

**THE ‘RUSSIANS’ ARE COMING TO GERMANY.
IRONIC CRITICISM OF EVERYTHING IN WLADIMIR
KAMINER’S *RUSSENDISKO* IN COMPARISON WITH
OLIVER ZIEGENBALG’S HUMOROUS
FILM ADAPTATION**

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Summary

This paper deals with the film adaptation of Wladimir Kaminer’s collection of short short stories titled *Russendisko* into a chronologically construed movie. The comparison between the literary source and the adaptation is based on the following elements: the image of the Soviet Union and the new capitalist Russia, the image of Russian women in Germany, the image of Russian men in Russia, the image of Berlin and Germany, the image of Germans, and the image of immigrants and immigrant workers in Germany. Kaminer behaves like as a pop-cultural, immigrant postmodernist in the multiculturally enriched metropolis Berlin. He includes also tabooed topics, like allegedly ‘second-class’ Jewish immigrants leaving for Germany – and the allegedly ‘first-class’ Jews migrating to the USA, so that the Jewish migration issue both in Kaminer’s narrative and in Ziegenbalg’s adaptation could be compared as well. The film stresses the existence of an (extra)ordinary historical dialectics of identity changeability: in this case the Jews becoming Russians and then returning to Jewishness – and the Russians becoming Jews for opportunistic reasons. Possibly, Kaminer’s text and Ziegenbalg’s adaptation are about relations and constellations that can be found in any other migration issues globally if we use instead of the labels “Jew”, “Russian” and “Germany” the names of any other nationalities and states.

Key words: image studies, Jewish minority in the former Soviet Union, collapse of the Soviet Union, German Democratic Republic, German Reunification, immigration to Germany, multicultural society, foreign workers in Germany, assimilation, biographical film, Wladimir Kaminer, Oliver Ziegenbalg, *Russendisko*, film adaptation of literature, postmodernist opportunist changes of national identity, postmodernist carnival, nostalgia for the Soviet times

»Was meinst du, warum dieser Film überhaupt gedreht wird?«, versuchte ich meinen Freund aufzuklären. »Wie – warum? Aus Albernheit natürlich«, meinte er. »Aus Schadenfreude«, behauptete ich, »ein überaus typisches Verhaltensmerkmal der westlichen Zivilisation.«

(Wladimir Kaminer, *Russendisko*, p. 145)

1. Introduction

The multicultural community of Germany has had in Wladimir Kaminer one of the leading literary and pop-culture stars with Soviet-Russian and Jewish roots. He has claimed to be a German writer who is only privately a Russian. Had he followed the advice of some clerks in Berlin labor bureaus, he would have become an electrician, carpenter or shop assistant. Fortunately, his literary genius has been given a chance to develop. Moreover, his books seem to be an evidence of an unbelievable ease with which Russians and Russian Jews (the latter possibly due to the similarities between Yiddish that they have at least somewhere in the subconscious and the German language) in Germany can attain the command of the German language. The film director Ziegenbalg gave therefore no indication that his “Russians” have problems with German at all. Between Moscow and Berlin there seems to be almost no language barrier. No courses of German as a foreign language seem to be necessary!

Kaminer has been producing interesting books in German, and his Russian compatriots (predominantly) are consuming them. His collection of short stories (originally columns for *taz. die tageszeitung*) titled *Russendisko* is his best-selling book presenting almost 50% of all sold books by Kaminer so far.¹ Amazingly, in Oliver Ziegenbalg’s film adaptation all Russian (Jewish) characters speak excellent, accent-free (let us say: C2 level) German, which could also be interpreted as optimism regarding further foreign language acquisition by Kaminer and his compatriots, and possibly as the disclosure of hidden assimilation agenda of the German immigration policy. Let the Russians (and others from the former Eastern Bloc) see how flawlessly they are going to speak German some day! The Turks, the Arabs, the Slovenes, the Croats, the Czechs, the Spaniards etc. are naturally going to follow the example. Jokes apart, Ziegenbalg managed through costume (and music) design to unequivocally create the aura of an authentic Russianness (including Ukrainianness and Jewishness) on part of his actors and actresses – and the German film star Matthias Schweighöfer seems to have promoted the life’s journey of the

¹ Cf. e.g. WANNER (2005), KAMINER (2010) and MEHNERT (2014).

(im)migrant writer Kaminer in the best possible way – making this film adaptation a biographic film dedicated to the famous migrant author, which is still a unique case in the field of migrant literature² in Germany.

2. The image of the Soviet Union and the new capitalist Russia

In chapter 2 (“Geschenke aus der DDR”), the reader is given information about ridiculous television shows like *International panorama* which were created with the aim to disparage capitalism through showing its social contrasts and praising the socialist achievements of collectivism and solidarity on the other hand. However, some pleasurable, entertaining articles of the Western pop-culture invaded secretly the Soviet Union and gave the impression that the capitalism was not so bad after all. But the final proofs were cases of anti-capitalist television moderators of the pre-Gorbachev era who escaped the Soviet ‘paradise’ and settled in any capitalist country. The socialist irony preached that the citizens of the Soviet Union should be ‘mature’ enough to be allowed to travel abroad. In other words, if one remains not sufficiently ‘developed’, one is forced by all legal means to stay in the realm of the socialist misery.

As part of an ironic film flashback, Kaminer’s wife-to-be Olga Aparina, a ballet dancer in the show *Herr Podorsky findet einen Schal und zieht ihn nicht an*, reports about the Sachalin island where she was born and about miserable infrastructural, social and climatic circumstances there. Whereas we read in Kaminer’s book the following: “Es existierten nämlich nur zwei Jahreszeiten auf Sachalin, der lange Winter und dann, ab Ende Juli, wenn sich der letzte Schnee auflöste, der Herbst.” (p. 37), Ziegenbalg’s film adaptation worsens even the Sachalin climate: “Dort gab’s immer nur

² Migrant literature is synonymous with the notion of the intercultural literature and is seen as a product of mobility and interaction between native and immigrant cultures. Since the migration processes have become global, there are theorists who claim that we deal with “New World Literature”. This paper is not going to provide a theoretical frame for this phenomenon. However, it is advisable to consult e.g. the following: LUCHTENBERG (1989), RÖSCH (1998), RÖSCH (2004), STURM-TRIGONAKIS (2007), TSUCHIYA (2008), LUGHOFFER (ed., 2011) and CORNEJO / PIONTEK / SELLMER / VLASTA (eds., 2014).

Schneestürme. Danach Frost. Und dann wieder Schneestürme.” What the film version does not mention are raccoons which oddly mutated to some kind of Sachalin crocodiles as a result of Chinese (radioactive?) sandstorms (cf. p. 38). Russia’s Sachalin resembles an ice prison everyone wants to leave. However, Moscow seems not to be much better. In chapter 32 (“Doppelleben in Berlin”), Kaminer gives a devastating assessment of life quality in Russia:

Dort, wo ich herkomme, ist das Leben zum Leben ungeeignet. Wegen des starken Windes und der schlechten Verkehrsverbindungen wird jedes Vorhaben ungeheuer mühsam. Schon mit vierzehn ist man oft unglaublich müde, so richtig erholen kann man sich erst mit fünfundvierzig. Ganz oft geht man einkaufen und kommt nicht wieder, oder man schreibt einen Roman, merkt plötzlich auf Seite 2000, wie unübersichtlich das Ganze geworden ist, und fängt noch einmal von vorne an. Es ist ein zeitloses Leben, zu dessen größten Errungenschaften die Möglichkeit zählt, im eigenen Bett zu sterben. (p. 127)

In chapter 11 (“Raus aus dem Garten der Liebe”), Kaminer gives the reader an account of many attempts to flee from the Soviet Union, which the film director Ziegenbalg conceals. The Moscow hippies did not discuss about *sex, drugs and rock’n’roll* – but about emigration whatever the cost and whatever the means! The ultimate dream was to leave the police state approaching inevitable bankruptcy. Although in Ziegenbalg’s film interpretation we get to know Andrej (from Murmansk) who is part of the *troika* of friends, Kaminer mentions in his book another Andrej (a friend from Moscow) who did not believe that an efficient, final escape is possible at all: “Wir sind hier für immer versklavt, egal wie clever du deine Flucht anstellst, die Sowjets werden dich trotzdem zurückholen.” (p. 51) The Moscow Andrej character possibly alluded to the KGB agents who allegedly managed even to return their defected agents worldwide to the Soviet Union (and possibly burn them alive in prison cells with video recording as a warning for other agents). Kaminer’s father teaches his son ironically about the notion of freedom in Russia – freedom can only be a foreigner in the ex-Soviet Russia, it can be only comprehended as a transient opportunity to flee: “Doch die Freiheit ist nur ein Gast hier. Sie kann sich in Russland nicht lange halten. [...] Beeil dich, denn wenn die Freiheit wieder verschwunden ist, dann kannst du lange stehen und schreien: O Augenblick, verweile doch, du bist so schön.” (p. 23) By

contrast, the following screenshots (fig. 1-3) prove the inversion of the literary source intention and show something that could be termed a retroactive nostalgia for the Soviet times – let us call it ‘Sovietostalgia’ – and a subsequent displeasure with Gorbachev:

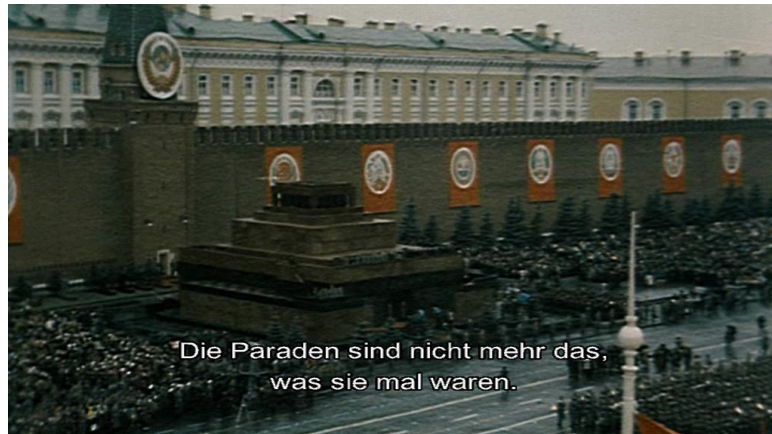


Fig. 1: “The Parades are not any more what they used to be.”



Fig. 2: I think this is because of Gorbachev, Glasnost, World Piece.



Fig. 3. - Well, he is not good at parades...- O shut up!

After the Gorbachev era of freedom 1986-1990, there came a period of rising criminality, energy crisis, and then finally the rise of wild capitalism when even higher education infrastructure could be sold or rent out to the private sector – like in the case of the Krupskaja Pedagogical Institute: “Die Räume wurden an die Betreiber einer Technodisco vermietet.” (p. 115) The salaries for the ex-Soviet university and public sector intelligence were then destabilized, too. According to Kaminer, the new Russian capitalism has appreciated miners much more than intellectuals.³

Ziegenbalg’s adaptation shows one good picture of the (post)modern capitalist Russia in the sense that the screenwriter changed Kaminer’s text in chapter 33 (“Bahnhof Lichtenberg”) with regard to the fate of the Andrej character. Kaminer’s Andrej does not return to Russia, but emigrates further to the USA: “Mein alter Bekannter Andrej, Inhaber der wahrscheinlich einzigen russischen Kette von Lebensmittelläden in Berlin, *Kasatschok*, will sein gut gehendes Geschäft aufgeben und zusammen mit seiner Familie nach Amerika auswandern.” (p. 131) He purportedly did not like the German finance and tax law and believed that Europe hinders his ‘imperialistic’ ambitions. Kaminer describes some of Andrej’s trade tactics that enabled him his professional advancement. Contrary to the image of the inseparable troika of friends depicted in Ziegenbalg’s adaptation, we realize that Kaminer labeled the Andrej character as an old acquaintance having a wife, a son called Mark, and another son underway possibly to be called Dollar. The following screenshots (fig. 4-9) display this significant, Russian-friendly, male bonding celebrating discrepancy between the book and its adaptation:

³ For all the causes of the flight of the ex-Soviet Jews to Eastern Germany and then to the reunified Germany see the following: BELKIN (2010), BERGER (2010), BRINKMANN (2010), FRIEDGUT (2010), GITELMAN (2010), GROSS (2010), KÖRBER (2010), PANAGIOTIDIS (2010) and WISSGOTT-MONETA (2010).



Fig. 4: I have here just nothing. Except my longing for going home.



Fig. 5: The true capitalism, the real capitalism...



Fig. 6: I can find only in Russia.⁴

⁴ This assertion sounds as pure irony. In reality, the Promised Lands of capitalism for the immigrant Russian(s) (and) Jews are primarily Germany and the USA. About the attraction of the German capitalism cf. BERNSTEIN (2010). Besides, true capitalists with Russian Jewish roots seem to never return to Russia!



Fig. 7: Andrej went back [to Russia]. In his honor, we organize...



Fig. 8: a "wild dancing celebrating the Soviet Plan Economy".



Fig. 9: Sure, his sense of business continues in Russia, too.⁵

⁵ It is hard to imagine any success of the Plan Economy compared to the Market Economy and the full support for creative entrepreneurship on all levels in the West.

3. The image of Russian women in Germany

Kaminer depicts a tragicomical profile of Russian women living in Germany. The relationship with them is according to the author connected with continuous obstacles of all kinds. Russian brides are financially too demanding and extravagant, moreover, when they lose their temper, they become like wild beasts! The worst feature of Russian women would be maliciousness and even hatred of men, contemplating their death. (Cf. chapter 14 “Die russische Braut”) Paradoxically, even when it is about only a sham marriage for pragmatical reasons of regulating the stay in Germany, the potential Russian German bride (originally from Kazakhstan) insists on romance, community presentation of the bridegroom and on making herself look pretty. (Cf. chapter 12 “Fähnrichs Heirat”) In turn, the author Kaminer himself could be accused of constructing a much too negative portrayal of the Russian members of the gentle sex or of concentrating exclusively on only negative examples. Nevertheless, in chapter 23 (“Die Frau, die allen das Leben schenkt”), he describes a woman called Katja who overtaxes her husband with her esoterically caused nervous breakdowns, exotic demands and temporary fashions. She traumatizes her husband with every new life style innovation, but also gives ironically and literally birth to new life in many aspects imaginable – without asking anybody whether this would be too much for anybody else’s health and purse.⁶

4. The image of Russian men in Russia

The case of a jealous Russian policeman who killed the wife of a Russian man living in Germany with an axe, but the crime was attributed to a German named Klaus, but nick-named by other prisoners in the remand prison as “der Blut-und-Boden-Mann” (p. 120), shows the Russian prejudice against Germans as being brutal conservative *Heimatkunst* and Nazi racists. The German liking for the Russian language and readiness to travel to Russia in this case turned out to be extremely dangerous. Kaminer

⁶ This characterization of the Russian woman is quite opposite to situation of the suppression of women in other immigrant cultures living in Germany. Cf. HAUSBACHER / KLAUS / POOLE / BRANDL / SCHMUTZHART (2009).

as an ex-Soviet citizen points out in chapter 20 (“Die Mücken sind anderswo”) the statistical data about the Russia of 2000: “Laut Statistik haben in Russland nur 17,8 Prozent der Bevölkerung an ihrem Leben Spaß.” (p. 85) The television program, amongst other things, can be possibly blamed for this pessimistic attitude to life. One of the reasons could be an absence of the counterpart of Hans Rosenthal and of his West German show *Spaß muß sein* (1959-1986) in Russia? Finally, even Russian houses of pleasure do not seem to be places attractive enough to any dream man of any ideal woman: “kein normaler Prinz [würde] jemals freiwillig Russland besuchen.” (p. 171) The Russians have allegedly no *joie de vivre* for many various reasons. In return, the west Europeans readily portray them as wild barbarians. In the deleted scenes of Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), which were presumably deleted for artistic reasons but providentially provided additional fee for the immigrant Russians as background actors, the Russian soldiers of the WWII seem to above and beyond have been depicted as total primitives. In chapter 35 (“Wie ich einmal Schauspieler war”), Kaminer reports about the director’s assistant who offers an additional deal:

Die Regieassistentin kommt und fragt, ob jemand bereit sei, seinen Hintern vor der Kamera zu entblößen, dafür gäbe es zusätzlich 250,- Mark. Die Russen genießen sich, der Bulgare auch. Nur der Deutsche ist bereit. Sein Hintern wird mit zwei Kameras gefilmt – von hinten und von der Seite. [...] die Kartenspieler [haben] draußen ihren eigenen Spaß. Der Verlierer muss fünf Kerzen mit einem Furz ausblasen. So sind sie eben, die wilden russischen Sitten. Die 30 Soldaten sollen sich dabei wie verrückt amüsieren, aber alle schämen sich nur. (p. 142)

5. The image of Russian men in Germany

Kaminer reports in this chapter 37 (“Political correctness”) that the actors of Russian descent were needed in the Berliner Volksbühne theater for most brutal roles, e. g. in *Titus Andronicus*: “Eine Unmenge von Beinen, Händen, Zungen und anderen lebenswichtigen Körperteilen werden auf der Bühne abgehackt. Die Hauptübeltäter, die Barbaren, werden von Russen gespielt. Denn offenbar ist jedem klar, dass Barbaren diejenigen sind, die von weither kommen und Deutsch mit russischem Akzent sprechen.” (p. 147)

The Russians in German casinos are famous, according to Kaminer, for their specific systems: “Russen gewinnen beim Pokern, weil sie ein System haben. Das »russische System« eben. Unabhängig davon, welche Kombination man gerade hat, man macht ein Full-House-Gesicht und strahlt Sicherheit aus, bis die Partie vorbei ist.” (p. 79) It is the system of the best possible outward impression on the onlookers.

In the Russian Disco, the Russians tend to prove that they are able to party unsurpassably well and to be so open as to combine both October revolution and Christmas, both Easter and Passover. However, they usually bring their drinks with themselves (similar to some other Slavic nations) instead of buying them in the disco, and the entrance fee is often an object of negotiation.

6. The image of Berlin and Germany

In chapter 20 (“Die Mücken sind woanders“), Kaminer admits why he likes Berlin:

Auf mich wirkt Berlin wie ein Kurort. In erster Linie wegen des milden Wetters. Im Sommer ist es selten heiß, im Winter nie richtig kalt. Und es gibt ganz wenige Mücken, hier im Prenzlauer Berg eigentlich gar keine. [...] Die Menschen finde ich auch cool. Die meisten Bewohner der Hauptstadt sind ruhig, gelassen und nachdenklich. [...] Die Berliner tun stets, was sie für richtig halten und haben am Leben Spaß.” (pp. 84-85)

Ganz anders ist es hier, wo man unter Umständen mehrere Leben gleichzeitig führen kann, sein eigenes und das eines anderen. Für Menschen, denen ein solches Doppelleben gefällt, ist Berlin die ideale Stadt. (p. 127)

Kaminer means here the liberal, innovative dancing and sex night life without any contact anxiety in Berlin, where even the Russian electrician Sascha can tolerate a gay painter (only because he was brought into this situation by his new girlfriend?), spend hours of discussions with him, even endure possibly inappropriate proximity, and settle any disagreements in a reasonable ways (cf. chapter 44 “Berliner Porträts”). In this sense, he

defines Berlin not as a city of singles, but as a city of visible and invisible relationships:

Berlin ist nicht eine Stadt der Singles, sondern eine Stadt der Beziehungen. Genau genommen ist die Stadt eine einzige Beziehungskiste, die jeden Neuankömmling sofort einbezieht. Alle leben hier mit allen. Im Winter ist die Kiste unsichtbar, im Frühling taucht sie wieder auf. Wenn man sich Mühe gibt und die Beziehungen einer allein stehenden Person lange genug zurückverfolgt, wird man bald feststellen, dass die Person mindestens indirekt mit der ganzen Stadt verbandelt ist. (p. 58)

7. The image of Germans

In the streets, Germans allegedly give no smile at all, which is what is claimed by the Russian telephone sex service and quoted by the author. Kaminer gives further one example illustrating that some Germans appear to be rather unsuspecting and gullible. The German liking for the Russian language could end up tragically like in the case of Kaminer's friend Klaus. His naivety of accepting the idea to visit the wife of his Russian friend in Moscow for the purpose of language exercise brought him into prison. His hospitality towards Russians was not reciprocated at all.

Further, Kaminer gave an interesting summary of German behavior in casinos, like in the *Spielbank Berlin* (chapter 19: "Die Systeme des Weltspiels"):

Die Deutschen mischen sich systemlos überall ein. Sie pokern, hopsen an die Black-Jack-Tische, ziehen dem Automaten den Hebel runter und verfolgen die Kugel in der Rouletteschüssel. Wenn sie gewinnen, freuen sie sich nicht, wenn sie verlieren, bleiben sie gleichgültig. Im Grunde genommen sind sie nicht aufs Spiel aus. Die Deutschen gehen ins Kasino, weil sie weltoffen und neugierig sind. Dort lernen sie die Systeme anderer Nationen kennen, die sie im Grunde aber auch nicht sonderlich interessieren." (p. 82)

And now we approach a very problematic aspect of the German character: the perpetual fascination with Hitler! In chapter 27 ("Nie wieder Weimar" – which sounds like "Nie wieder Faschismus", "Nie wieder Krieg" or "Nie wieder Deutschland"), Kaminer reports that even during the German

Culture Capital manifestation with Weimar as the privileged culture center, the German culture elite could combine (without any visible pangs of conscience) the Buchenwald concentration camp, Hitler's private art collection (famous for his naïve pictures of women, eagles and provincial sceneries with Nazi aesthetics) and Anselm Kiefer's pictures (famous for the pictures *Der Morgenstrahl auf dem Tisch des Führers* and *Operation Seelöwe*) in Weimarer Museum für moderne Kunst. How to come to terms with the Nazi past if the Nazi past can be an object of revisionism or even polishing? It seems that in this case Kaminer's subconscious Jewish humor of survival under gallows is expressed when he does not exclude himself from the company of fellow visitors and endures Hitler's and Kiefer's pictures until the moment of writing his account of the event when he can make understatement and trivialize Weimar like in the following sentence: "Mein Versuch, in Weimar neue Socken zu kaufen, scheiterte. Dann war das Festival zu Ende." (p. 109) Besides, the influence of alcohol on Kaminer's suppressing of emotional reactions cannot be underestimated during his visit to Weimar: "Nur der warme ukrainische Wodka sorgte für ein Minimum an Toleranz." (p. 106) Finally, Kaminer's involvement as a DJ with the Russian Disco and the Red Star hanging from the ceiling could be interpreted against this background as his individual resistance to the Nazi past of his host country. Of course, (neo-)Nazis are also part of the Berlin social landscape with their unintelligent election slogans like "Mal zeigen, was ne Harke ist", but Kaminer knows very well that worldwide there are many similar aggressive political groups where there are mosquitoes too – unlike in Berlin. His irony is again reconciling and charming, avoiding conflicts, not provoking controversies.⁷

⁷ On the humor and paradoxes of the life of the Russian Jews cf. DINER (2010) and KLINGENBERG (2010). In contrast to Kaminer's irony and ludicrous understatement, the migrant literature can also be decisively shaped by emotional coldness, like in the case of certain texts by the world famous author Yoko Tawada, cf. UVANOVIĆ (2017). Could Yoko Tawada's texts ever attract similar film adaptation projects like in the case of Wladimir Kaminer?



Fig. 10: No Russian flags in the *Russian Disco*!

The archivist of everyday life Kaminer mentions further what he heard from a Russian ex-actress who became engaged in the Russian telephone sex service regarding German-Russian phone sex contacts (chapter 34 – “Stalingrad”). The unexpected German customer of the Russian erotic facility turned out to be an ex-SS unit member who even half a century after the WWII feels the drive to rape a Russian woman:

Hör zu: Wir schreiben das Jahr 1943, ein Minenfeld in der Nähe von Stalingrad. Es ist saukalt, die Luft riecht nach Pulver. In der Ferne hört man die Geschütze donnern. Du heißt Klawa, du bist blond, dick und liegst im Schnee. Du hast nur Soldatenstiefel und eine Mütze an. Ich, in der Uniform eines Sturmbannführers der SS, gehe auf dich zu. Es geht loooooos!” (p. 138)

8. The image of immigrants and immigrant workers in Germany

Wladimir Kaminer as an ex-Soviet / Russian Jew and as a more artist-type immigrant and later on a collaborator at the SFB4 “Multikulti Radio” seems not to have suffered too considerably from the German asylum policies. As a DJ ‘clown’ and popular artist, he presumably associated with other immigrant artists: “Viele Russen, die sich in den letzten Jahren im Prenzlauer Berg niederließen, kannte ich noch aus Moskau. Die meisten waren bildende Künstler, Musiker oder Dichter: Menschen ohne Entwicklung, die so genannte Zwischenschicht – ewig zwischen Hammer und Sichel, bereits etwas zerlumpt, aber immer noch gut drauf.” (p. 175)

Clowns normally present no danger to society. However, the musical and literary pop-culture clown Kaminer is interested in the fates of other kind of immigrants who suffer much more from capricious regulations and individual decisions of clerks – who can sometimes create situations resembling those between arrested partisans and rigid Gestapo officers during WWII (cf. p. 103): “Das Asylrecht in Deutschland ist launisch wie eine Frau, deren Vorlieben und Zurückweisungen nicht nachvollziehbar sind. In den einen Asylbewerber verliebt sich das Asylrecht auf den ersten Blick und lässt ihn nicht mehr gehen. Den anderen tritt es in den Arsch.” (p. 87) Kaminer has proved to be a socially critical comedian who readily sheds light on life conditions of less privileged immigrants and immigrant workers, who can more easily than would be statistically normal be suspected of any crimes by police or local inhabitants. He shows sympathy with those who get derided when trying to achieve some economical results even in regular small business (in chapter 26 “Russenmafia-puff”, a simple fast food booth owned by a Russian immigrant worker is ridiculed by Germans as a brothel for the Russian mafia).⁸

Since in the majority of cases the immigrant workers cannot run the German ethnocentric blockade, the German wall of prejudice and a conspiracy of silence (as if they all would be members of some secret monolithic fraternity) – especially in traditional and rustic German bars (cf. p. 99), the immigrants in Germany have developed a sense of mutual solidarity: “und plötzlich entsteht ein Gefühl der Zusammengehörigkeit bei vielen, die nicht zusammengehören und früher vielleicht gar nichts voneinander wissen wollten – Araber, Juden, Chinesen, Türken –, weil sie genau diese »Ausländer« sind.” (p. 73) It seems that the German “fraternity” provoked the emergence of a stronger “brotherhood” of foreigners in Germany, creating thus a bipolar society with native majority and immigrant minority cultures, kind of two sports teams possibly dreaming of fair play. But one team bears on its coat of arms the slogan: “Immigrants from all countries living now in Germany, unite yourselves!” Immigrants’ unity in diversity – forged by the common German ‘enemy’ and possibly in readiness to wage mini cold wars against him / them?

⁸ Cf. GORELIK (2010) for the deterioration of the image of Russians in the German society to the level of a mere ‘mafia’.

One example of intercultural encounter under unusual ecumenical circumstances is described in chapter 39 (“Das Frauenfrühlingsfest”). The German protestant pastor acts here as host of spring festival organized by the Women’s Club of the Potsdam Jewish Community which for its part has included members of the Russian Germans (*Russlanddeutsche*) in the program, too. What is glaringly obvious in this case is that the pastor’s tolerance and hospitality are feigned. On the other hand, the pastor could have been disappointed by the deficiency of any religious contents in the performance. Kaminer bases his (tragi)comical situation exactly on this discrepancy. The Jewish spring celebration could have been associated in the pastor’s mind with Passover festivities. By contrast, the whole show is rather secular and carnivalesque. The Jewish women present new female international fashion with topless models, children’s ballet group displays the little swans’ dance, the choir sings *Schnadahüpfel* criticizes clerks of the Potsdam social bureau and immigration office, and there is belly dance and gingerbread and wine. During the whole program, the pastor remained huddled in his isolated corner: “Nur der evangelische Pfarrer blieb alleine in seiner Ecke sitzen. Auch nach dem letzten Bauchtanz, als endlich auch der Rest nach Hause ging, rührte er sich nicht. Bestimmt blieb er noch die halbe Nacht dort sitzen und dachte über all das nach, was an diesem Tag passiert war.” (p. 154) It could be argued that Kaminer’s attitude towards this German pastor is rather ironic and, at the same time, without any intention to insult. The pastor’s responses to his immigrant guests are empty gestures and masks of silence and distance.

9. Kaminer as a pop-cultural, immigrant postmodernist in the multiculturally enriched metropolis Berlin

Kaminer insists on a playful, multifaceted jocular, he projects fluid identities in motion possibly deceiving one another, he describes the façade and deciphers the core of people and phenomena, he walks through scurrile situations and adapts to absurdities. He may wonder about youths leafing through Ikea catalogues and may consider them all to be like Beavis and Butthead, but his German sounds very close to them: slovenly, amusing and full of adolescent criticism of everything, which has been manifested in

his following works. Live and let live, enjoy the life despite of its imperfections, wage no modernist correcting interventions but invite to problem solving by clownish persiflage and DJ-like party performance. Things and people are constantly in a recycling vicious circle forcing to adapt to fluid or abrupt changes. The profession change is for immigrants very often such a challenging situation. The following case of an ex archaeologist from Russia who, in order to earn his livelihood, became tailor and applied the principle of a creative recycling, i. e. DJ-ing of available older parts of the clothes to some new fashionable garments, can be considered as an illustrative example of creativity applicable in literature as well: “Schneider, der aus Russland kam und eigentlich Archäologe war. Erst in Deutschland, wo es nicht so viel auszugraben gab, machte er eine Umschulung. Nun kaufte der Archäologe auf dem Flohmarkt billige Klamotten, trennte sie auf und nähte aus ihnen neue, pffiffige Kleider, die er in einer russischen Boutique am Kurfürstendamm verscheuerte.” (p. 116)

Only after resettling in a foreign country, the immigrants have a more intense experience of a postmodern market economy and of a fluid identity based on the adaptation to the needs of customers. In chapter 24 (“Geschäftstarnungen”), Kaminer accumulates cases in which his immigrants of various nationalities pretend to be representatives of some other immigrant nationality: Bulgarians pretend to be Turks, the Greeks pretend to be Italians, the Arabs pretend to be Greeks, the American Jews own ‘Japanese’ Sushi bars, and the Vietnamese cigarette sellers – a humorous leitmotif in Ziegenbalg’s film adaptation – come predominantly from the Inner Mongolia (cf. p. 99). The author draws a conclusion about postmodernist conditions of the immigrants’ life: “Berlin ist eine geheimnisvolle Stadt. Nichts ist hier so, wie es zunächst scheint. [...] Nichts ist hier echt, jeder ist er selbst und zugleich ein anderer.” (p. 98) In the metropolis, nothing is unambiguous and one-dimensionally authentic, especially for the immigrants.

The postmodernist playfulness and fluidity of interpretation of one and the same single work of art (in this case a medium-sized concrete shell with a dot in the centre, from where a number of rays reaches the rim) is further demonstrated in the chapter 10 (“Alltag eines Kunstwerks”). Kaminer’s

compatriot sculptor Sergej N. declines any interpretation attempts and recommends instead drinking Vodka. However, his piece of art travels literally and hermeneutically in the course of four year seasons from the Berlin *Kochschule der Künste* to the commission for the Holocaust memorial, then the transfer to the Prague commission for the remembrance of the Czech women raped by the Soviet troops in 1968 failed, then to a Hamburg erotic fair, and finally to a children's playground in Wedding. One and the same object started its semantic metamorphoses as a mother heart expressing the grief of matter, transformed then to a symbolical expression of the pain of the human kind, could potentially express the pain of rape victims, then it was meant to imply the unfulfilled desire for vaginal contacts, and finally it was recognized in the eye of children as a giant snail. Kaminer proves again his postmodernist perspective on every phenomenon which he encounters in the immigrant world of Germany.

10. 'Second-class' Jewish immigrants leave for Germany – the 'first-class' Jews go to the USA

Complete dispersion seems to have taken place at the end of the Soviet Union: "Mein Freund Mischa und ich fuhren nach Berlin. Mischas Freundlin flog nach Rotterdam, sein Bruder nach Miami und Gorbatschow nach San Francisco." (p. 23) The following opinion of a Soviet Jew who opted for the USA about those Jews for whom Germany is the appropriate target country sounds very brutal and very true: "für euch ist Deutschland genau das Richtige, da wimmelt es nur so von Pennern. Sie haben dort ein stabiles soziales System. Ein paar Jungs mehr warden da nicht groß auffallen." (p. 12) But not only tramps were directed to Germany: Wladimir Kaminer defines himself and his Jewish friend Mischa as adventurous romantics: "Unser Plan war einfach: Leute kennen lernen, Verbindungen schaffen, in Berlin eine Unterkunft finden. Die ersten Berliner, die wir kennen lernten, waren Zigeuner und Vietnamesen. Wir wurden schnell Freunde." (p. 25) But the romantic Kaminer soon decided to quit bachelor existence in dormitories and to become a bourgeois man of letters living in Prenzlauer Berg, with a wife and two children, with Café Burger and Russendisko, possibly following in his father's footsteps who

played the role of a foreigner in the Berlin elderly cabaret *Die Knallschoten*, to eventually become a professional sound technician and DJ.

11. The Jewish migration issue in Kaminer's narrative and in Ziegenbalg's adaptation

Contrary to some expectations, Kaminer claims that the Soviets disliked the Jews in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – simply because every Jew in the world, including the Soviet Jews, could use the opportunity to become an Israeli citizen, which was looked upon as a completely correct thing to do. However, the typical stereotype of the Jews is still there: buying things (like beer, cigarettes etc.) cheaper and selling them more expensive – and accusing other Jews of being false Jews! Moreover, Ziegenbalg stresses an extraordinary dialectics of intercultural life: the Jews becoming Russians and then returning to Jewishness – and the Russians becoming Jews for opportunistic reasons.

German Democratic Republic invited the Soviet Jews due to the remorse for not having contributed to the German reparations for Israel in the period 1950-1990. After decades of ignorance, the Socialist East Germans decided to compensate for their negligence and to participate in the international help for the Jews in the disintegrating Soviet Union. To paraphrase the verse “Wem Gott will rechte Gunst erweisen, den schickt er in die weite Welt”, the status of being of Jewish descent promoted and favored an international mobility, besides the opportunity to attain Israeli citizenship. Wladimir Kaminer reports about this turning point as follows:

Die neuen Zeiten brachen an: Die Freikarte in die große weite Welt, die Einladung zu einem Neuanfang bestand nun darin, Jude zu sein. Die Juden, die früher an die Miliz Geld zahlten, um das Wort Jude aus ihrem Pass entfernen zu lassen, fingen an, für das Gegenteil Geld auszugeben. Alle Betriebe wünschten sich auf einmal einen jüdischen Direktor, nur er konnte auf der ganzen Welt Geschäfte machen. Viele Leute verschiedener Nationalität wollten plötzlich Jude werden und nach Amerika, Kanada oder Österreich auswandern. Ostdeutschland kam etwas später dazu und war so etwas wie ein Geheimtipp. (p. 11)

The first chapter of Kaminer's book was transformed in the final part of Ziegenbalg's adaptation as a conversation between a rabbi and the character of Mischa (see fig. 11-19) whose first plan to achieve German citizenship through the marriage with a German woman failed and therefore the plan B – an attempt to prove or pretend his Jewishness – had to be started.



Fig. 11: The Russians visit me every day,

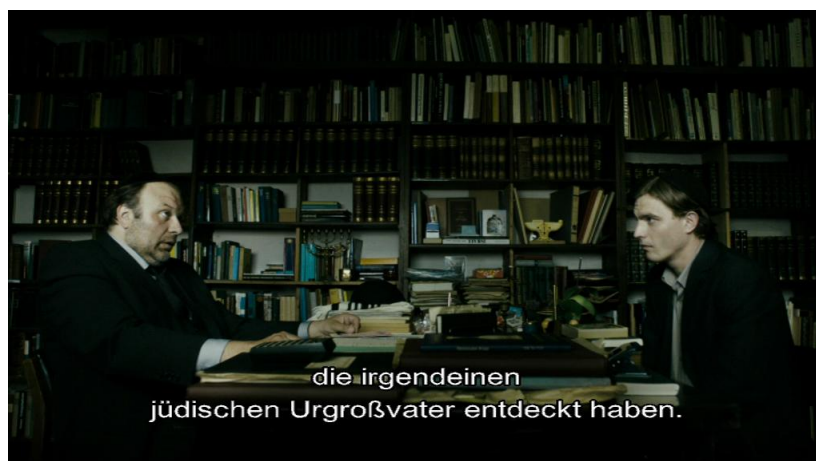


Fig. 12: claiming that they discovered that they had some great-grandfather.

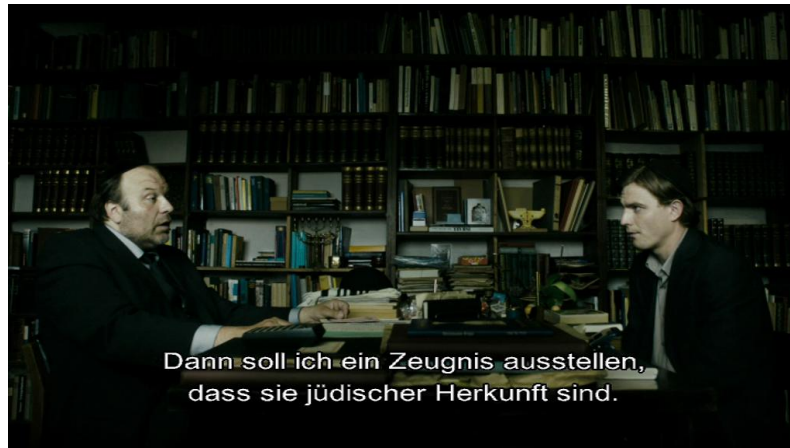


Fig. 13: This means I should issue them the Certificate of Jewish Origin.



Fig. 14: If I don't give you this certificate, you are going to be expelled, aren't you?



Fig. 15: You know what,



Fig. 16: in the past, all Jews wanted to be only Russians.



Fig. 17: Nowadays, every Russian wants all of a sudden to become Jewish.



Fig. 18: I hope you haven't already extra get circumcised for this purpose?



Fig. 19: Yes, it's as smooth as a sausage.

Whereas the literary character Mischa is a Jew just like Wladimir Kaminer, the film character Mischa is a Russian who converts to Judaism for the sake of staying in Germany on the basis of the Jewish privilege as compensation for the Holocaust. The scene from the screenshot above is in Kaminer's literary model placed in the first chapter where it is described as follows:

Am Ende der dritten Woche versammelte sich die Hälfte der männlichen Belegschaft unseres Heimes im Waschraum. Alle platzten vor Neugierde. Mischa präsentierte uns seinen Schwanz – er war glatt wie eine Wurst. [...] Doch die meisten Anwesenden waren von seinem Schwanz enttäuscht. Sie hatten mehr erwartet und rieten Mischa, das mit dem Judentum sein zu lassen, was er später auch tat. Manche Bewohner unseres Heims dachten, das kann alles nicht gut ausgehen und fuhren wieder nach Russland zurück. (p. 16)

We see that the literary Jew Mischa developed a distance toward a deepening of his Judaism (after he had previously agreed on circumcision due to his pangs of conscience for accepting some forms of bribery from the members of the agile Berlin Jewish community), whereas the non-Jewish film counterpart Mischa adapts partly opportunistically to the expectations of the rabbi and becomes even the organist of the synagogue of the Berlin Jewish community and moreover the educator of the young Jewish boys there, which is illustrated in the following screenshots (fig. 20-22):



Fig. 20: Mischa plays organ and gives classes in the synagogue.



Fig. 21: The target to live from music alone could not be realized,



Fig. 22: Instead, music gave him opportunity to stay and live in Germany.

The film character Mischa serves also as a condensation background for another aspect of the Russian Jews' experience with the German Jews and German rabbis who sometimes had to measure the level of Jewishness of the Jews from the Soviet Union. Kaminer reports in his book about strange cases in Cologne where the local rabbi conducted examinations about Jewish (religious) customs and definitions of matzo – forcing some “passport Jews” to circumcise themselves personally without medical help in order to avoid such stressful rabbinic investigation (cf. p. 14). Whereas in the book version it is a lady who clarifies in the first chapter that matzo is a cake made after old recipes from blood of little children, again we see Mischa in the last scenes of the film before meeting the rabbi borrowing the book text as follows (fig. 23-25):



Fig. 23: What is matzo?



Fig. 24: Cakes made after the old recipe, from the blood of children.



Fig. 25: The rabbi is going to faint. That will never work.

The originally non-Jewish film *Mischa* character is forced to comply with Jewish religious formalities to save his existence in Germany. Paradoxically, the “real” Soviet Jew Wladimir Kaminer has been enjoying the privilege of the Jewish determination in his Soviet passport which saved him from procedures designed for checking the immigrants’ Jewishness. Moreover, the Jew Kaminer seems to subconsciously neglect his origins, which could be implied from his comical slip of the ear at 10 o’clock a. m.: instead of hearing that he should write a journal article about the Jewish culture (“Judenkultur”), he believes to have heard the words the youth culture (“Jugendkultur”) in chapter 22 (“Ein verlorener Tag”).

But let me now return to the issue of asylum for Jews in Germany. Even being a half Jew could be sufficient for gaining asylum like in the case of the ex-professor of socialist education at the Krupskaja Pedagogical Institute: “Hier bekam er als Halbjude Asyl und durfte bleiben. Nur eins quälte ihn: dass er nichts zu tun hatte.” (p. 116) Drastically, the German local immigration authorities could on the other hand show readiness to issue exceptional asylum decisions and residence permits for reasons of medical experimentation on human guinea pigs, which is what Kaminer suggests in chapter 46 (“Das Mädchen mit der Maus im Kopf”). Of course, this account could be purely fictional.

12. (Abbreviated) conclusion

The on-screen-Kaminer Matthias Schweighöfer opens the *Russian Disco* with the Jewish song *Odessa* (“Ah Odessa, my Odessa, you are so dear to me. Wherever I go, wherever I am, I still think of you. Your streets and alleyways, where I had so much fun, I yearn for you by day and by night.”).⁹ And Kaminer’s disco could be termed at the same time Ukrainian, Russian, Soviet, Jewish, German, global, hybrid, carnivalesque, and – anti-Nazi. This is *Super Good*, after all. The film music successfully enwrapped the German players playing foreigners into foreigners / immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The film tone is humorous – unlike Kaminer’s own critical literary intentions. The film has skipped many serious issues and reduced itself primarily to happy ending entertainment – which is possibly the simplest and the best means of migrant integration into the German society nowadays. Be happy, keep smiling! Adapt to the everyday postmodernist games!¹⁰ But this adaptation seems to be a mutual challenge: both on the side of ‘aboriginal’ inhabitants¹¹ and the ‘immigrants’. Finally, a new notion of citizenship could be useful, because home for everybody could be everywhere.¹² If one becomes well-adapted and well-integrated!¹³

⁹ Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EQVvgW7kjo&feature=youtu.be> .

¹⁰ OLIVER LUBRICH (2003) could see in this phenomenon also traces of post-colonialism. RIGNEY (2011) speaks about “merging identities” in postmodernist discos of immigrants.

¹¹ Cf. OTTO (2014) for the challenges on the part of the local, native people and the instability of their notion of pure national statehood.

¹² Cf. NAOMI LUBRICH (2007) on this new citizenship.

¹³ Cf. GRAUMANN (2010) and LAGODINSKY (2010) on the Russian Jew’s integration in Germany.

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[Anmerkung des Verfassers: Alle *screenshots* aus diesem Film dienen ausschließlich der komparatistischen Argumentation. Jegliche mögliche abweichende legale Interpretationen, z. B. dass die hier verwendeten *screenshots* irgendwelchen kommerziellen Zwecken oder zur Steigerung der Zitierhäufigkeit dieses Beitrags dienen (können), werden mit allen legalen Mitteln widerlegt. Der Verfasser beruft sich auf internationale Interpretationen von *fair use* Verwendungsweisen von *screenshots* aus kommerziellen Filmen in Wissenschaft und Bildung.]

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**Die ‚Russen‘ kommen nach Deutschland.
Ironische Kritik an allem in Wladimir Kaminer's *Russendisko* im
Vergleich mit Oliver Ziegenbalgs humorvoller Filmadaption**

Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit befasst sich mit der Verfilmung von Wladimir Kaminers Sammlung kurzer Kurzgeschichten unter dem Titel *Russendisko* zu einem chronologisch konstruierten Film. Der Vergleich zwischen der literarischen Quelle und der Verfilmung basiert auf den folgenden Elementen: dem Bild der Sowjetunion und dem neuen kapitalistischen Russland, dem Bild der russischen Frauen in Deutschland, dem Bild der russischen Männer in Russland, dem Bild von Berlin und Deutschland, das Bild der Deutschen und das Bild von Einwanderern und Einwanderern in Deutschland. Kaminer verhält sich wie ein popkultureller, immigrierter Postmodernist in der multikulturell bereicherten Metropole Berlin. Er bezieht auch tabuisierte Themen unerschrocken mit ein, wie zum Beispiel jüdische Einwanderer „zweiter Klasse“, die angeblich nach Deutschland auswander(te)n - und die „erstklassigen“ Juden, die angeblich in die USA migrier(t)en, so dass das jüdische „Emigrationsproblem“ sowohl in Kaminers Erzählung wie auch in Ziegenbalgs Adaption verglichen werden konnten. Der Film betont die Existenz einer (außer)gewöhnlichen historischen Dialektik des Identitätswechsels: die Juden wurden Russen in der Vergangenheit und kehren dann zum Judentum zurück in der Gegenwart - und die ‚echten‘ Russen werden Juden aus opportunistischen Gründen. Möglicherweise handelt es sich um Beziehungen und Konstellationen, die auch in anderen Fragen der Migrantenliteratur und der Migrationen global zu finden sind, wenn wir statt der Wörter „Jude“, „Russe“ und „Deutschland“ die Namen anderer Nationalitäten und Staaten verwenden würden.

Stichwörter: Imagologie, Jüdische Minderheit in der ehemaligen Sowjetunion, Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion, Deutsche Demokratische Republik, Deutsche Wiedervereinigung, Einwanderung nach Deutschland, multikulturelle Gesellschaft, ausländische Arbeiter in Deutschland, Assimilation, biographischer Film, Wladimir Kaminer, Oliver Ziegenbalg, *Russendisko*, Literaturverfilmung, postmodernistische opportunistische Wandel der Nationalidentitäten, postmoderner Karneval, Sehnsucht nach sowjetischen Zeiten