagination help to bring relations of power into existence and to sustain them. Mass media also spur and shape individual fantasy in the novel.

I will explore two specific instances of mass media in Berlin Savignyplatz and will also ask how these media instances assign subject positions and how these subject
positions are structured in relation to one another. But first, it would be helpful to set up the novel and its context.

The novel demonstrates a dual process of creation. On the one hand the author Aras Ören has created the narrator A.Ö. On the other hand the narrator A.Ö. admits he is constantly in the process of creating Ali Itır. Though in the novel Ali Itır is presumably a separate character, the narrator constantly projects his own thoughts and fantasies onto him.

The character of Ali Itır first appeared in Ören’s novella Bitte nix Polizei. This novella follows Ali Itır’s experiences as an undocumented worker in Germany in the early 1970s as an economic downturn is taking place. In the book Ali is portrayed as an exploited Turkish worker who dreams of making a name for himself in Germany. Without documents he only receives temporary menial work and through several misunderstandings he becomes the suspect for two crimes and the possible victim of a third. Ali Itır comes to represent the quintessential victimized Turkish guest worker in Germany: “Hat dieser rastlose Flüchtling . . . dann überhaupt eine Identität? Im Spannungsfeld von zwei Kulturen . . . gleichen Hunderttausende Ali Itır, ob mit oder ohne Aufenthaltsgenehmigung” (Pazarkaya 19). Berlin Savignyplatz critiques Bitte nix Polizei by again pursuing the Ali Itır of the narrator’s and others’ fantasies. But Ali Itır proves much more elusive this time around.

At the end of Bitte nix Polizei, the police create a composite sketch, or “Phantombild” of the victim/suspect found in the Landwehrkanal in order to verify his identity (Ören, Bitte nix Polizei 116), but the identity of the corpse is never conclusively determined. This ambiguous “Phantombild” of what may or may not have been Ali Itır suggests that a
destabilization of the subject is already happening in Bitte nix Polizei. A.Ö., the narrator of Berlin Savignyplatz and author of the novel Bitte nix Polizei (although Aras Ören is its actual author), begins his so-called "legend" of Ali Itır where the former novel left off—with an unidentified corpse that has been found in the Landwehrkanal of Berlin (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 9, translation mine).

The novel takes place on the pivotal night of the opening of the Berlin Wall. A.Ö., unaware that he is living a historic moment (though very aware that he is “auf der Suche nach der Gegenwart”), spends the evening going from bar to bar in the vicinity of Savignyplatz, immersed in his thoughts, memories, and fantasies, which all revolve around the “legend” of Ali Itır. Ali Itır is finally introduced to him at the end of the novel, although even then Ali insists “Aber ich bin nicht er” (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 165). Not only A.Ö.’s, but also other characters’ memories, fantasies, and thoughts about Ali Itır are born out of what they have seen on television, read in newspapers or magazines, or taken in through other forms of mass media.

The difference between fantasy and reality is constantly questioned throughout the novel. In thinking about Ali Itır at the beginning of the novel, the narrator remarks, “Im Grunde verlieren meine Gedankenvariationen und Phantasiespiele über Ali Itır bereits den Charakter des Spiels und beginnen sich in ein Trauma zu verwandeln, das mein künftiges Verhalten auf unbestimmte Weise beeinflussen wird” (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 30). It is clear in this example that the narrator’s fantasies have a direct effect on his behavior. Imagination on both an individual and collective level is an active force in the novel. By imagination I mean the ability to create images in one’s own mind or externally of what does not exist, of what might currently exist, or of what could exist in the future. These
images are created using other images found in one's memories of actual, virtual or textual events. Imagination is manifested through mass media on a collective level and structured by mass media on an individual level. It not only shapes the everyday experience of the characters, but also is a way to create and sustain certain relationships of power both individually and collectively. For example the narrator A.Ö. asserts power over the character Ali Itr in the way he insists on imagining him:


Directly following we are given a montage of short scenes from A.Ö.’s imagination in which Ali Itr plays the main role. This is significant because these fantasies are structured as if they were a film playing in the narrator's mind.

The two particular instances in Berlin Savignyplatz that I discuss next portray Turkish figures as a negative presence, as a servile presence and, paradoxically, as an absent presence. The Turkish figures are also often silenced and used as props in a story mainly focused on constructing a majority identity. Berlin Savignyplatz exposes and deconstructs these mass media portrayals through unfulfilled expectations on the part of A.Ö.; by referencing mass media instances with which the reader is likely to already be familiar; and by showing the inherent contradictions within these media instances.

The first scene to be discussed narrates not only a media instance, but also the narrator A.Ö.’s reaction to it. In this scene A.Ö. sits down to watch a made-for-TV film, showcasing the life and fate of Ali Itr. This is a film in which A.Ö. takes great interest, given
his obsession with the Ali Itır of his own and others’ fantasies. The film recounts the story of Ali Itır, but A.Ö. does not take interest in the film in order to learn mere facts about him. Instead, he anxiously awaits the film because he feels the mass media portrayal of Ali Itır is tied to his own sense of identity.

As the film begins, A.Ö. notices the film’s “sticky” and exotic aesthetic (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 36, translation mine). The main character Ali Itır fits right into this aesthetic as the actor overdramatizes the role, presenting Ali as ever-wise and ever-naive, replete with ready-made reactions and holy poses (Berlin Savignyplatz 36). This portrayal freezes Ali Itır in time and depicts him as essentially different from the modern “German.” He is objectified as a “fleischgewordenes Denkmal der Sittlichkeit” (Berlin Savignyplatz 36). So although in its introduction the film claims to be a “Beitrag zur Völkerverständigung” (Berlin Savignyplatz 35), it really doesn’t attempt to understand guest workers nor does it allow space for their agency, but rather portrays them as permanently different and frozen in an exotic pre-modern state. What is one to make of a mass media instance claiming one purpose, but performing another?2

This portrayal bothers A.Ö. because he was expecting to be able to identify in some way with the character of Ali Itır. This expectation of identification should not be seen as natural, but rather the result of the continual reinforcement of discourses that maintain one should be able to identify with others of the same skin color, ethnicity, or national background. “Seltsame Erwartungen überkamen mich. Die Bilder die gleich auf der Mattscheibe zu sehen sein würden, mußten geheime Ansichten aus meinem Leben

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2 See Teraoka 1996 for an in-depth exploration of how certain well-meaning German authors from the Left have attempted to portray the situation of Turkish guest workers in Germany, but have instead inadvertently served to further fossilize a conception of these workers as inherently different from Germans.
sein” (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 35). He expects the images to tell him who he is and to help him imagine and embrace his own identity, but he is frustrated by what he finds. A.Ö. expects to identify with Ali İtir on the basis of ethnic identity, which he unconsciously supposes to be something stable enough to give him some essential commonality with Ali İtir. The irony is that Ali İtir’s identity is presented as completely frozen and unchanging, as too stable. A.Ö. can’t identify with him at all even though he created him in Bitte nix Polizei. In this, the text critiques the idea of ethnic identity as something stable by showing its unreliability and instability.

Mass media, however, don’t usually portray subject positions as unstable and malleable. In the article “Stigmatisierende Medienkurse in der kosmopolitanen Einwanderungsgesellschaft” Erol Yildiz points out that renewed nationalistic ideologies and “processes of ethnicization” in the media serving to reinforce national identities have accompanied globalization with its attendant mass-migration and the spread of neoliberalism (Yildiz 38, translation mine). Mass media, even as they actively construct and reconstruct subjects according to current social, cultural, and economic contexts, often assert at the same time that ethnic identity is a stable and unchanging category. Yildiz identifies ethnicization as a type of othering that has intensified in the context of globalization.

A.Ö.’s expectations to identify with the main character and to learn something about his own identity are not just due to personal naiveté. On the contrary, mass media affirm and reaffirm their own ability to powerfully actualize a person’s life, to give him an identity, and to make him a “Persönlichkeit,” the very thing for which Ali İtir yearned in Ören’s Bitte nix Polizei (48). A.Ö.’s identical, yet unconscious hope to become a “Persönlichkeit” reflects
a common conception that people become more real through the eye of the camera: “Als wäre ein verborgenes Auge in die geheimsten Winkel meines Lebens vorgedrungen und würde das dort Gesehene . . . nun offen vor aller Augen ausbreiten”(Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 35). This reveals A.Ö.’s desire to be given a recognized identity, to share an equal position with all the viewers of the film:


To be a “Persönlichkeit” is to no longer be anonymous, to no longer be constructed as an absent presence. Yet, to gain recognition as a “Persönlichkeit” A.Ö. must heed the call of an already existing discourse, and unfortunately the discourses being offered to him in the film are very limiting. The novel exposes how this media instance fails to meet A.Ö.’s expectations and how its promises prove to be a “false magic” because the film does the opposite of what A.Ö. is hoping for: in its construction of them, it polarizes and hardens cultural and ethnic identities rather than bringing them together.

At the same time that the film constructs exotic ethnic subjects, it also constructs “German” subjects. The film does this by calling individuals to participate in certain types of subject positions and in this way effectively assigns identities. This process is called “interpellation”(Althusser 301; Culler 46). The idea of interpellation is that if a viewer is addressed enough times as a certain kind of subject, then the viewer will eventually “come to occupy such a position”(Culler 46). The “German” subjects of the film, although not
visible on the screen, appear in the introduction of the film. The film addresses the audience as “we” and identifies that “we” as “die Hausherren” (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 35).

It is curious that the film only directly addresses one of the two kinds of constructed subjects: the German “we.” The ethnic other is constructed only peripherally and the narrator is frustrated in his attempt at identification because he is not addressed as part of the German “we,” nor is he willing to be constructed as the exotic ethnic other. The result of mass media speaking about a particular group of people without speaking directly to them, is again the construction of that group as an absent other. Although this other may be present before the camera as an actor, his/her presence as a spectator before the television is not acknowledged. But even though the film does not directly address Turkish Germans, it still assigns them the subject position of ethnic other through a process of interpellation.

The ethnicization of Ali Itir as completely other, even if not in this instance as a bad other, illustrates the obsession Yildiz describes to redefine and reinforce the national self through the construction of others. In this case, the other is portrayed not only as exotic, but also as an unthreatening servile presence, which becomes clear by the way the character Ali Itir speaks in the film: “Oh, mein Herr, welch eine Freude… Mein Herz liegt Ihnen zu Füßen” (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 34). As long as the conditions of the German economy required foreign labor, this way of portraying the internal other was acceptable.

Yet as the world economy faced crisis and as the Cold War later drew to a close (a shift which Berlin Savignyplatz registers), Germany’s construction of its internal and external others would also change (Loentz 102). After 1989, the primary other was no longer socialist East Germany or the Soviet Union, it was now being constructed along the
lines of the unwanted immigrant *other* and also being played out on an international scale in new ways (Loentz 102). For this reason and others, representations of Turkish Germans shifted in dramatic ways in the 1990s (Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature* 128–30).

The portrayal of the migrant other as a desirable servile presence was seen as completely natural, however, in the throes of Germany’s booming 1960s economy, as is clear in the next example of mass media from the novel. In this scene, A.Ö. buys a newspaper on his way to Berlin Savignyplatz. The article on the front page is entitled “Fünfhunderttausender Gastarbeiter verabschiedet.” This article describes the farewell to Necati G., a Turkish guest worker about to leave Istanbul headed for Germany. He is joyfully seen off by both Turkish and German officials and given a portable TV as a farewell gift. Necati G.’s reaction to this farewell is to be so excited and overjoyed that he faints.

The newspaper article is reminiscent of the actual news story about Armando Rodrigues de Sá, “the millionth guest worker” to enter Germany in 1964 (Göktürk, Gramling, and Kaes 36–37). This article has certain key commonalities with this media instance in *Berlin Savignyplatz*. Like Necati G., Rodrigues is taken by surprise, becoming the center of a political celebration and staged media event. He is also given a special modern gift: a motorbike. This instance in the novel is drawing on the images of the Rodrigues de Sá story that already likely lie in the memory of the reader of *Berlin Savignyplatz*. By recalling and recreating these images it effectively parodies them and creates a dissonance in the logic of such a representation.

The narrator, from the standpoint of the night of the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989, recalls reading this article on the exact date of July 22, 1972. But then he hesitates
and says no, he must have read it sometime during the mid-1960s. The fallibility of the narrator’s memory is highlighted here and the reader is reminded that the narrator is not completely trustworthy in his recounting of events. The first date mentioned is actually closer in time to the oil crisis in 1973 and the Anwerbestopp that followed, which sets up in the imagination of the reader a sharp contrast of images: on the one hand the overjoyed Necati G. and on the other guest workers encouraged to go home. The ambiguous name of the article “Fünfhunderttausender Gastarbeiter verabschiedet” also reflects this contrast and the importance of historical context. The text draws on the readers’ probable associations in order to expose contradictions in mass media portrayals of the servile other.

While Necati G. is placed at the center of the news story, he is not the real center of this media instance; rather, he is a sign for something else and so assumes a negative presence in the representation, whereas the positive content or meaning is imputed from elsewhere. Although the newspaper article purports to be about the luck of an ordinary family man off to work in Germany, it actually recounts a political spectacle between Turkey and Germany. Such a media event really has nothing to do with the guest worker Necati G., who just happens to be the arbitrary recipient of the farewell and functions as a prop for the political spectacle and as a symbol for the servile Turkish laborers ready to be a workforce for Germany’s benefit. The support garnered through the mass media is for the prolonged importation of guest workers to fuel continued economic growth.

This situation brings to mind Stuart Hall’s poststructuralist explanation of the constructionist theory of representation where meaning is inherent neither in objects themselves nor in the signs that refer to objects, but rather is produced through “signifying practices” (24). He also maintains that the sign is “arbitrarily” chosen to be the vehicle for
meaning and in using the sign again and again to signify, the meaning of the sign becomes “fixed” as “natural and inevitable” (21). More important than the arbitrarily chosen sign is its “difference” from other signs (27). Similarly, Necati G. serves as a negative/empty arbitrary sign that is assigned a particular meaning reducing the actual Necati G. to a much-“degraded” version of himself (Baudrillard 86). The meaning of the happy servile guest worker is produced through Necati G.’s difference from the concept of Germanness.

But this assertion of difference implicit in the article—where the visible other is a negative value in relation to the invisible “we”—is not inevitable according to Lawrence Grossberg. He states, "... the euro-modern category of culture ... assumes that negativity (dialectics, contradiction, absence) is the only logic of otherness, resulting in rigidity and impenetrability characterizing all of its maps of meaning (belonging, otherness)" (201). Grossberg maintains, then, that this type of othering is not unavoidable, but is a specific problem in the way a European form of modernity tends to function on a cultural level.

The novel makes apparent the inherent contradictions of the article and many like it. Necati G., newly married with an infant daughter, is strangely overjoyed to leave his family and head to work in Germany. Even though his fainting is the direct result of receiving the honor of the Turkish minister of labor kissing him goodbye, the implication of the article is that Necati G. represents a mass of Turkish workers, ready and happy to labor on behalf of Germany’s economic progress. Necati G. thus becomes the embodiment of the myth of the happy ethnic laborer, a myth that works to support the economic status quo of 1960s Germany. Germany, meanwhile, is constructed as the generous receiver of Necati G.’s services.
The gift that Necati G. receives—a portable TV—also carries symbolic significance. If the TV is a symbol of modernity and advancing technological progress, then the article suggests that Necati G. is the recipient of that modernity. The news article implies that he is stepping out of pre-modern village life and into the modernity that reigns in Germany. As a laborer, he will be privileged to help advance this modernity and technological progress in Germany.

Necati G. is portrayed as a silent servile worker who fails to think about his own social position. Directly before the newspaper article about him, however, there is a contrasting scene in the novel. Ayhan, a student and factory worker, expresses his dissatisfaction with capitalism in Germany. If Necati G. is satisfied with being a worker, Ayhan is a dissatisfied revolutionary stuck in a German factory. But the text does not present Ayhan uncritically; rather, he also embodies a certain type of constructed subject. He is the committed Marxist intellectual who identifies a clear enemy: the “dreckige Kapitalisten” (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 46). By contrast, the news article about Necati G. is unclear about who the oppressive enemy really is. Is it the Turkish government? Is it the German government? Is it the writer of the article? Who can be blamed for the way the mass media construct subject positions? The answer is more complex than just the “dreckige Kapitalisten.” Mediation as mass media in Berlin Savignyplatz functions as “reality constructing itself” (Grossberg 190) and composes self-sustaining systems, which perpetuate their own reality. So the “enemy” (if it should even be called that) is a collective imagining: re-formed, channeled, and always somewhat changed by mass media representations. But this type of “enemy” is difficult to pin down and hold responsible.
Ultimately, the article is not really about Necati G., but about a larger process of migration and change in which national governments are portrayed as protagonists. In the authoritative guise of “news,” the article is a carefully selected and crafted narrative. At the same time it only semi-consciously utilizes certain familiar discourses in which protagonists and antagonists are constructed in shifting historical contexts. But what does it mean to have a figure like Necati G. in the middle of this narrative, but not at its center? The fixed and othered identity in media instances like this one serves as a prop in a larger program of identity and reality construction. Mass media portrayals supposedly represent real people, in this case guest workers, and yet their representation strictly encloses the possibilities of what they can be. In this sense, how they are imagined determines their reality.

Aras Ören doesn’t just focus on Turkish German issues in this novel. In fact, within Tom Cheesman’s model of how minority authors respond to “burdens of representation” Berlin Savignyplatz could be counted within the category of “glocalism”: “a strategy which neither dwells on nor side-steps axialist themes [issues pertaining to cultural, ethnic, class difference etc.], but instead incorporates them as part of a wider study of society and the individual” (“Juggling Burdens of Representation” 483–84). Although the novel does investigate how the Turkish German minority is portrayed in the media, it does so only within a larger context of mass media constructing subjects within the framework of euro-modernity.

By exploring these fictitious mass media portrayals, which stand in for a whole host of actual mass media instances, Berlin Savignyplatz also implicates the New Left in their role in shaping the current discourse about Turkish German minorities. These examples of
mass media from the novel show how minority figures are at times assigned a negative, at times a servile, and at times an absent presence. One must remember, however, that these and other discourses can and often do contradict one another and change along with historical contexts.

**Postmodernism and Post-Marxism in *Berlin Savignyplatz***

Before looking at postmodernism in *Berlin Savignyplatz*, it is necessary to first explore the concept itself. Many dispute definitions of postmodernism and accounts of its influence. Christopher Butler argues in his short introduction to postmodernism, that the movement is not as dominant in society as postmodern thinkers portray it to be (5). Göran Therborn suggests that postmodernity is an extension of modernity and that it is only one movement of several: "... we may say that modernity turned at the end of the twentieth century, but in several directions: to the right; into postmodernism; and into theoretical and political searches for new modernities" (128). What many scholars tend to agree upon is that postmodernism is characterized by “... a questioning of, or a loss of belief in, the future narratives of the modern” (Therborn 122; Butler 16; Callinicos 86; El-Ojeili 2). Gerda Moser makes the argument that rather than art, literature, or theory being the center of postmodernism, a postmodern consumer and leisure industry is its true driving force (36). And some suggest that postmodernism has already ended and that a new phase has begun (Butler 11; Punter 1).

Wolfgang Welsch, on the other hand, does not believe that postmodernism is a mere passing fad, but rather a way of looking at the world that has affected society on a broad scale (6). That it is not an isolated phenomenon can also be seen by a postmodern congruence that can be found in literature, architecture, the arts, economies, and politics in
many countries (6). Welsch states “Viemehr sind unsere Realität und Lebenswelt 'postmodern' geworden” (4). He attempts to get to the root of the concept of postmodernism, identifying its heart as “radical plurality” (4–5, translation mine). This “radical plurality” has become explicit (whereas in modernity it was present, but implicit), affects all aspects of life, and is generally seen in a positive light (6, 33). This favoring of “radical plurality” also includes a distrust and general turning away from totalizing meta-narratives (5). Welsch would disagree with Moser by arguing that postmodern thinkers really have produced coherent and definable concepts that undergird postmodernism as a widespread “Geisteszustand” (35, quoting Lyotard). However, a more diffuse, undefined, and popularized “anything goes” version of postmodernism tends to be what is promoted in postmodern consumer industries (2–3). I find Welsch’s perspective the most helpful in identifying some of the functions of postmodernism in Berlin Savignyplatz.

Berlin Savignyplatz is ambiguous about postmodernism. It plays with and revels in the undoing of a notion of a singular stable identity. In the examples of mass media given in the previous section, the novel demonstrates how, under the influence of New Left discourses, Turkish guest workers were portrayed as helpless victims, essentially different from Germans, and forever trapped in a pre-modern past. To counter this fixing of identity the text uses a postmodern style and worldview to multiply the narratives about Ali Itr, the once “typical” guest worker. But Berlin Savignyplatz also seems to lament the meaninglessness that results from the kind of diffuse and undefined postmodernism that Welsch criticizes. In this sense the text is also critical of postmodern consumer society.

The move from a more modernist style to a postmodernist style in Aras Ören’s writing has been gradual. In Bitte nix Polizei some postmodern elements already begin to
appear. Scholar Tom Cheesman reads *Bitte nix Polizei* as a “socialist realist” narrative with a “postmodernist refusal of closure” (*Novels of Turkish German Settlement* 84). *Berlin Savignyplatz*, however, is much more postmodern in its style and content. The following description by Cheesman accurately describes this novel: "Unreliable narrators, indeterminate identities, the impossibility of non-perspectival knowledge and the implicit critique of Marxist or other grand narratives merit the label postmodernist" (*Novels of Turkish German Settlement* 162).

The very idea of one coherent narrative is questioned by the novel’s centering on a character who exists at the same time that he does not exist: “Ali Itır ist also eine existierende Person, die es nicht gibt, oder das Gegenteil davon: eine nichtexistente Person, die es dennoch gibt” (Ören, *Berlin Savignyplatz* 30). As opposed to *Bitte nix Polizei*, in *Berlin Savignyplatz* the identity of Ali Itır simply can’t be pinned down. In accord with the New Left discourses on guest workers, Ali Itır is barely able to communicate in German in *Bitte nix Polizei*, he refers to himself in third person, he is simple, almost instinctual in his thought processes and actions, and he is the embodiment of the *Gastarbeiter* as victim (Cheesman, *Novels of Turkish German Settlement* 156–57).

*Berlin Savignyplatz* can be seen as a sharp critique of *Bitte nix Polizei*. In this text Ali Itır speaks sophisticated German; he refuses to be identified as Ali Itır; and he tells the story the reader may know from *Bitte nix Polizei* in a different way. Ali Itır’s recounting of his relationship with the German teenager Brigitte, for example, completely contradicts the version of this relationship narrated in *Bitte nix Polizei*, where Brigitte and Ali Itır (strangers to each other) have a sexual encounter that quickly turns nonconsensual. But in *Berlin Savignyplatz* Ali explains: “Unter all den Türken in ihrer Bekanntschaft war ich es,
der sie am besten kannte. Ich will nicht sagen, sie sei meine Freundin gewesen, aber etwas in der Richtung. Ich ging sehr oft zu ihr und sie hatte keine Geheimnisse von mir” (Ören, *Berlin Savignyplatz* 119). This character completely contradicts and undermines the authority of author and narrator A.Ö.

If in *Bitte nix Polizei* Ali Itır was a simple, helpless victim who continually finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, in *Berlin Savignyplatz* he can’t be pinned down nor can he be trusted. The narrator attempts to reassert his narrative authority and control: “Übertreiben gehörte zu seinem Wesen, insgeheim war er stolz darauf” (Ören, *Berlin Savignyplatz* 120); and Dr. Anders, Ali’s psychologist, says “Ali Itır erfand sich eine neue Biographie, eine Biographie, die alle in Staunen versetzen sollte . . . Er konnte all seine Gedanken und Phantasien furchtlos verwirklichen” (*Berlin Savignyplatz* 121). Yet the narrator and Dr. Anders are not necessarily to be trusted: “Er [Dr. Anders] hatte bereits damit begonnen, Ali Itır in eines der Klischees in seinem Kopf einzuordnen, die sich kaum voneinander unterschieden” (*Berlin Savignyplatz* 102). Most of what the reader learns about Ali Itır comes from the imagination, thoughts, and testimonies of the narrator and other characters in the novel as they are also influenced by different media instances. The character of Ali Itır becomes postmodern in that he now negotiates his subjectivity based on a multitude of contradictory narratives, perspectives, and mass media discourses.

Ören’s reference to the modernist novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in naming his novel is also indicative of a move from modernism to postmodernism. Although he may make this reference for several reasons, all of which I cannot address here, he uses the reference not only to suggest possible parallels, but also important contrasts between these two stories.
By examining the contrasts, one can see especially how notions of identity are called into question in *Berlin Savignyplatz*.

In *Berlin Alexanderplatz* the story accompanies the character of Franz Biberkopf, an ex-convict who desires to make an honest living, but is unable to do so. Ali Itır had quite a similar story in *Bitte nix Polizei*, especially in his seeming inability to remain “anständig” (Döblin 11). In *Berlin Savignyplatz*, however, Ali Itır is no longer a cohesive character in that he fails to operate on the basis of the Kantian concept of a “unified ego” (Butler 51). What he says about himself is often questionable and the reader is forced to try to understand his subjectivity based also on what other characters say, think, and imagine him to be, even as he proclaims again and again “Ich bin nicht er.” What other characters say or imagine, however, is also often contradictory. *Berlin Savignyplatz* is drastically different from *Berlin Alexanderplatz* with regards to the concept of identity. In *Berlin Alexanderplatz* identity is stable, only to be changed by a miraculous event, whereas in *Berlin Savignyplatz* identity is unstable and the very possibility of a singular identity is questioned.

One embodiment of Ören’s postmodern style in *Berlin Savignyplatz* is a puzzle that perplexes Ali Itır, the mystery of which he is not able to solve. It consists of a square with nine numbers where the sum of each row, each column, and each diagonal is 15:

Was könnte das Geheimnis der Zahl Fünfzehn sein? Ali Itır kämpfte die ganze Nacht im Traum mit dieser Frage. Die Zahlen in den Quadraten verbogen sich und verwandelten sich geradezu in lebendige Wesen. Die Sechs, die Eins, die Acht, die Sieben, die Neun, alle Zahlen stürmten wie Gespenster auf ihn ein, dann verschwanden sie wieder, nur die Fünfzehn blieb, aber das ist gar keine Zahl, das
heißt, es ist eine Zahl und zugleich keine, ein seltsames, schreckliches Ding, das Ali Itır unablässig die Frage stellt: ‘Wer bin ich? Wer bin ich?’ Gerade beginnt er zu verstehen, was da zu ihm spricht, da sieht er plötzlich: Auch die Fünfzehn ist jetzt kein seltsames, schreckliches Ding mehr, sondern einfach ein Nichts. (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 27)

The second time the puzzle comes up in the novel, Ali Itır has been hit by a car and while unconscious he dreams of a dead uncle who again gives him the puzzle saying, “Du kannst es nicht verstehen” (Berlin Savignyplatz 131). This puzzle is indicative of the plurality of discourses that influence the production of a single subject. But when Ali attempts to understand the sum of the signs—the “secret” of that sum, tied to the question of identity “Wer bin ich?”—he ends up with “a nothingness.” The multiplicity of influences and narratives that comprise an individual’s context are what forms her/him as a subject; and so an inherent, unified “identity” simply does not exist except as an idea.

The “radical plurality” of Welsch’s understanding of postmodernity (4–5, translation mine) also clarifies why a changing and expanding media landscape has produced a multiplicity of narratives and discourses which are often, but not always contradictory. Various forms of mass media in the novel mediate the lives of Ali Itır and other characters. These forms of mass media also mediate character’s ideas of themselves and of Ali Itır. But the sum of all of the media instances in the novel (as a proliferation of signs) does not add up to one coherent narrative, just as the numbers of the puzzle do not finally add up to the meaning that Ali is hoping for. The number 15 is completely arbitrary and trying to find meaning in it a futile exercise.
Drawing on M. Featherstone, El-Ojeili notes, "As the overproduction of signs continues inexorably, we are confronted with an apparently perpetual present that leaves us unable to connect the multitude of signs and images into coherent narratives" (18). In this sense Berlin Savignyplatz's postmodern style helps portray the unsolvable puzzle of a postmodernity where mass media not only mediate reality, but also are themselves a crucial part of peoples' reality (Baudrillard 81). Forms of mass media, despite their circulation of multiple and often contradictory discourses, now act as the primary mediators of peoples' identity and reality. The totalizing meta-narratives of the past that used to fill this mediating role now take second place to the plurality of discourses in mass media.

The shift to postmodernism in Ören's work is also accompanied by another important shift: the shift from Marxism to post-Marxism. There is an important link between postmodernist thought and the move away from traditional forms of socialism according to Chamsy El-Ojeili. He writes that postmodernism is in some ways a reaction to the failures of socialism, but it is also a primary cause of socialism's inability to reformulate itself as a new project. Unlike Butler who sees postmodernism as a marginal phenomenon, El-Ojeili sees it "as a now inescapable intellectual and political horizon" (4).

Postmodernism can be considered a diverse and multifaceted movement penetrating art, society, and even politics. I will use the term post-Marxist, however, in two ways. The first way in which the term post-Marxist is relevant to this novel is as a general time marker signaling the end of Marxism as a viable solution to problems of social and material inequality. The period 1989-91 has in popular discourse become symbolic for the death of socialism (El-Ojeili 11). *Berlin Savignyplatz* makes use of popular imagination by
hinging its narrative on this symbolically charged eve of the end of socialism. Of course, the death of socialism was a discursive rather than an actual event, but *Berlin Savignyplatz* continually plays with the often-shaky division between the two.

The second way the term post-Marxist is significant regards specific writers who, according to Therborn, are characterized by “. . . an explicitly Marxist background, whose recent work has gone beyond Marxist problematics and who do not publicly claim a continuing Marxist commitment” (165). Aras Ören is one such writer and *Berlin Savignyplatz* characterizes more of a post-Marxist view than a Marxist one.

The characters Dr. Anders and his wife Annelie—both part of the generation of ’68—serve as one indicator of Ören’s move from being a Marxist writer to a post-Marxist writer. Annelie, unlike Dr. Anders, continues to cling to her socialist values:


In this passage Dr. Anders represents a postmodern attitude that has turned away from the narrative of Marxism. Annelie feels hopeless in the face of this attitude. She promises to continue the good fight without her husband, but even as she says this she “. . . merkt selbst, daß ihre Worte scheinheilig sind,” and as she ends her outburst, she “. . . gießt sich ein Glas randvoll mit Cognac” (*Berlin Savignyplatz* 108). This passage demonstrates a
critical stance toward both the Marxist outlook and the attitude of indifference toward issues of equality and justice which sometimes seems to characterize a postmodern consumer society. Yet Berlin Savignyplatz never attempts to redeem the validity of Marxism and for this reason it demonstrates a lack of “a continuing Marxist commitment” (Therborn 165).

The novel marks a move to a post-Marxist time period by taking place on the night of the opening of the Berlin Wall. In this sense Berlin Savignyplatz may also be considered a Wenderoman. This important aspect of the novel has been either overlooked or underplayed by several scholars. Hohoff and Ackermann, for example, insist on the secondary importance of the fall of the Berlin Wall in the novel: “Der Roman rückt von allen Realbezügen ab, um die Figur in der Phantasie neu erstehen zu lassen, denn 'jeder hat sich wohl in seiner Vorstellung seinen eigenen Ali Itır zusammengereimt’” (11). Although the opening of the wall is not recounted in the novel as a historical event—occurring rather as an actual event in the background of the narrator’s thoughts and fantasies about Ali Itır—I would argue that it is central in the sense that it is an important indicator in the novel that a major transition is taking place. Rather than juxtaposing reality and fantasy as Hohoff and Ackermann do, perhaps it would be more helpful to note how the novel erases the boundaries between the two as the narrator moves unawares into a new era, while he paradoxically engages in his brooding “search for the present.”

There are references in several places in the text to entering into a new age. The journalist Jürgen B. says, “Eine neue Zeit beginnt, vielleicht das 21. Jahrhundert . . . Was ich weiß, ist, daß wir heute keinen Platz mehr haben für eine handvoll Bohémiens aus der

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3 See Mattson 2012 for an exploration of recent German literature that has portrayed postmodernist consumer society in this light.
Vergangenheit, die auf der kleinen Insel Savignyplatz vor sich hin leben“ (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 154). And after finishing a speech on how the ideal of beauty has changed over time, Manfred Kohlhaas finishes, “Freunde, laßt uns trinken auf den Abschied von der Gegenwart und den Eintritt des zukünftigen Neuen” (Berlin Savignyplatz 162)!

Berlin Savignyplatz seems to catalogue with mixed feelings a shift toward postmodernism and the end of Marxism as a valid world-view in the popular imagination. The novel is somewhat pessimistic in the sense that it does not acknowledge the possibility of a new socialist project in the traditional sense. This pessimism is counteracted, however, in the character of Ali Itir, who now sometimes refuses to heed the call when he is hailed as a certain kind of subject (Althusser 301). He thus more actively negotiates a subject position for himself in comparison to his character in Bitte nix Polizei.

Berlin Savignyplatz reflects postmodernity in that it is composed of a multiplicity of voices and images that contradict one another to the point of precluding a clear, straightforward narrative. This same multiplicity, however, also provides postmodern subjects the opportunity to more readily negotiate their subject positions. The novel brings attention to the mass media images and voices that bombard the postmodern subject daily and mediate his understanding of himself and reality. The novel also registers the shift to a post-Marxist era in which Marxism becomes irrelevant.

Conclusion: Ören in Various Literary Contexts

One thing that Berlin Savignyplatz demonstrates as it diverges from the typical New Left discourse on Turkish guest workers and minorities, is that Turkish Germans are not essentially different from “native” Germans. Like “native” Germans, they should also have the right to claim Germany as their home and they have also influenced German society and
culture. It is therefore important to ask where we can locate Aras Ören and his novel *Berlin Savignyplatz* in the scope of German Turkish literature, German literature generally, and also European literature. In Germany there is a tendency to fence off German Turkish literature as only having to do with Turkish German or minority issues (Cheesman, “Juggling Burdens of Representation” 472). Tom Cheesman states that, “The danger is that common assumptions about homogeneous ‘identities’ and essentialized ‘differences’ remain untouched” and goes on to show that the work of many Turkish German authors is more complex than a simple handling of issues of “migration and ethnic difference” (“Juggling Burdens of Representation” 478).

At around the same moment Ören published *Berlin Savignyplatz*, a work by Feridun Zaimoglu, who is considered part of the second generation of Turkish writers, was receiving significant attention. This work, *Kanak Sprak*, sought to establish a sort of pride in “Kanak” identity, by taking the derogatory term and making it into something politically and culturally radical and provocative. Zaimoglu and Ören use quite different strategies to do something similar, that is, to challenge typical portrayals of Turkish Germans. Many of the voices in *Kanak Sprak* parody “Turkishness” in order to question and make fun of the prevailing assumptions about Turkish Germans. By contrast, *Berlin Savignyplatz* undermines assumptions about Turkish German identity by completely destabilizing the subject and thus also destabilizing the whole notion of identity. The novel also questions identity as something that one can independently shape for oneself. Ali İtir, for example, is only able to influence his own subjectivity by rejecting or utilizing the discourses that surround him. As much as Ali İtir insists he is or is not something, others’ fantasies, stories, and imaginations continue to directly or indirectly influence his subjectivity. The same
happens with the narrator, who is more subtly reminded again and again of his status as a “Turk.” Author Aras Ören has also had to deal with being labeled a representative of the *Gastarbeiter*, even though he refused to claim to represent a certain social group or box his literature into the category of *Gastarbeiterliteratur* (Torossi 10).

Tom Cheesman has pointed out the general tendency among scholars to categorize Turkish German literature according to generation with the implication that the most recent Turkish German literature is more “literary” than the writings of the first generation of Turkish immigrants. He shows that this way of categorizing and thinking about Turkish German literature overlooks “the literary historical facts” (“Juggling Burdens of Representation” 474–75). Petra Fachinger’s book *Rewriting Germany from the Margins* is a good example of this type of categorization. She attempts to give reasons as to why the so-called second generation is more “oppositional” and active in “rewriting” established ideas of German national identity (xii). One of the main reasons she gives for this assumption is that the second generation writes “exclusively in German” in this way utilizing the “language of power” in a post-colonial framework (20).

There are multiple problems with this way of thinking of German Turkish literature, but the one that is of most concern here is the idea that writing in German somehow gives an author more authority to question the boundaries of German identity and belonging. Apart from the obvious contradiction in Fachinger’s mode of categorization—some first generation Turkish German writers (like Emine Sevgi Özdamar) have written and do write in German—scholars simply do not always know why an author chooses to write in one language rather than another and this choice may have little to do with how “oppositional” or “counterdiscursive” (xii) a writer’s literature is. Since we can’t assume why Ören writes
in Turkish and not German, there remain open a number of possibilities. What is certain is that Ören’s writing in Turkish has led him to collaborate with other writers (some of them “second generation” Turkish Germans) as they translate his works. He has also not used language to access some imagined German “center” that needs to be penetrated and occupied. Instead, he emphasizes the constructed nature of cultural, political, and national identity and the possibility of addressing a number of different contexts, but especially the German context in which he lives and which he has named his home (Ören, Privatexil ein Programm? 23).

*Berlin Savignyplatz* is a work that can’t be easily restricted to the category of minority literature. It could, for example, be considered within the German framework of the *Wenderoman* as it deals with this period of transition in Germany and how it affected the West German New Left. Yet scholarship dealing with the *Wenderoman* tends to exclude any literature considered minority literature from this category, presumably for its lack of status as truly German literature. This novel could also be considered within the framework of German postmodern literature, as it shares with this type of literature certain characteristics like the characters’ indifference to larger “social, political and historical” events and issues (Mattson 245), and the dominance of the affective mode of melancholy (254).

Although issues of difference and Turkish German identity play an important role in the novel, it is important to pay attention to the ways the narrator relates to difference and identity in the novel. The issue of difference mainly revolves around Ali Itur, and the narrator’s obsession with him also signals to the reader the narrator’s own internal

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4 See, for example, Wehdeking 1995.
struggle as being labeled as different or other. But aside from the narrator’s preoccupation with Ali, we have very few clues from his memories that would make us think he wasn’t German or generally part of a broader group of European Left intellectuals. In his youth, he seems to have been part of his times, part of an intellectual Left movement of writers, artists, and actors who frequented the same social locales in Berlin. But occasionally someone in the story will call the narrator “großerTürke,” or say they have a fellow “Landsmann” for him to meet (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 156).

Ören often references German and European literature, music and culture in his novels and poems. Elizabeth Loentz points out the novel Eine verspätete Abrechnung’s central reference to Homer’s Odyssey (99). She also points out that Ören’s book of poetry Deutschland, ein türkisches Märchen, references Heinrich Heine’s Deutschland, ein Wintermärchen, and argues in a foot note that Ören is identifying with Heine as another "fellow exile and political poet, whose place in the German and European literary canons has also fluctuated”(109). In the title Berlin Savignyplatz Ören references Alfred Döblin’s Berlin Alexanderplatz. He also makes abundant inter-textual references to European artists. To name just a few examples, artist, actor, and writer Robert Wolfgang Schnell (Berlin Savignyplatz 133), musician Robert Biberti (Berlin Savignyplatz 80), and musician Georges Brassens (Berlin Savignyplatz 54).

It is also important to recognize the novel’s references to Turkish literature, without creating a second extra-European literary category. For example, A.Ö. quotes a passage from Refik Ahmet Sevengil as he imagines the thoughts of Ali Itir (Ören, Berlin Savignyplatz 62). The interesting thing about this passage is its exoticizing of Ottoman history, which European writers and artists have done in their references to Turkey for many years. Ören
does not categorize Turkey as non-European. Part of the reason for this is he perceives Istanbul as a historically cosmopolitan city, as both European and Turkish (Ören, Privatexil ein Programm? 9–11; Loentz 103, 106).

Because of these and other complexities within the novel, I argue as others have that Ören’s and many other Turkish German writers works should not be strictly labeled and relegated to minority literature. This literature echoes the cosmopolitan experiences of a growing number of people throughout the world, and the terms “native” and “non-native” have become increasingly nonsensical categories.

Ören has an exceptionally large and diverse corpus of work. He tends to rework ideas or characters from his previous writings. The resurrection of the character of Ali İtr in Berlin Savignyplatz is a prime example of this. In Berlin Savignyplatz Ören not only changes the character Ali İtr, but also the meaning of Ali İtr in Bitte nix Polizei. His "realness" in the 1981 novel is questioned in 1995, and we cannot go back and read Bitte nix Polizei in the same way again. In this sense the author continually changes the entire body of his work as his times change, and with each new text, all the others are also transformed and may be seen with a new perspective. This process of transforming his body of work seems to be Ören’s personal "search for the present time."
Bibliography


