



Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

Migration Cinema in Higher Education: Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974) and Contemporary Student Perspectives

Yüksek Öğretimde Göç Sineması: Rainer Werner Fassbinder'in *Ali: Korku Ruhü Yer* (1974) ve Çağdaş Öğrenci Perspektifleri

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Abstract: Within the context of the Erasmus+ KA220 project MigraMedia, "Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting," the authors of this essay collaborated to assess the impact of a migration film on higher education students. They chose Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, 1974) due to its artistic significance and unique treatment of the migrant experience, combining modernist aesthetics and melodramatic narrative elements. To assess the film's impact on contemporary students, they asked Greek undergraduate students in a film course, coming from various humanities departments, to write short papers about the film and submit a survey. The students' responses indicated that a powerful migration film from a different period, such as *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, can be beneficial in today's classrooms and can serve as a tool for broadening students' social and critical awareness. The essay first discusses the film and its historical context and then presents and comments on the students' perspectives.

Öz: Erasmus+ KA220 projesi MigraMedia kapsamında, "Avrupa Medyasında Göç Anlatıları: Bu makalenin yazarları, bir göç filminin yüksek öğrenim öğrencileri üzerindeki etkisini değerlendirmek için işbirliği yaptılar. Rainer Werner Fassbinder'in *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Korku Ruhü Yiyor*, 1974) filmi, sanatsal önemi ve modernist estetik ile melodramatik anlatı unsurlarını birleştirerek göçmen deneyimini benzersiz bir şekilde ele alması nedeniyle seçmişlerdir. Filmin günümüz öğrencileri üzerindeki etkisini değerlendirmek için, çeşitli beşeri bilimler bölümlerinden gelen bir sinema dersindeki Yunan lisans öğrencilerinden film hakkında kısa yazılar yazmalarını ve bir anket göndermelerini istediler. Öğrencilerin yanıtları, Ali gibi farklı bir döneme ait güçlü bir göç filminin *Fear Eats the Soul* gibi farklı bir döneme ait güçlü bir göç filminin günümüz sınıflarında faydalı olabileceği ve öğrencilerin sosyal ve eleştirel farkındalıklarını genişletmek için bir araç görevi görebileceği yönündeydi. Bu makale öncelikle filmi ve tarihsel bağlamını tartışmakta, ardından öğrencilerin bakış açılarını sunmakta ve yorumlamaktadır.

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Introduction

Migration cinema refers to films and film production that depict, or are shaped by, the experiences of migrants, refugees, and displaced individuals, reflecting on their struggles, cultural transitions, and personal transformations. The history and theory of this form of cinema are influenced by global migration patterns, international conflicts, colonial legacies, social perceptions, and ever-evolving cinematic techniques used to explore themes of identity, belonging, exclusion, displacement, and exile.⁴ In turn, this form of cinema contributes to shaping viewers' mindsets on migrants and migration. In fact, as scholarship has suggested,⁵ when used in education, migration cinema can strengthen intercultural competencies, internationalize students' perspectives, and foster a better understanding of issues such as racism, discrimination, and cultural hybridity. Like other migration arts and media, it can explore, show, and 'translate' migrant experiences, challenge stereotypes, and foster empathy and critical awareness.

With the belief that cinema can serve as a powerful tool for raising students' awareness about global migration issues, including the representation of migrants and the histories of specific migrations, the authors of this essay collaborated on assessing the impact of a migration film on higher education students within the context of the Erasmus+ KA220 project MigraMedia, "Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting." Among numerous films that could be used to educate students, we chose Rainer Werner Fassbinder's (1945-1982) *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, 1974) due to its artistic significance and unique treatment of the migrant experience. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* is considered a landmark in European art cinema and a key film of the world famous New German Cinema, made by a major *auteur*.⁶ Upon its release, the film received remarkable critical acclaim, exemplified by its award of the international critics' prize at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival, and contributed to Fassbinder's reputation among a wider audience.⁷ The film's significance is also reflected in its dialogic relationship with earlier important films and its direct influence on later works.⁸ In addition to introducing students to a major artwork dealing with migration, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* was deemed suitable for a young audience due to its unique blend of modernist aesthetics and seemingly simple story and characters. This simplicity was crafted by Fassbinder to prompt viewers to reflect on and even change their own attitudes towards discriminated people.⁹

To what extent do Fassbinder's strategies have their desired effects on today's higher education students? How do contemporary students read and assess *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, made in a context quite removed in time (1970s) and space (Munich, Germany)? To answer these questions, we asked undergraduate students in the humanities at the University of Crete (Greece) to write short papers about the film and submit a survey. Their responses indicated that powerful migration narratives of a different period can be beneficial in today's classrooms and that historical films can serve as tools for broadening students' social awareness. In the following, we will first introduce the film and its historical context and discuss the film's form and ideas; this discussion will help us better understand students' perspectives on *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. In the second part, we will present these perspectives, including excerpts from three student papers that have been published in full on the webpage of the EU-funded project MigraMedia.¹⁰

Fassbinder and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* in context

Although people's displacements had always been featured in cinema, in Western Europe it was in the 1970s that filmmakers first became fully engaged with the representation of marginalized and discriminated ethnic groups, using

⁴ On migration cinema, see, for instance, Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg, eds., *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Deniz Bayrakdar and Robert Burgoyne, eds., *Refugees and Migrants in Contemporary Film, Art and Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

⁵ For a recent publication, see Masha Salazkina and Yumna Siddiqi, eds., *Teaching Migration in Literature, Film, and Media* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2025).

⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, *Fassbinder's Germany: History, Identity, Subject* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 7, 281.

⁷ Elena Gorfinkel, "Impossible, Impolitic: *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* and Fassbinder's Asynchronous Bodies," in *A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, ed. Brigitte Peucker (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 504.

⁸ Malve Lippmann, Can Sungu and Martin Ganguly, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder Angst essen Seele auf, Lehrmaterial*, CinEd, https://cined.eu/back-office/uploads/DE_Cin_ED_Pedagogical_File_ANGST_ESSEN_SEELE_AUF_8e0571f037.pdf, 23-28.

⁹ Rainer Werner Fassbinder, "At some point films have to top being films": A Conversation with Hans Günther Pflaum about *Fear Eats the Soul* [February 1974], in *The Anarchy of the Imagination: Interviews, Essays, Notes*, eds. Michael Töteberg and Leo A. Lensing, trans. Krishna Winston (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 11-15.

¹⁰ The three papers have been published on the webpage of MigraMedia under the students' names (Elissavet Leonidaki, Maria Markaki, and Ioannis Theodorou) with the students' approval. See, MigraMedia "Teaching and Research Project on Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974, engl. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*) – student essays by Elissavet Leonidaki, Maria Markaki, Ioannis Theodorou (University of Crete), <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/migramedia/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Students-papers-on-Fear-Eats.-English.pdf>. The survey was filled out anonymously, hand written on distributed questionnaires, which are used here with students' consent and are stored at the offices of the MigraMedia Greek partner, the Institute for Mediterranean Studies-FORTH. -.

film to challenge dominant exclusionary narratives of nationhood and citizenship.¹¹ The continuation and expansion of labor migration in countries such as France, the UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands, especially from former colonies, prompted new forms of cinematic expression in depicting migration. Along with film practitioners, critical theorists also challenged what they identified as a predominant colonialist, racist, and patriarchal visual politics in mainstream cinema, whether in Hollywood or *genre* film production elsewhere.

In this context, in France, Moroccan-born Med Hondo (1935-2019) used documentary and fiction to explore the experiences of African immigrants. Hondo's experimental film *Soleil Ô* (France/Mauritania 1970) and the documentary *Les Bicots-nègres, vos voisins* (France/Mauritania, 1974) focused on themes of migrant alienation, labor exploitation, and cultural hybridity. In the UK, Horace Ové's (1936-2023) *Pressure* (1976) chronicled the tensions of second-generation Caribbean youth caught between their parents' diasporic hopes and a hostile British society. During the same decade, other European filmmakers interested in politically engaged aesthetics also took up the themes of immigration, social exclusion, and discrimination.

In West Germany, particularly under the influence of the New German Cinema, directors reflected on the immigrant experience as a crucial element of postwar identity and experimented with its visual representation. Broader social developments played a significant role in their interest in portraying the immigrant experience. From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, a large number of so-called guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*) were recruited from Italy, Spain, Greece, Türkiye, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia to work for the country's reconstruction process and economic expansion. By 1973, approximately 14 million people had migrated to work in West Germany, with 2.6 million choosing to remain when recruitment ended in 1973.¹² Within this context, Fassbinder created two films that placed the guest worker at the center of the narrative: *Katzelmacher* (1969) and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*.¹³ *Katzelmacher* explores the relationship between urban working-class youth and a Greek immigrant in a modernist, defamiliarizing cinematic style. Produced five years later, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* portrays the interracial relationship between a Moroccan guest worker and an older German woman, exposing the emotional isolation caused by xenophobia and racism.¹⁴

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul stands out as a particularly significant contribution to New German Cinema because of its minimalistic cinematography, its acting that references the Brechtian alienation effect, and its focus on highly relevant social controversies in post-war West Germany. By means of its modernist cinematography that makes camera perspective, the "act of looking,"¹⁵ one of its major aesthetic features, gendered and racialized relations between individuals and groups of people are staged in a way highly relevant as a critical analysis of contemporary German society.

However, unlike most *auteur* cinema of the time, Fassbinder employs a melodramatic emotional guidance of the audience through shifts in camera perspective and dialogue. The romance between a Moroccan guest worker and an older German cleaner was inspired by Douglas Sirk's melodramas of the 1950s, which Fassbinder became interested in after 1970. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, in certain ways, is a remake of Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) that tells the love story of a wealthy widow and her significantly younger gardener in a small town in New England.¹⁶ The social environment of the well-respected family in Sirk's film strongly objects to the marriage across class boundaries. However, Fassbinder's melodrama reshapes the plot of *All That Heaven Allows* by incorporating racialized and national differences as central issues that make the relationship more controversial. This approach greatly contributes to audience reflection on racism and stereotyping, as the students' responses will show in the next part of the essay. Additionally, Fassbinder sets the story in his contemporary German society, which is shown to be struggling with its Nazi past while also having to come to terms with the presence of migrant workers and escalating racist anti-Arab sentiments, which

¹¹ For an example of this development in German cinema, which is particularly relevant to this essay, see Malte Hagener, "Migration and Refugees in German Cinema: Transnational Entanglements," *Studies in European Cinema* 15, no. 2-3 (2018): 110-124, DOI: 10.1080/17411548.2018.1453772.

¹² Mark E. Spicka, "Guest Workers, Social Order, and West German Municipalities, 1960-7," *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 3 (July 2019): 620.

¹³ For Fassbinder's films in the context of these developments, see John David Rhodes, "Fassbinder's *Work*: Style, Sirk, and Queer Labor," in *A Companion to Rainer Werner Fassbinder*, ed. Brigitte Peucker (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 184; Lippmann, Sungu, and Ganguly, *Rainer Werner Fassbinder Angst essen Seele auf*, 8.

¹⁴ Markus Heide, "Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974)," *Hospitality and European Film*, 2019. <https://hostfilm.usal.es/index.php/fear-eats-the-soul-2/>

¹⁵ Judith Mayne, "Fassbinder and Spectatorship," *New German Critique* 12 (Autumn 1977): 61-74

¹⁶ Fassbinder's attraction to Sirk's melodramas and reshaping of *All That Heaven Allows* have been extensively studied. See, for instance, Robert C. Reimer, "Comparison of Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* and R. W. Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*; Or, How Hollywood's New England Dropouts Became Germany's Marginalized Other," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24, no.3, (1996): 281-287; Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, "The Price of Heaven: Remaking Politics in *All That Heaven Allows*, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, and *Far from Heaven*," *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 3 (2008): 90-121; Rhodes, "Fassbinder's *Work*: Style, Sirk, and Queer Labor," 181-203; Laura Cottingham, *Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)*, 2nd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 2020), chapter 4; and William H. Mooney, "Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Douglas Sirk: Recreation of *All That Heaven Allows* as *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974)," in *Adaptation and the New Art Film: Remaking the Classics in the Twilight of Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 27-67.

intensified after the PLO-linked attack on the Israeli team at the Munich Summer Olympics in 1972.

In *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, the 60-year-old German cleaner Emmi (Brigitte Mira) meets the Moroccan guest worker Ali (El Hedi ben Salem) in a tavern. Ali is more than 20 years Emmi's junior. Emmi lives withdrawn as an aged widow, while Ali suffers from the isolation of guest workers. Their mutual loneliness brings them together, and, despite facing growing social pressure, they decide to get married. As a result, Emmi is evaded by her neighbors and colleagues, insulted and rejected by her children as a "whore," and banned by the neighborhood grocer whom she has known for years. Meanwhile, Ali experiences incomprehension and ridicule for marrying an older woman. As a way to temporarily escape this pressure, the couple goes on vacation. After their return, their social environment seems to accept the unusual bonding. However, what seems to be progress is triggered by the individuals' and communities' self-interest, as well as new forms of discrimination. Now, the neighbors see the advantage of Ali's physical strength, the colleagues of the cleaning crew re-adopt Emmi back into their circle, and Emmi's son apologizes. As the social pressure on Emmi and Ali diminishes and they return to their previous circles, the bonding and commitment between the two begin to crumble. Eventually, Ali has an affair with his former lover Barbara. Close to the end, the couple meets again in the pub where they first met. While the couple dances, Ali breaks down and is taken to a hospital. A doctor diagnoses a burst ulcer. It is left open how the couple will proceed.

Fassbinder's camerawork, which critically comments on domination, migration history, gender relations, and racism, has been thoroughly examined in the scholarship on Fassbinder's work. His camerawork and audio-visual communication can be used to inspire class discussions on the connection between style and ideological comments. Take, for example, the film's opening scenes. Following the credit sequence, the first images, accompanied by the Arab music heard in the credits, show Emmi opening a door and entering a pub. She faces an almost empty room. At the end of the bar, a group of young men and women stares at the older lady who is clearly "established as an outsider."¹⁷ Emmi sits down at a table distanced from the group. She tells the waitress that she came in as it is raining and that she has passed by often and has wondered about the foreign music. She asks what kind of music it is. The waitress responds: "Arabic. But we also have German songs in the jukebox—almost half of them. But of course (natürlich) they prefer to listen to things from their home." Emmi thinks, looks at the Arab men, and agrees in a friendly way: "Of course (natürlich)." With these first images and dialogue, Fassbinder's film introduces cultural contact and curiosity as topics. The following scenes deepen these themes. One of the German women picks a traditional popular song from the 1950s. As the jukebox starts playing "Du schwarzer Zigeuner" ("You Black Gypsy") she prompts Ali, as a joke, to dance with the "old woman." Emmi accepts and the couple dances while the others stare silently. He tells her that Ali is not his real name, but that Germans call him by this name: "German is master, Arab dog." The pub emerges as an exceptional place of interaction, where the Arab migrant workers are not perceived as threatening and where they come in contact with German women on a friendly and even sexual level. Once Ali and Emmi – and the camera – leave the pub, the German characters react with open dislike to Ali's presence. The camera angle switches to the subjective perspective of those characters – turning them into diegetic viewers, staring disapprovingly at Ali and at the couple. The spectator's attention is drawn to the "act of looking,"¹⁸ which may be read as a critique of ideological domination. In one of the following scenes, Emmi's vicious neighbor is introduced with a semi-subjective shot of her gazing at Ali who then returns the gaze with a frozen face. Once the couple is out of sight, the neighbor quickly informs another neighbor that "Kurowski [Emmi's surname] brought a foreigner into the house (...). Yes! A black man!" The couple, as well as the camera (and by implication, the spectator), move in a world controlled by racism, prejudice, and anxieties.¹⁹

Fassbinder's mastery lies in the combination of such meticulous stylistic choices and a simple melodramatic story that clearly separates evil and innocent characters, moral and immoral attitudes, intended to guide viewers to align themselves with goodness, an open heart, and lack of prejudice. These life qualities, as we will see in the next part of the essay, were identified in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* and appreciated by students. As Fassbinder said in 1974, interviewed about *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*:

It seems to me that the simpler a story is, the truer it is. The common denominator for many stories is a story as simple as this. If we'd made the character of Ali more complicated, the audience would have had a harder time dealing with the story. If the character had been more complex, the childlike quality of the relationship between Ali and Emmi would have suffered – whereas now the story's as naïve as the two people it's about. Though of course the relationships are much

¹⁷ Mayne, "Fassbinder and Spectatorship," 62.

¹⁸ Mayne, "Fassbinder and Spectatorship," 62.

¹⁹ Rüdiger Graf argues that Fassbinder was skeptical of any type of group formation and that *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* is a filmic reflection on repressive functions of communities in society. Graf "'das hinterhältigste und wirksamste Instrument gesellschaftlicher Unterdrückung': Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft in Rainer Werner Fassbinders *Angst essen Seele auf*," in *Die Kunst der Geschichte: Historiographie, Ästhetik, Erzählung*, eds. Martin Baumeister, Moritz Föllmer, and Philipp Müller (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009), 373–392. See also Heide, "Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974)."

more complex, I realize that. But it's my opinion that each viewer has to flesh them out with his own reality. And he has an opportunity to do that when a story's very simple. I think people have to find their own opportunities for change – of course, you can go strictly by ideology, but for the larger audience I don't think that makes much sense. (...)

I think this film forces people – because the love between the two comes across as so clear and pure – to examine their own relationships with darker-skinned and also older people. To me that's very important. You can't make it simple enough. (...)

Yes, we wanted to try to keep it so simple that people would keep thinking: All sorts of things would be possible. I don't consider human beings incapable of change. It's built into the structure of my film that people begin to see, Yes, it is better if things are a bit different. And if you think it out a little more, things can be even better.²⁰

Indeed, the central two characters, discriminated against by others based on a wide range of characteristics such as skin color, gender, origin, work, and love partners, project a disarming childishness and naiveté. Ignorant of real life's harshness, in the first scene at the bar, Emmi is surprised to learn that Ali is treated as inferior to Germans both at work and in society. Later that night, she lets him sleep in her home, because she considers it “inhuman” that six men share a room and because he is “nice.” The next day, she is unable to understand her colleagues' discriminatory comments against foreign workers and native women dating them, while she naively shares with her daughter and son-in-law that she is in love with a much younger Moroccan man. In turn, Ali clearly separates between good and bad behaviors. “Germans with Arabs not good” he informs Emmi in his broken German while they are dancing. He pays for Emmi's Coca-Cola, seeing that she talked “good with Ali,” and later states: “You not old woman. You good. Big heart.” When Emmi's colleague, Paula, is shocked when she finds out that Emmi married Ali, he concludes that “That woman, no good.” While Ali and Emmi treat each other with mutual respect and understanding, anti-immigrant characters around them are depicted as overly mean and insidious. Emmi's neighbors, colleagues, and children, the grocer, and those staring at the couple convey excessive hostility, brutality, and indiscreetness through dialogue and/or behavior and expressions. It is also overtly obvious that those around them are duplicitous, changing their attitude, after the couple's return from vacation, driven by economic considerations: Emmi's son visits her to ask whether she may take care of his children; the neighbors need storage space for their son's furniture as his employer sends him to Norway; the grocer wants to regain customers; and her fellow cleaners need Emmi to support their claim for a pay rise.

Confronted with such negative attitudes, in contrast to two working people who love, respect, and need each other, and hearing throughout the film simple truths (such as that foreigners want to listen to their own music, that six workers sharing one room is inhuman, that being alone is not good, that natives consider foreigners as animals and dirty), the film's viewers are encouraged to align themselves with Emmi's and Ali's warmth and mutual acceptance. Indeed, this will be evident in the students' responses to *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. The film's viewers are also prompted to sympathize with Emmi's landlord's son, who, after his initial warning to Emmi for her prospective marriage (“You're old enough to know what you're doing...”), counters the neighbors' hostility against the couple with the words, “They seem very happy together (...). I fail to see anything indecent. Not at all.”

Eventually, viewers are driven to question Emmi and Ali themselves when they fail to treat each other with the respect and love they had previously shared. They are prompted to feel uncomfortable when Emmi asks Ali to show off his muscles to her colleagues, partaking thus in using him as an exotic, sexualized object, or when she refuses to prepare couscous for him, stating that he “should get used to the way things are done in Germany. People in Germany don't eat couscous,” contrary to her previous understanding of Ali's cultural needs. Viewers are also encouraged to feel disturbed by the auto repair shop scene. When in search of her husband, Emmi enters the garage, where Ali works, and tells him to return home and how much she needs him, one of his fellow mechanics jokes: “Ali, who is this? Is it your grandmother from Morocco?” The men, including Ali, laugh. Then, Ali remains sad and silent, leaving viewers disappointed as they expected him to defend Emmi and their relationship. Ali rejects Emmi – structurally similar to the communities of neighbors, family, and colleagues earlier in the film – and Emmi leaves the garage and walks into the street alone. Contrary to such cases, the viewers' expectations for Emmi and Ali projecting their earlier goodness are rewarded in the film's second-to-last scene. The couple, apparently contrite, reunites and dances in the bar where they first met. By that point, viewers have been encouraged to understand and agree with Emmi's last words to Ali, before he collapses: “When we are together, we must be nice to each other. Otherwise, life is not worth living. (...). Together we are strong.”

Student perspectives

The survey and the short papers on *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* that undergraduate students at the University of Crete

²⁰ Fassbinder, “At some point films have to top being films”: A Conversation with Hans Günther Pflaum about *Fear Eats the Soul*,” 11-12.

submitted indicate that the film led the vast majority of them to align themselves with Emmi's and Ali's warmth and mutual acceptance, feel distanced from anti-immigrant characters, and consequently reflect on issues of migration, consider the needs and challenges of a migrant in a foreign country, and understand the effects of racist attitudes on people's well-being. Both the survey and the papers were submitted in the context of a film course taught by Panayiota Mini in the Department of Philology during the academic year 2023-2024. The course covered the history of cinema after 1970, devoting a module to New German Cinema and including *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* as required course material. Twenty-two students, coming from five humanities departments, filled out the survey,²¹ and seventeen students turned in short papers on the film.

Responses to the survey

The survey, included here as an appendix, first asked students to respond to a similar set of two questions on migration, asking students what they thought when they heard the phrase "immigrant in Germany" and what they considered being the two main difficulties of an immigrant in a foreign country before watching the film and what their thoughts on the same issues were after watching it. The following questions of the survey covered specific issues and characters of the film.

With regards to the phrase "immigrant in Germany," before watching the film, only one student thought of the term "racism" and one student mentioned the relevant notion of "social exclusion." After watching the film, five students used the term "racism," one mentioned "discrimination," three referred to society's negative attitudes and stereotypes, and one to "Anti-Arab attitude." Obviously, the film contributed to making students aware that "migrant," "racism," "discrimination," and negative stereotypes are interconnected notions. Furthermore, before watching the film, four students were thinking about the Greeks who had migrated to Germany (perhaps having in mind the large number of those who went to work in Germany during the 1960s). After watching the film, no student gave the same answer, indicating that the film made them think beyond national (Greek) issues and consider the term "migrant in Germany" in a broader context. Additionally, before watching the film, five students thought of an individual who had migrated to Germany for economic reasons – in search of a better job and more work opportunities – and four mentioned an individual in search of a better life. Interestingly, after watching the film, the total number of these answers dropped from nine to only one as the answers now referred to people facing racism, discrimination, and negative attitudes.

Changing opinions after watching Fassbinder's film are also evident with regard to the question about a migrant's main difficulties/challenges in a new country. Before watching the film, 15 students (approximately 68%) considered one of the two main difficulties to be the new language. This number significantly dropped to 3 (approximately 13,6%) after the students watched the film. An opposite fluctuation appeared with regard to the difficulties stemming from racism, prejudice, and lack of acceptance. Before watching the film, a total of eleven students considered racism and negative attitudes to be the top two difficulties. After watching the film, 18 answers mentioned racism and negative attitudes, while three more answers referred to lack of acceptance, two to prejudice, one to ghettoization, one to stigma, and one to xenophobia. Apparently, the experience of the film made students think that what one could consider a problem, such as the new language, stemming from the migrants' different background, was minimal compared to the effects of prejudice and racism coming from the new society.

The responses to questions about the characters and the plot showed that students were taken in by Fassbinder's clear-cut division of good and bad characters. All students described the grocer's attitude in most negative terms, including "racist," "xenophobic," "self-serving," "harsh," "aggressive," "hostile," "prejudiced," "obscene," "slimy," "annoying," "insolent," "unethical," "unfair," "two-faced," "ignorant," and "small-minded." Similarly, the attitude of Emmi's colleagues was described with words such as "racist," "stereotypical," "prejudiced," "ill-intentioned," "narrow-minded," "two-faced," "self-serving," "exploitative," "rude," "manipulative," "unfair," "unreasonable," "hostile," "harsh," "malicious," "petty," "backward," and "indiscriminate." To both questions, the single rather detached answer described these characters' attitudes as "ordinary," most likely referring to real people's common tendency to belittle and stereotype foreigners. At the other end of the spectrum, the vast majority of the students described Emmi's attitude to Ali in positive terms ("affectionate," "compassionate," "open-hearted," "kind-hearted," "progressive," "inclusive," "open-minded," "kind," "humane," "well-meaning," "maternal," "helpful," "supportive," "understanding"), with only a few answers finding it "complicated," "somewhat strict," and "manipulative." Interestingly, the students did not relate to the doctor at the hospital, who, as one could say, is rather sympathetic to Emmi and Ali. In addition to "formal," "professional," "objective," and "calm" (11 such answers in total) students described it as "cynical," "cold," "impersonal," "indifferent," "bad," "abrupt," "racist," "stereotypical," and "unprofessional," with only one student using

²¹ The survey results show that the department of study as well as sex, age range, and nationality were not factors in shaping the students' responses.

the adverb “sympathetic.” It seems that the ingredients of melodrama that Fassbinder used in his work, with the division of characters into good and bad (except for the doctor), succeeded in shaping students’ emotions and judgment in favor of Emmi and Ali and against those treating them in racist ways. As the doctor does not act in an emotional, either deeply positive or deeply negative, way, like other characters, the role remained unclear to the students.

Students’ answers to the question “Which scene in the film do you consider the strongest in terms of the commentary on immigrants?” also suggest that Fassbinder’s portrayal of pronounced racist behavior had an impact on them. Some of the scenes that the students singled out included those of the grocer; Emmi’s co-workers describing foreigners as dirty and pigs, treating Ali as an exotic object, and excluding a new foreign girl from Yugoslavia from their group; Emmi’s children reacting with insults and physical aggression to her announcement of marriage; and people staring at, avoiding, or rejecting the couple. At the same time, in response to the questions regarding Emmi’s and Ali’s needs, students described them in a compassionate manner. They considered Ali’s needs for respect, understanding, love, warmth, integration, acceptance, stability, family, and a normal life, while Emmi’s needs were seen as love, companionship, support, respect, acceptance, protection, tolerance, and honesty.

Students’ overall assessment of the film’s impact on them regarding *the needs of migrants in a foreign country*, on a scale from one (not at all) to five (very much), was distributed as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
-	3 students	8 students	7 students	4 students

Students felt much more influenced by the film regarding *the problems of migrants in a foreign country*, which, as we have seen earlier, were identified as issues such as racism, negative attitudes, prejudice, intolerance, and xenophobia. On the same scale, their responses were distributed as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
-	2 students	3 students	9 students	8 students

Student papers

The assignment of a short paper on *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* provided students in the same course with the opportunity to develop further their thoughts on the representation of migrants in the film and connect it to contemporary developments. The assignment asked students to address the following in their papers: 1. How is the migrant worker Ali treated by German society in Fassbinder’s *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (and migrant workers in general)? What stereotypes are attributed to him, and who participates in perpetuating these stereotypes? 2. What impact do the attitudes of the environment, society, and the state have on Ali? 3. How does the film prompt us to reflect on our own attitudes towards foreigners and immigrants in our countries today? All seventeen papers turned in showed sensitivity to issues related to racism, social exclusion, and the reproduction of stereotypes. They indicated that the film’s plot and narrative situations helped the students think about the many challenges that migrants face in a new environment, explore the harmful impact of stereotyping on people’s lives and emotional well-being, and draw parallels between Fassbinder’s Germany of the 1970s and today’s society.

Three of these student papers were selected for publication on the MigraMedia webpage²² and are accessible in the original Greek and in English translation.²³ The papers, authored by Elissavet Leonidaki, Maria Markaki, and Ioannis Theodorou, show a sensitive engagement with the film and with a social setting far removed from the students’ time and lived experience and perceptively link the ‘historical’ film to their/our contemporary global condition.

Leonidaki concludes her analysis as follows:

In addition to the psychological consequences of deep-rooted racism, the physical toll of grueling work for Ali (and migrants in general) becomes evident at the end of the film. After a breakdown, Ali is taken to the hospital, where it becomes clear that, while he may be saved this time, another breakdown is inevitable as the context of “modern slavery”

²² MigraMedia, <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/migramedia/>

²³ MigraMedia, “Teaching and Research Project on Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974, engl. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*)-student essays by Elissavet Leonidaki, Maria Markaki, Ioannis Theodorou (University of Crete),” (2024), <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/migramedia/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Students-papers-on-Fear-Eats.-English.pdf> and <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/migramedia/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Students-papers-on-Fear-Eats.-Greek-version.pdf>.

remains unchanged. As a result, the hospital doctor bids farewell to Emmi, telling her “Auf Wiedersehen,” which means “See you again.”

Fassbinder’s masterpiece is timeless and unfortunately always relevant. It serves as a reminder of the difficulty of accepting the different, the ‘foreign.’ In today’s world, where immigration is a pressing issue and xenophobia, neo-fascism and anti-immigration policies are on the rise globally, the film helps us understand the feelings and struggles of immigrants. It encourages us to view them differently, with empathy and support as they are trying to integrate into the social and professional life of their new country, under adverse circumstances.

In conclusion, *Angst essen Seele auf* reminds us that it is our duty to recognize that migrants are victims of the problematic situations in a global society. In this society, conditions can easily be reversed, putting any of us in the position of immigrants within a single moment. Let us feel deep within ourselves the meaning of the film, that love can be an answer, perhaps the most important one.²⁴

Markaki concludes her paper by discussing the current situation in Greece:

Unfortunately, Fassbinder’s film remains relevant today. Many people come to Greece seeking a better life, one with higher wages, more job opportunities and peaceful living conditions, away from poverty, hunger, and, in some cases, war. Greek society is filled with stereotypes and perceptions that were also present in the 1970s film. ‘The foreigners, the unwashed, the lazy criminals who have come here to corrupt our culture’ are just a few examples. Sadly, these parallels are also seen on a larger scale. Most migrants in Greece work in manual labor, such as farming and construction, often without insurance or fair pay compared to local workers (as seen in the case of migrant workers in Manolada a few years ago). Furthermore, many foreigners struggle to find a home on their own, due to financial constraints or racist landlords, leading to overcrowded living situations. These examples highlight the hardships immigrants face in contemporary Greek society. This is why the film *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* is a powerful tool in combating racism, even today. It sheds light on “the other side,” the point of view and the voice of those who are subjected to and endure these hardships. The film captures the fact that, above all, immigrants are ordinary people -- they dream, they love, they suffer.²⁵

Theodorou’s paper shows that the film inspired him to think about racism in contemporary Europe:

Fassbinder’s critique of social exclusion and racism in German society aims to explore the identity of the European citizen, a search that has become increasingly relevant in the present era. Modern Europe is grappling with strong populist nationalism and escalating anti-refugee policies. The economic crisis affecting many cities, along with drastically rising unemployment rates and the impoverishment of third-world countries, creates a nightmarish cocktail that fuels racism and xenophobia. Immigrants are no longer met with sympathy for the challenges they face as they seek opportunities in what is supposed to be a civilized world; instead, they are seen as threats. Borders are fortified with fences, deportations are enforced, and those forced to return to their countries face a bleak future. Boats carrying women and children are left to their fate with victims reduced to mere statistics. At the same time, refugees are crammed into overcrowded structures, living in squalor. Attacks on foreigners are on the rise, with hatred spreading.

In our country, as in the rest of Europe, the phenomenon of racism is reaching alarming proportions. This is evident not only in people’s everyday interactions but also in the emergence of parties and political organizations that promote this ideology. There is an urgent need, through education, dialogue, and solidarity with our fellow human beings, to return to the ideals of a multicultural European society that embraces, empowers, and stands by those in need, celebrates diversity, and provides equal opportunities, regardless of ideology, gender, or color.²⁶

The excerpts from the student papers impressively demonstrate that Fassbinder’s film from the 1970s inspired a comparative critical perspective on current events and political constellations, as well as on the need for inclusion and support for migrants. The papers linked the racist attitudes in the film with the rise of neo-fascism, xenophobia, anti-immigration policies and parties, and unfair working and living conditions for foreigners in present-day societies. At the same time, they emphasize how *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* encourages audiences to view migrants with empathy and support, understand their hardships and disillusionments, and recognize that all human beings are equal and share similar needs including love and respect.

Conclusion

The situation of migrant workers and their descendants in German society has changed dramatically since the West Germany of 1974, with second- and third-generation migrants now participating in most spheres of civil society, politics, and the media. However, more than fifty years after its premiere, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, as the students’ papers and

²⁴ MigraMedia, “Teaching and Research Project on Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film *Angst essen Seele auf*,” 4-5.

²⁵ MigraMedia, “Teaching and Research Project on Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film *Angst essen Seele auf*,” 7.

²⁶ MigraMedia, “Teaching and Research Project on Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film *Angst essen Seele auf*,” 9-10.

responses to the survey questions illustrate, still provides a complex and very useful cinematic exploration of the mechanisms of anti-migration sentiments, anti-Arab prejudices, and racism.

As we have seen, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* prompted students to become aware and internalize that immigration, racism, discrimination, and negative stereotypes are interconnected. It made some of them think of migration beyond their country's context to a broader perspective. And it made some of them consider that objective challenges for migrants, such as learning a new language, may be more manageable compared to discrimination, exclusion, and stigmatization based on subjective opinions of the *Other*. Through its melodramatic elements, Fassbinder's film also encouraged students to associate acceptance and respect towards foreigners with goodness, and stereotyping and marginalization with viciousness. Moreover, the student papers revealed that *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* can help students easily connect historical migration with present situations. Combined, these aspects of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, along with its significance as a work of art, make it a migration film of great pedagogical value.

More results from in-class higher education activities conducted in various countries and institutions, using this or other migration films, will help us gain a fuller understanding of cinema's potential to raise social awareness. For such critical reflection, different genres of historical and contemporary films, such as art house films or comedies, may be employed in educational practice. For example, Aki Kaurismäki's *Toivon tuolla puolen (The Other Side of Hope, 2017)*, concentrating on the experience of Syrian refugees in Finland, uses similar "alienation effects" in acting as *Fear Eats the Soul*, while creating, below its "reductive imagery and dialogue," moments of hope for a livable future for the refugees.²⁷ Yasemin Şamdereli's comedy *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland (Almanya: Welcome to Germany, 2011)* introduces the history of so-called "guest workers" in an entertaining, as well as critically reflective way. Such comedies, set in specific historical, national and regional contexts, might make students from other local contexts reflect on the identities of second and third generation descendants of immigrants. Additionally, activities that go beyond issues of film narrative, which were the focus of our survey and paper assignment, and explore how film style contributes to conveying social commentary, could enhance students' appreciation of the interplay between cinema in particular (and art in general) and people's broadening of intercultural perspectives. Migration cinema in education emerges as a vast field for research, empirical studies, and theoretical reflection, which is much needed in a world where racism in various forms is still present.

Extended Abstract

Migration cinema depicts, or is shaped by, the experiences of migrants, refugees, and displaced individuals. In turn, it contributes to shaping viewers' mindsets on migrants and migration. With the belief that this form of cinema can serve as a powerful tool for raising students' awareness about migration, the authors of this essay assessed the impact of a major migration film, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf (Ali: Fear Eats the Soul, 1974)* on higher education students within the context of the Erasmus+ KA220 project MigraMedia, "Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting." Specifically, they asked humanities undergraduate students at the University of Crete to write short papers about the film and complete a survey. The essay first discusses the film's form and ideas and then presents the students' perspectives.

In introducing Fassbinder's film, the essay highlights its significance in world cinema and its relationship to Douglas Sirk's film melodrama *All That Heaven Allows (1955)*. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* reshapes the plot of *All That Heaven Allows* by incorporating racialized and national differences as central issues in the romantic affair, and subsequent marriage, of the film's central couple, a Moroccan 'guest worker' (Ali) in Germany and a much older German working-class woman (Emmi). In terms of style, Fassbinder's camerawork critically comments on domination, migration history, gender relations, and racism. However, Fassbinder's mastery lies in the combination of a meticulous style and a simple, melodramatic story that separates evil from innocent characters, moral from immoral attitudes, intended to guide viewers to align themselves with goodness and the lack of prejudice. The film's central two characters, discriminated against by others based on skin color, gender, origin, work, and love partners, project a disarming childishness and naiveté. At the same time, the anti-immigrant characters around them are depicted as overly mean and insidious.

The survey and the papers on *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* that undergraduate students submitted indicate that the film indeed led the vast majority of the students to align themselves with Emmi's and Ali's warmth and mutual acceptance, feeling distanced from the anti-immigrant characters. The film contributed to making students aware that "migrant," "racism," "discrimination," and negative stereotypes are interconnected notions. It also prompted them to think beyond national

²⁷ See Markus Heide, "Aki Kaurismäki's *The Other Side of Hope (2017)*," *Hospitality and European Film*, 2019, <https://hostfilm.usal.es/index.php/aki-kaurismaki-the-other-side-of-hope/>

issues and consider the term “migrant in Germany” in broader contexts. Furthermore, it contributed to making them consider the difficulties faced by immigrants in a foreign country, stemming from racism, prejudice, and a lack of acceptance. The students were also drawn to Fassbinder’s clear-cut division of good and bad characters. The melodramatic elements used by Fassbinder shaped students’ judgment in favor of Emmi and Ali and against those who treated the two characters in racist ways. These elements also helped students understand the central couple’s needs for love, warmth, integration, acceptance, stability, family, and honesty. The short papers also demonstrated sensitivity to issues related to racism, social exclusion, and the perpetuation of stereotypes. They indicated that the film helped the students explore the harmful impact of stereotyping on people’s lives and draw parallels between Fassbinder’s Germany of the 1970s and today’s society. The papers linked the racist attitudes in the film with the rise of neo-fascism, xenophobia, anti-immigration policies and parties, and unfair working and living conditions for foreigners in present-day societies; and they emphasized how *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* encourages audiences to view migrants with empathy and support.

The authors of the essay conclude by summarizing the great pedagogical value of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. The film prompted students to reflect on the interconnectedness of immigration, racism, discrimination, and negative stereotypes; think of migration beyond their country’s context to a broader perspective; consider the challenges faced by migrants due to discrimination, exclusion, and stigmatization; associate acceptance and respect towards foreigners with goodness, while linking stereotyping and marginalization with viciousness; and connect historical migration with present situations. The results of using *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* in the classroom also indicate that migration cinema in education is a vast field for research, empirical studies, and theoretical reflection, particularly important in a world where racism in various forms is still present.

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Appendix²⁸



Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting
Erasmus+ Projekt 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000154375

QUESTIONNAIRE

about the film *Angst essen Seele auf* by Rainer Werner Fassbinder
in the context of the course KPAF103 Film History III
University of Crete, Fall Semester 2023-2024

Nationality:
Age:
Gender:

Please provide brief answers to the following questions

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

1. What did you think when you heard the phrase "immigrant in Germany"?	
2. What did you consider to be the two main difficulties of an immigrant in a foreign country?	1. 2.

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

1. What do you now think hearing the phrase "immigrant in Germany"?	
2. What do you now consider to be the two main difficulties of an immigrant in a foreign country?	1. 2.



²⁸ The questionnaire was distributed in Greek and is here translated into English.





Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting
Erasmus+ Projekt 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000154375

ON THE FILM	
How would you characterize the grocer's attitude (in two adjectives)?	1. 2.
How would you characterize the attitude of Emmi's colleagues (in two adjectives)?	1. 2.
How would you characterize Emmi's attitude towards Ali in two adjectives?	1. 2.
How would you describe the doctor's attitude?	1. 2.
What needs does Ali have, in your opinion?	1. 2. 3.
What needs does Emmi have, in your opinion?	1. 2. 3.
Which scene in the film do you consider the strongest in terms of the commentary on immigrants?	
Why, in your opinion, did Fassbinder choose the immigrant to be non-white?	
How much did this film influence your opinion about the needs of immigrants in a foreign country? From one (not at all) to five (very much):	
How much did this film influence your opinion about the problems of immigrants in a foreign country? From one (not at all) to five (very much):	

Thank you for your participation!



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