

Sonderdruck aus

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In der Welt der Proteste und Umwälzungen

Deutschland und die Türkei

Mit 9 Abbildungen

V&R unipress

ISBN 978-3-8471-0388-2

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Black Virgins, Close Encounters: Re-examining the 'Semi-Documentary' in Postmigrant Theatre

Abstract

In 2006 the premiere of Feridun Zaimoglu and Günter Senkel's play *Black Virgins* (*Schwarze Jungfrauen*) became the first play by a Turkish-German writer to be featured on the front cover of Germany's influential theatre magazine, *Theater heute* (*Theatre Today*). *Black Virgins* consists of interview-based monologues reworked into Zaimoglu's "artistic language" and has generally been received as "semi-documentary theatre." However, the director of the premiere, Neco Çelik, claims that *Black Virgins* "should not be read in a documentary [...] manner." This is reflected in the use of references to science fiction films, particularly Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of A Third Kind*, and in Çelik's use of sound, costume and *mise-en-scène*. Drawing on personal interviews with Çelik, as well as reviews, scripts and a video-recording of the premiere production, this article explores the ways in which the intertextual, intermedial and transnational references to science fiction present in the premiere of *Black Virgins* provide a new mode of understanding this landmark production. It argues that close attention to Çelik's non-documentary articulation of *Black Virgins* can be used not only to shed new light on the play's reception, but also to frame audiences' 'close encounter' with the Muslim woman in unexpected ways.

"Everything is true. Almost everything is true"¹

In 2006, the premiere of Feridun Zaimoglu and Günter Senkel's *Black Virgins* (*Schwarze Jungfrauen*), directed by Neco Çelik, became the first play written by a Turkish-German playwright and directed by a Turkish-German director to be the

¹ "[A]lles ist wahr. Fast alles ist wahr." (HAU, 2006: [3]; Zaimoglu / Senkel 2006: 37). The translation of the title of *Schwarze Jungfrauen* is taken from Sieg (2010). Unless otherwise stated, all other translations from the German are my own.

feature on the front cover of influential German theatre magazine *Theater heute* (*Theatre Today*).² The play's success heralded the arrival of a new movement in German theatre: one actively positioning itself as "postmigrant theatre" ("postmigrantisches Theater"). This theatre often thematizes migration and postmigrant life in Germany and aims to redress the lack of postmigrant representation on German stages by promoting postmigrant artists and perspectives (Kulaoğlu 2010: 162; Sharifi 2011: 38–40; Sieg 2010: 149–150). It has been championed by Shermin Langhoff, who commissioned *Black Virgins* as part of a new theatre festival titled *Beyond Belonging*, which first took place at the HAU theatre complex in Kreuzberg, Berlin. The success of this festival and productions like *Black Virgins* helped lead to the establishment of the Ballhaus Naunynstraße, which opened in Kreuzberg in 2008 under Langhoff's leadership (Kulaoğlu 2010: 160; Sharifi 2011: 38–40). The Ballhaus has been extremely successful not only in its aim to provide a forum for aesthetically experimental "postmigrant theatre," but also in raising serious questions about the politics of employment within the theatrical establishment and whom the state-funded stages are there to serve (Sharifi 2011: 42–44; Haakh 2011: 11). This success is reflected in the fact that Langhoff, together with Jens Hillje, became the artistic director of Berlin's renowned Gorki Theatre in 2013. *Black Virgins* continued to be performed on and off in its premiere production at the Ballhaus until 2011, albeit with some alterations to the casting. In 2014 the production followed Langhoff to the Gorki Theatre, marking it as perhaps the flagship production for postmigrant theatre.

The full dramatic text of *Black Virgins* consists of ten monologues based on interviews with highly religious Muslim women living in Germany, which were reworked into Zaimoglu's characteristic "artistic language" ("Kunstsprache"; Zaimoglu quoted in Behrendt 2006: 41).³ The resultant text is often extreme in several senses: politically, linguistically, and in the explicit content concerning the women's sexuality. In Monologue 6, for example, the speaker exclaims:

I don't bandage myself up like a mummy, I am not ... how do you say? ... abstinent. God forgive me, I have to say it: I still fuck because I know it doesn't damage my faith. I pray five times a day. I fast in Ramadan and I am a committed Muslim.

Ich trage kein Mumientuch, ich bin nicht ... wie sagt man? ... enthaltsam. Gott verzeih' mir, ich muß es sagen: ich ficke immer noch, weil ich weiß, es schadet nicht meinem

2 In the spelling of Turkish names within this article, I use the germanised variant (e.g. Zaimoglu rather than Zaimoğlu, Shermin rather than Şermin) only when this spelling seems to be actively used by the person in question.

3 This language is identified as Zaimoglu's in the source quoted here. Senkel was unknown as an author in his own right prior to his collaboration with Zaimoglu and Zaimoglu remains the more public face of the duo, thus his reputation has tended to colour the reception of their work as dramatists.

Glauben. Ich bete fünf Mal am Tag. Ich faste im Ramadan, und ich bin überzeugte Moslemin. (ellipses in orig.; Zaimoglu / Senkel 2006: 31)⁴

The “black virgins” are thus no saints, but rather individualised figures who complicate received ideas of religious, cultural and sexual purity. In doing so, these figures point to the intersections between discourses on these three issues (Sieg 2010: 152ff; El Hissy 2012: 120; Matthes 2010: 206).

Most scholars have acknowledged the blend of fact and fiction present in the dramatic text of *Black Virgins* as typical of Zaimoglu's earlier sole-authored prose work (see, in particular, Matthes 2010: 207; Halle 2009: 44; Kraft 2011: 132, 134). However, in the shift from prose to a theatrical context, the use of monologues supposedly developed from “real” interviews has led to *Black Virgins* being termed “semi-documentary theatre” (“semi-dokumentarisches Theater”; Behrendt 2006: 40). In this paradoxical label, the qualifying prefix “semi” both points to, and elides, the interventions made by Zaimoglu and his co-dramatist Senkel in the monologues. According to Katharina Keim, the terms “semi-documentary theatre” and “postdramatic documentary theatre” have been used somewhat interchangeably in Germany in recent years (Keim 2010b: 133). Although aware of Zaimoglu's authorial *modus operandi*, both Claudia Breger and Ingrid Hentschel therefore discuss the world premiere of *Black Virgins* in the context of the historical tradition of, and contemporary trend for, documentary theatre in Germany (Breger 2012: 232–234; Hentschel 2007: 157, 159–161).⁵ This is perhaps unsurprising given the popularity in Germany over the past ten years of documentary theatre which uses verbatim material.⁶ However, the re-labelling of Zaimoglu's work in particular which this entails has significant implications for the reception of the play. Rather than differentiating or distancing the play from other contemporary documentary practices in the theatre, the term “semi-documentary” arguably functions to anchor the play firmly within that field of practice.

This explains a certain anxiety that pervades the secondary literature on the play about the relationship between the anonymous interview sources and the subsequent artistic product. Scholars such as Katrin Sieg, Frauke Matthes, and İpek A. Çelik all address the question of “who speaks” in *Black Virgins* and identify the potentially problematic “ventriloquism” of the female figures in-

4 Copyright © 2013 by Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, Reinbek bei Hamburg. Aufführungsrechte [Production rights]: Rowohlt Theater Verlag, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Hamburger Straße 17, 21465 Reinbek. The full set of monologues is now also available as an e-book from Rowohlt. This line is also partially quoted in slightly different translations by Katrin Sieg (2010: 159), Breger (2012: 233), and İpek A. Çelik (2012: 122). İ. A. Çelik notes that these lines are those perhaps most frequently quoted in reviews.

5 Sieg also discusses the play mainly as documentary theatre (Sieg 2010: 149; Sieg 2011: 174).

6 For examples see Keim (2010b: 128, 134–135).

volved by Zaimoglu and Senkel as a key concern (Sieg 2010: 171–172, 185; Matthes 2010: 201–202; İ. A. Çelik 2012: 124–126). Their work highlights that, for audiences unlikely to be familiar with academic debates on Zaimoglu's earlier works, the very public narrative of the play's origin in interviews may well lead to a popular reception of the play as an "authentic" portrayal of Muslim women in Germany (Sieg 2010: 171; Matthes 2010: 201, 209; Breger 2012: 232; Halle 2009: 44). The semi-documentary labelling was thus the source of some contention about the production during the judging of the Mülheim Prize for New Dramatic Writing (Mülheimer Dramatikerpreis), for which the play was nominated in 2007 (see also Hentschel 2007: 160 n. 117). Jury member Til Briegleb voted against the play being selected as overall winner for the following reasons:

I find the play manipulative in its manner of construction. I think that when you see it and have no background information, you have no idea whether what you are being shown here is documentary theatre, whether it has been devised on a wild whim of the authors, [or] what they really want to achieve with this.

Weil ich die, in ihrer Konstruktionsart und -Weise, manipulativ finde. Ich finde, wenn man das sieht und keine Hintergrundinformation hat, hat man keine Ahnung, ob einem hier dokumentarisches Theater vorgeführt wird, ob das von den Autoren wild zusammen konstruiert ist, und wo sie genau damit hinwollen. [my transcription; LS] (Mülheimer Dramatikerpreis 2007: 52:50–53:11)

Here we see the high expectations associated with the documentary or semi-documentary form in terms not only of the function of the play (it should be informative), but also in terms of the ethics of representation present within it (the play should have a clear truth value).⁷

The director of the world premiere, Neco Çelik, however, claims that "it is strange but it really should not be read in a documentary [...] manner" ("es ist komisch, aber man darf das wirklich nicht unter die dokumentarische [...] Lupe nehmen"; N. Çelik 2006b: 44).⁸ This comment has also been picked up by Claudia Breger (2012: 233), who highlights that "the decidedly artificial aesthetics [of Çelik's production] simultaneously underlines that we cannot in fact hope for 'naked truth' and contradicts documentary protocol to the degree to which the latter is still associated with naturalism" (Breger 2012: 235). For Breger then, the aesthetics of the world premiere "probes the boundaries of at least some definitions of the documentary" (2012: 233).⁹ Indeed the one extract from *Black Virgins* reprinted in the short programme distributed at the HAU sets the em-

7 See also Reinelt (2009) on the "promise of documentary".

8 Breger also provides a slightly different translation of part of this quotation (Breger 2012: 233).

9 Similarly, Randal Halle suggests that the staging of the play "also leads one to actually question the authenticity of these voices" (2009: 44).

phasis quite differently for the audience of the premiere production. There the figure of monologue seven exclaims:

What kind of cheap game am I playing here? I do know that I'm using impertinence against assumption. You think you know how I am and I address you to prove the opposite – to leave a really vulgar impression. But that *is* really how I am and everything is true. Almost everything is true.

Was treibe ich hier für ein billiges Spiel? Ich weiss doch, dass ich Zumutung gegen Vermutung setze. Ihr glaubt zu wissen, wie ich bin und ich rede dagegen an – um einen richtig vulgären Eindruck zu hinterlassen. Aber ich bin tatsächlich so und alles ist wahr. Fast alles ist wahr. (HAU, 2006: [3]; Zaimoglu / Senkel 2006: 37)

The authenticity of the source material is purposefully destabilised in this quotation as the truth claim is invoked and playfully revoked. The inclusion of this quotation, presented on the same page of the short HAU programme for *Black Virgins* as information on the mediating director and author (HAU, 2006: [3]), certainly seems intended to disrupt an easy assignation of the play in production to a documentary genre.

Both Çelik's comments above and the HAU programme suggest a degree of discrepancy at work between the wry, playful intention of the premiere production and its rather more earnest popular reception as documentary.¹⁰ I raise the potential of a discrepancy here not in order to suggest that the director's intention renders other interpretations of *Black Virgins* thus far in any way invalid. When I interviewed him in 2012, Çelik stressed that he kept the *mise-en-scène* purposefully abstract so that "as an audience member you produce images in your head [...] patterns appear or...or a moment of epiphany" ("[man] produziert als Zuschauer im Kopf Bilder [...] es entstehen Muster oder ... oder Erleuchtung [sic]"; N. Çelik 2012). The subsequent, very serious reception of the play might also be considered a significant factor in the broader changes in the status of postmigrant theatre, such as the opening of the Ballhaus Naunynstraße two years later. I am interested, however, in how the discrepancy between the premiere production's intentions and its subsequent reception emerged.¹¹ Drawing on personal interviews with Neco Çelik, as well as reviews, scripts and a video-recording of the premiere production, I will focus in particular on playful

10 See Breger for a discussion of the play's reception (2012: 149).

11 Postmigrant dramatist Marianne Salzmann has recently highlighted the failure of theatre reviewers to acknowledge the humour of many postmigrant plays: "Needless to say, the majority wants to hear the hard, sad stories of the minorities among them. [...] Above all, no one believes the director to be capable of sarcasm." (Ellis / Salzmann 2012: 3; "Natürlich will die Majorität die harten, traurigen Geschichten der Minoritäten hören. [...] [D]em Regisseur wird vor allem kein Sarkasmus zugetraut"; Salzmann 2012: 3) Salzmann critiques this as a problematic lack of engagement with the post-migrant theatre practitioners on their own terms. This is something I aim to avoid here.

references within the premiere production to Steven Spielberg's film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).¹² I will explore the ways in which attention to this intertextual, intermedial and transnational reference provides a new mode of understanding the supposedly "semi-documentary" form of this landmark production and functions to draw attention to the dynamics of the initial wave of self-designated postmigrant theatre in Germany.

The World Premiere of *Black Virgins*: Kreuzberg Meets Spielberg

The world premiere of *Black Virgins* was staged in a grid of six boxes within which five actresses delivered a playful montage of the original dramatic text (Fig 1; Popken / Kulaoğlu 2006; see also Sieg 2010: 153–154).¹³ The actresses were dressed in flesh-coloured long johns, long-sleeved t-shirts and bald caps and as each actress spoke, the box in which she stood was illuminated with a harsh, white light. The others remained in darkness and in between each segment, the stage was blacked out entirely, allowing the actresses to reposition themselves for the next block of monologues. For the opening sequence of the performance, however, this set was initially completely obscured; the audience waited immersed in darkness, the only sound a low static growl. As the curtain slowly drew across the stage, squares of bright neon red, green, yellow, blue and white light began to appear in brief flashes and the static growl built to a series of electronic tones. Both lights and tones increased in speed, appearing in rapid patterns across the grid-like stage and it was only during this faster strobing sequence that the boxes were revealed to contain five actresses (Figs 2–4). Although initially dressed fully in black raincoats and headscarves, the actresses then stripped down to the androgynous alien-like base costume seen in Fig. 1 as the strobing lights and electronic tones continued. The striptease is a striking aspect of the premiere production, in which there is otherwise little movement on stage (Sieg 2010: 178). This opening sequence, which can be seen in Figs 2–4, ended with the stage disappearing again into darkness, leaving one box lit, in which the first actress began her monologue (N. Çelik 2006a: 00:00:00–00:02:15).¹⁴

12 As will be outlined in more detail in the following section of this article, this reference has been noted by scholars such as Sieg, but has not been the subject of a sustained examination.

13 The dramaturgical team made use of material from seven of the monologues present in the full version of the dramatic text, occasionally merging characters together (Popken / Kulaoğlu 2006). As Sieg has highlighted, this cut of the dramatic text also highlighted aspects of the monologues which addressed sexuality (2010: 153–154).

14 The *mise-en-scene* of the world premiere is also described by Sieg (2010: 153–155), İ. A. Çelik (2012: 119) and El Hissy (2012: 126–127). This use of light and sound was repeated in the production's closing sequence (N. Çelik 2006a: 01:09:45–01:10:30). Elements of this opening

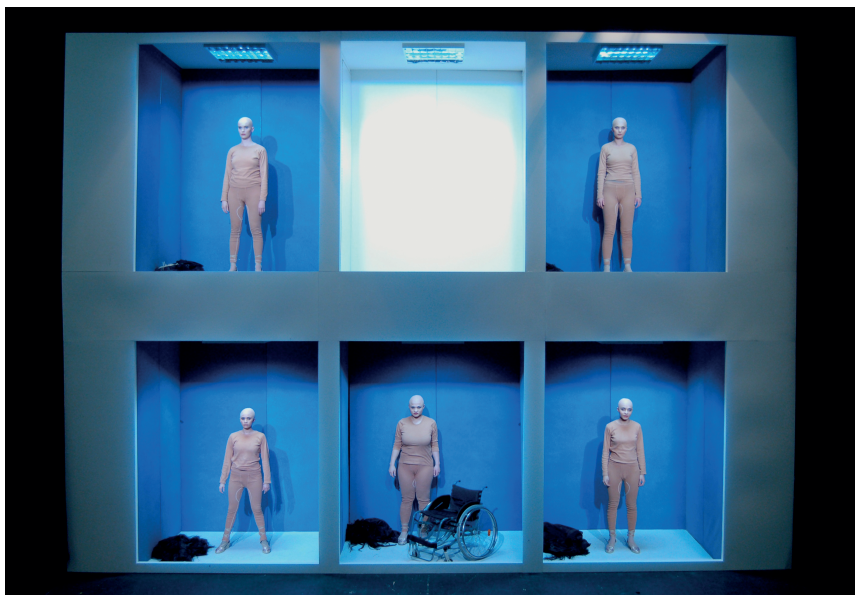


Fig. 1.

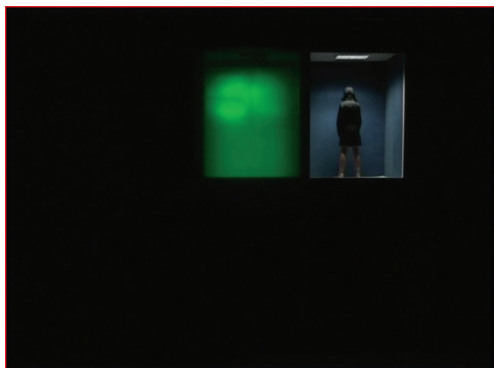


Fig. 2.

Sieg, who examines the representation of sexuality within the play, summarises the effects of the audio-visual elements of the opening scene as follows: “[t]he repetitive, computer-generated melody emanating from the loudspeakers recalls the soundtrack to Steven Spielberg’s 1977 science fiction movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and heralds, tongue in cheek, the arrival of aliens”

and closing sequence can be seen on the online promotional video produced by the Gorki Theater (Gorki 2014: 00:00–00:08, 00:28–00:31).

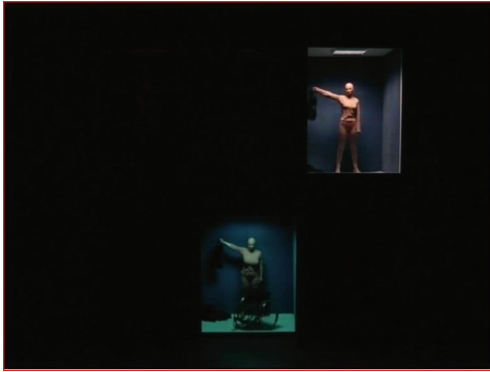


Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

(Sieg 2010: 178).¹⁵ Sieg immediately moves on from this observation to focus on the striptease which occurs to the sound of that melody; she reads this and the “nude” costuming as critical comments on European discourses which problematically link nudity and displays of sexuality with emancipation. Sieg’s intervention is important given that in recent years the supposed oppression symbolised by the headscarf has been used to suggest that Islam, and by extension many postmigrants, are incompatible with what are seen as European post-Enlightenment values (Sieg 2010: 151 – 152, 176). A concern with sexuality is also highlighted by Maha El Hissy in her reading of the premiere (El Hissy 2012: 122 – 134), while the extent to which the male writers and director might sell out a

15 Breger also notes the references to aliens in this interview and in some reviews of the play (2012: 236 – 237); she later suggests that his production “produces an uncomfortably close encounter” (2012: 266). Similarly, Hentschel subtitles the section of her book in which the play is discussed “Encounter and Document” (“Begegnung und Dokument”; 2007: 155). Neither piece addresses Spielberg’s film any more explicitly.



Fig. 5.

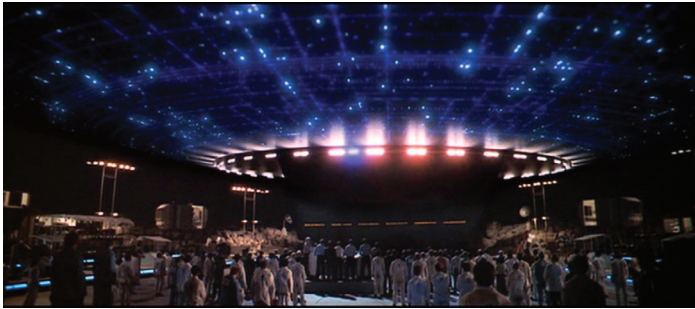


Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

sexualised version of the Muslim woman to the German audience is the focus of İ. A. Çelik's critical approach (İ. A. Çelik 2012: 121).

Published interviews with Neco Çelik from 2006 reveal that this striking opening sequence does more than recall Spielberg's film though; it explicitly references it (N. Çelik 2006b: 44). *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), the story of a mass encounter engineered by mysterious alien beings, is perhaps best known for the light and sound spectacle during the lengthy encounter scene at

the film's climax (Spielberg 1977: 01:40:35 – 02:09:00). In the central section of this sequence, a series of tones is played back and forth in order to establish contact between the U.S. military and alien spacecraft which arrive at the base of a mountain named "Devil's Tower" (Figs 5–6). Each tone corresponds to a different light and, as the aliens communicate through increasingly complex variations, an epic sequence of light and tone emerges which the humans gathered at the base of the mountain are challenged to respond to (Spielberg 1977: 01:54:13 – 01:57:24). This sequence is echoed by the neon-lit boxes and repeated electronic refrain of the opening and closing movements of Çelik's production (compare Figs 2–4 to Figs 5–6; N. Çelik 2006a: 00:00:00 – 00:02:15, 01:09:45 – 01:10:30). The eerie blue lighting and costuming of the actresses in Fig. 1 is also strongly suggestive of Spielberg's particular representation of blue-lit, bald, humanoid aliens (see Fig. 7). While the opening and closing sequences are relatively brief, as the first and last elements of the performance, they can be considered key framing devices; the motif of the flashing neon lights and the use of electronic tones also continues to break up and re-connect the montage of monologues throughout the performance.¹⁶

When I interviewed him in 2012, Çelik again emphasised how important Spielberg's film was for his conception of the premiere of *Schwarze Jungfrauen*:

I came up with the idea in relation to the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, by Spielberg [...]. The story is very important because the people [in the film] have a vision and don't know where this vision comes from. They follow this vision and encounter this UFO. [...] The people who have the vision are invited to come there by the extra-terrestrials. It is only then that they understand this [that the vision is an invitation] and they try to communicate with each other the whole time. That was, so to say, the deciding factor for me: to stage the play in such a way that I get the information across without the other side being able to answer.

So kam ich dann auf die Idee, in Verbindung mit dem Film *Unheimliche Begegnung der dritten Art* von Spielberg [...]. Die Geschichte ist sehr wichtig, weil die Leute haben eine Vision und wissen nicht, woher diese Vision kommt. Sie folgen dieser Vision und dann begegnen sie diesem UFO [...]. Die Leute, die die Vision haben, sind eingeladen von den Außerirdischen, dahinzukommen. Erst dann begreifen sie das und sie versuchen die ganze Zeit, miteinander zu kommunizieren. Das war sozusagen entscheidend für mich: dieses Bühnenbild so zu machen, dass eben, ohne dass die andere Seite antworten kann, ich die Information rübergebe.¹⁷

16 The jerky, almost lizard-like head-turns employed by the actors on the video-recording I had access to might suggest elements of the alien in the performance style.

17 Neco Çelik also identified the art form of the icon as a further point of aesthetic inspiration in our 2012 interview. Interestingly both the icon, and, as Sue-Ellen Case highlights, the alien can be seen as avatars (Case 2007: 163 – 164).

Neither Sieg, nor the other commentators on *Black Virgins* thus far, consider the implications of the intertextual, indeed intermedial, audio-visual reference which accompanies the striptease. This is somewhat surprising as other potential intertexts such as Hirsi Ali's film *Submission I* have been examined by a number of scholars (see El Hissy 2012: 122–123; İ. A. Çelik 2012: 124–125). Engaging with the framing created by the reference to *Close Encounters* reveals a particular element of the mode of representation at work, however. Rather than the 2006 production presenting itself as a “true” or fully “authentic” expression of Muslim women's voices (as a more typically documentary or naturalistic aesthetic might suggest), this intertextual reference arguably becomes one way in which the staging highlights its own status as fantasy and artistic experimentation.¹⁸ While *Black Virgins* has mainly been received as at least “semi-documentary” theatre, this opening sequence playfully frames the striptease, and Çelik's production of the play, with a reference to a determinedly non-documentary genre: science fiction.

Genre and Intermediality: *Black Virgins*, “Broken Traditions”

The final section of this article will consider the implications of the *Close Encounters* reference with regard to the representation of Muslim women in this production of *Black Virgins*. First, I want to push the question of genre further and explore what it might reveal about the dynamics of the initial wave of self-designated postmigrant theatre in Germany. The inclusion of a pop culture reference within the staging of the world premiere alerts us to a frame of reference which is far from canonical and has little to do with Islamic tradition, constructions of Muslim women, or German politics and theatre – the three areas in relation to which the play is most frequently situated. Instead this reference to Hollywood situates the Turkish-German or Muslim theatre practitioner (both Zaimoglu and Neco Çelik self-identify in these ways; Senkel does not) at the centre of a web of transnational influences which cannot be reduced to one, or

18 Halle and Breger also highlight the staging as challenging in this regard (Halle 2009: 44; Breger 2012: 233–239). In the online extract from Nora Haakh's unpublished Masters dissertation, Haakh stresses the artistic work of the Ballhaus when she contrasts the “imagined Islam” (“imaginierte Islam”) of the mass media with the “fictional” Islam produced by specific artists at the Ballhaus (Haakh 2011: 9). In the extract, Haakh argues that “in this way Islam and motifs associated with Islamisation are playfully picked up and renegotiated through their incorporation in fantasy-laden and experimental configurations” (“so werden mit Islam und Islamisierung assoziierte Motive spielerisch aufgegriffen und durch die Eingliederung in phantasievolle Versuchsanordnungen umverhandelt”; 2011: 14). The page numbers here refer to the online extract: I have not yet been able to access the full dissertation.

even two, national or religious cultures. It is also an intermedial reference, a factor which takes on further significance when one considers that in 2006, Çelik, was best known as an independent film director.

Çelik was approached to direct *Black Virgins* by Langhoff as part of her aim to bring postmigrant artists already active in other media into the theatre. Sieg has highlighted the radical nature of Langhoff's approach to the curation of the *Beyond Belonging* festival programme in which *Black Virgins* premiered:

By commissioning film directors to direct plays, and asking literary authors to write them, for instance, *Beyond Belonging* has compensated for the unequal access to professional training in the different artistic disciplines. (Sieg 2010: 149–150; italics my own; LS)

The allusion to unequal access to professional training refers to the way in which a lack of institutional support for migrant and postmigrant theatre practitioners has, to a degree, shaped their lack of representation on Germany's state-funded stages.¹⁹ As Sieg points out, it was this situation which the first *Beyond Belonging* festival, attempted to rectify by commissioning artists already active in other spheres to work with theatre as a medium (Sieg 2010: 149–150).²⁰ This project was and still is continued by the Ballhaus Naunynstraße, a theatre that also provides a home for directors who have taken more traditional routes into theatre. For example, Katrin Sieg also discusses documentary theatre produced and directed for the Ballhaus by Lukas Langhoff and by Nurkan Erpulat (Sieg 2011: 165–183): Lukas Langhoff comes from a veritable theatrical dynasty in Germany, while Erpulat studied theatre in İzmir and also trained as a director at the renowned Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts, Berlin.

Tuncay Kulaoğlu explains that, at the time of *Beyond Belonging*, postmigrant artists had already managed to establish themselves more firmly in the film industry, an industry in which he and Langhoff had also long been active. As a result, in 2006, “[the] first step was to make use of this potential” (“[der] erste Schritt auch darin lag, auf dieses Potenzial zurückzugreifen”; Kulaoğlu 2010: 161). Neco Çelik came to the production of *Black Virgins* in this context and as the *Close Encounters* reference highlights, he brought not only a so-called “background of migration” (“Migrationshintergrund”) but also a background in film to his theatrical work. Randal Halle, for example, comments on the “cinematic quality” of the premiere of *Black Virgins* in his analysis of Çelik's cinema

19 Erol Boran outlines a situation in which funding for Turkish-German theatre in the 1970s, 80s and 90s was frequently low, drawn from social funds rather than cultural budgets, and consisted of short-term, project-based subsidies, rather than money for longer running projects (Boran 2004: 79, 158).

20 A second *Beyond Belonging* took place in 2007. Neco Çelik's production of *Black Virgins* was again included in the programme for this.

(Halle 2007: 44).²¹ In an interview I carried out with Neco Çelik in 2012, he explained the effect this had on his relationship to the idea of documentary theatre, as opposed to documentary film, at the time of the premiere:

I didn't know what documentary theatre was [...], that there are different genres in theatre, [...] it's a waste. What for? What is the point of having these various genres in theatre? The space is defined, the terms of the encounter are defined. I can adapt the space etc., but it always remains theatre.

Ich wusste nicht, was Dokumentartheater ist [...] daß es im Theater unterschiedliche Genres gibt, [...] das ist eine Verschwendung. Wozu? Wozu diese verschiedenen Genres im Theater? Weil der Raum definiert ist, die Verabredung definiert ist. Ich kann den Raum umstellen usw., aber es bleibt immer Theater. (N. Çelik 2012)

Since the premiere, Çelik has gone on to direct a number of theatrical and operatic pieces and has become a passionate advocate of the need for Turkish-Germans to gain a foothold in this sphere of German social and artistic life.²² In the quotation above, though, he highlighted his position back in 2006 as a first-time theatre director with particularly filmic frames of reference. These comments are extremely productive in opening up "documentary theatre" as a contested category and further exploring the ways in which the initial dynamics of the postmigrant theatre movement entered into that contestation.

A brief look at how documentary theatre has developed and can be defined illustrates how important frames of reference are in the assignation of this genre-label to a performance piece. Performance scholar Janelle Reinelt suggests that the use of documentary sources often "sets up a realist epistemology where knowledge is available through sense perception and cognition linked to objects / documents" (Reinelt 2009: 9). A focus on the epistemology involved, rather than on the document itself, allows Reinelt to emphasise the role of the theatrical spectator as "as co-producer of the reality in question" (Reinelt 2009: 10). Reinelt's differentiated approach thus positions "the documentary" as a category that can be brought into play by a number of agents, rather than as a fixed quality to be attributed or denied. Furthermore, Derek Paget highlights that the history of documentary theatre is almost too scattered and interrupted to be considered anything other than a "broken tradition" (Paget 2009: 224). In contrast to "the continuity of the tradition of stage naturalism," the association of documentary

21 Halle also sees a "transposition [...] of a cinematic structure onto the stage" in the frame-like boxes of the *mise-en-scène* (2007: 44). Similarly, my colleague Jane Sillars, found the boxy scenery suggestive of the screen display of digital film-editing programmes.

22 These include Zaimogu and Senkel's *Nathan Messias* (Ballhaus Naunynstraße, 2009). Neco Çelik directed Ludger Vollmer's operatic adaptation of Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand* at the OperStuttgart in 2010 and an adaptation of Shostakovitch's *Moscow, Cheryomushki* (*Moskau Tscherjomuschki*) at the Staatsoper Berlin in 2012. He currently has several new theatrical projects in progress.

theatre with political interests and off-scene groups has meant that, in the UK at least, “[p]ractitioners almost always have to learn again techniques that seldom get passed on directly” (Paget 2009: 224). In a broader sense, Paget argues that while practices which correspond to “documentary” genre markers used previously may reappear in areas where such a tradition once existed, they do not necessarily represent a continuation of the previous tradition (Paget 2009: 224).

Similarly, in the case of *Black Virgins*, I would suggest that a playwright’s claim that a play was developed from transcribed interviews may not be enough to create a realist epistemology in the mind of a director such as Çelik, who was familiar with what he calls the “black humour” of Zaimoglu’s prose-writing and with experience of a more immediate creation of the documentary object in film.²³ However this same claim may well lead a theatre critic familiar with the tradition of documentary theatre in the German context to identify the piece as “documentary.” This is particularly the case given that the mainstream theatrical establishment in Germany has mainly turned to the documentary genre in recent years when attempting to address issues of migration (see the list of plays discussed in Kraft 2011: 129 – 130). This becomes problematic when, as Breger puts it, “the new interest in documentary forms feeds into old habits in the reception of the art and literature of migration [...] in sociological rather than aesthetic terms” (Breger 2012: 233). Postmigrant dramatist Marianne Salzmann explains that work with “non-professionals” at the Ballhaus has sometimes been misinterpreted as indicating that there are no professional Turkish-German theatre practitioners (Salzmann 2012: 5). In highlighting Çelik’s move from film to theatre, I do not want to play into such false assumptions or position him as “non-professional.” Rather, I would suggest that the desire to see “reality” rather than “fiction” in the premiere’s extremely artificial aesthetics may suggest a further failure to pay attention to the postmigrant artist as artist.

Returning to the context and ethos of the *Beyond Belonging* festival, it is also important to recognise that while the postmigrant theatre movement creates new space for postmigrant artists, it brings with it not only a new set of perspectives but also, in some cases, new patterns of artistic development. Indeed, Paget’s identification of documentary theatre as a “broken” tradition also finds resonance in the non-continuous history of Turkish-German theatre in Germany as described by Erol Boran (2004: 75 – 200). Having invited professional filmmakers into the theatre, the Ballhaus Naunynstraße continues to offer itself as an “academy of autodidacts” (“akademie [sic] der autodidakten [sic]”; Sharifi 2011:

23 In our 2012 interview Neco Çelik explained, “I always laugh when I read Feridun’s books, because [...] for me it is black humour. There is of course a lot of truth, a lot of tragedy there, but that’s what black humour thrives on” (“Ich lache immer über Feriduns Bücher, weil [...] es für mich schwarzer Humor [ist]. Es ist natürlich viel Wahrheit, viel Tragisches dabei, aber schwarzer Humor lebt davon”; N. Çelik 2012).

40) for its surrounding community, in addition to commissioning and developing the work of a new generation of postmigrant and international artists. A deeper understanding of the multiple patterns of artistic development at work in postmigrant theatre, as well as the relationship between postmigrant productions and the reception context therefore continues to be timely. In the case of *Black Virgins* in particular, this suggests that if one wants to address the representation of the Muslim women in the play, it is productive to consider both the intentions of its postmigrant producers and the historical and aesthetic framework employed by its critics. With this in mind, I return now to the *mise-en-scène* and particularly the reference to *Close Encounters*.

Staging Close Encounters with the Muslim Woman

The intertextual reference of the opening sequence of Çelik's production not only allows for a discussion of intention and reception but can also be read as a comment on the play's content and positioning within the theatrical landscape in Germany. John Rieder has drawn attention to the generic and historical connection of science fiction to colonialism, for example (Reid 2009: 257). This connection has made science fiction a ready means for cementing, contesting, or working through concepts of race, power, and alterity (Reid 2009: 256ff). While *Black Virgins* is not situated in a directly postcolonial context, Sieg, İ. A. Çelik and El Hissy all discuss the striptease sequence in the play in relation to postcolonial critiques of the desire to unveil and so, in a Foucauldian sense, discipline the Muslim woman (İ. A. Çelik 2012: 123–124; Sieg 2010: 175–178; El Hissy 2012: 128–132). The question of "who speaks" in *Black Virgins* is thus, to a large degree, also a question of what type of knowledge the play might provide or encourage viewers to expect to receive, and of the racialised or culturalised power relationships it might expose, reinforce or challenge as a result. In the final section of this article, I want to suggest that close attention to the use of *Close Encounters* in the premiere production can provide new insight into precisely these issues.

Charlene Engel analyses the encounter scene of *Close Encounters* as follows:

The purpose of the meeting at Devil's Tower is not for the aliens to communicate in Terran languages. It seems from the aliens' point of view to be an experiment to see if humans are capable of rapidly learning to communicate in an abstract language of light and sound. Their demonstration of that capacity makes them worth communicating with. (Engel 1996: 381)

The use of music as language, and the imperative on the humans in the film to learn this language, suggests that in *Close Encounters*, it is the aliens who are

superior not only in terms of technology but also spiritually and ‘culturally.’ It is clear from the alien-like features of the costuming in *Black Virgins* that Çelik places the play’s female protagonists in the position of the ‘aliens’ in the encounter which his staging creates (Fig. 1). This costuming does not simply code the Muslim woman as radically other, nor does it package her as easily comprehensible and therefore consumable in an Orientalist manner. While this costuming indicates difference, the emphasis on alien superiority created by the *Close Encounters* audio-visual cue suggests that this difference is in no way a sign of cultural or personal underdevelopment. This is significant, as visual markers of Islam, such as the headscarf, are often perceived as signalling oppression and a lack of autonomy in the German context (Chin 2010: 567–568). Performance scholar Sue-Ellen Case highlights that a performative and playful turn to science fiction also occurs in afro-futurist music such as that of U.S.-musician Sun Ra. There, it functions as a means to “imagine racialized people as powerful, in-control citizens of a different order of things” and “invest social relations with fictional rather than factual powers as instruments of change” (Case 2007: 124–125). While operating in a different context and discourse of othering, in choosing what Case has called “alien over alienation” (Case 2007: 188), Çelik also pointedly embraces the fictional rather than the factual in his presentation of female Muslim subjectivities.²⁴ This reframes a seemingly documentary discourse on Islam as always constructed, and as therefore also open to reconstruction and, thus, change.²⁵

Çelik’s emphasis on the themes and story of *Close Encounters* in section two of this article remind us that the reference to *Close Encounters* also highlights the role of invitation in the “encounters” which took place around the premiere. In *Close Encounters*, the hero Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) feels a compulsion to travel to the planned location of the mass alien encounter after the aliens implant an image of it in his mind. As the other key figure of identification within the film, Lacombe (François Truffaut), remarks, Neary then becomes the first man to enter the alien spaceship because he has been explicitly *invited* to the point of encounter by the aliens themselves (Engel 1996: 380). It is extremely important to address questions of representation, potential voyeurism, and manipulation surrounding the subjects of *Black Virgins*. However, attention to the most explicit intertextual reference of the *mise-en-scène* suggests that we must also recognise the premiere production as an invitation: an invitation extended first by the *HAU* theatre to postmigrant artists to share their artistic concerns and views of the

24 See also Haakh (2011: 6).

25 My analysis here provides one possible answer to questions raised by Breger who asks “in which ways and for whom exactly” the women are positioned as “strangers” and “how exactly does a theatricalizing, (post-) Brechtian aesthetics of distancing work here?” (Breger 2012: 236).

world, and, second, by those artists themselves, who invited both German-German and postmigrant audiences to listen to, and engage with, their work.²⁶

This places the potentially desiring or disciplining audience in a very different power-position to that suggested by scholars such as Sieg, İ. A. Çelik and El Hissy. However much a spectator may want to act as a voyeur, this becomes very difficult once he has been actively invited to look and listen.²⁷ As Engel suggests, in *Close Encounters*, it is the aliens who set the terms of the encounter throughout, and the humans who must adapt. Similarly, in *Black Virgins*, it is arguably the Muslim women who agreed to be interviewed initially by Zaimoglu, together with the postmigrant artistic producers of the theatrical production, who set the terms of the theatrical encounter. Unable to respond, the audience members, rather than the actresses, are disciplined into a pose of attentive listening by the conventions of the German theatrical event. This positioning playfully raises the question of the audience's ability to "rapidly learn" to listen to Muslim women. The striptease mentioned earlier thus does not merely cite the desiring and disciplinary gaze in order to refuse it (Sieg 2010: 178 – 179), nor is it simply an invitation to peer into Muslim women's private lives (El Hissy 2012: 131). Framed by a sci-fi aesthetic, the striptease scene in particular and the production as a whole pose an invitation to engage with the representations that Germany's Muslim and postmigrant subjects actually offer.

This emphasis on fantasy and mediation also has the potential to redirect an impulse towards attending and viewing the play in order to gain knowledge into an impulse toward actual communication and encounter after the performance. In my 2012 interview with Çelik, he described some of these attempts as follows:

People were so irritated that even when there was no post-show discussion they didn't go home. They waited in the foyer and forced you into a discussion. [...] They were completely at odds with themselves and needed some hope, some kind of relief.

Die Leute waren so irritiert, dass sie, auch wenn es kein Publikumsgespräch gab, nicht nach Hause gegangen sind. Sie haben im Foyer gewartet und haben ein Gespräch

26 In 2006 Neco Çelik expressed disappointed that the audience for *Black Virgins* was 95 percent German (Çelik 2006b: 45; Keim 2010a: 82). His comment refers to the initial run of premiere production at the HAU. In a 2008 interview, Matthias Lilienthal, artistic director of the HAU at the time of the *Beyond Belonging* festivals, added to this information: "if, during the migration festivals, we have perhaps 50 % migrant visitors, I am really proud of that: [particularly] when for the rest of the programme the number is only about 3 %" ("[w]enn wir bei den Migrationsfestivals vielleicht 50 % migrantische Besucher haben, bin ich total stolz, wenn es beim Restprogramm mal 3 % sind"; quoted in Raddatz 2008: 20). The Ballhaus Naunynstraße, where the production later appeared, also has a different audience profile again (Kulaoğlu 2010: 169).

27 See also Breger who describes the way in which the distance created by the staging makes difficult any middle-class self-affirmation or "zoo effect" on behalf of the audience (2012: 238).

erzungen. [...] Sie waren dann völlig durcheinander und haben eine Hoffnung, eine Art von Lichtblick, gebraucht. (N. Çelik 2012)

Although the *Beyond Belonging* festival for which the play was first commissioned performed important work in initiating such discussions, as Kulaoğlu has highlighted, the limited duration of the festival format did not offer sufficient scope for them to continue in a sustained manner at the HAU (Kulaoğlu 2010: 160). In comparison, the Ballhaus Naunynstraße, where Çelik's production would later enter the repertoire, has been able to offer a more continuous space for discussion both amongst audience members and amongst artists. Post-migrant playwright Marianne Salzmann, for example, vividly describes the sociable atmosphere of the Ballhaus and the effects for her of inspirational evenings at the theatre's bar: "We talked about meaning and art and suddenly we wanted something. A change of conditions. This time for real."²⁸ ("Wir diskutierten über Sinn und Kunst und plötzlich wollten wir etwas. Veränderung der Verhältnisse. Dieses Mal ernsthaft"; Salzmann 2012: 3). As outlined in the opening section of this article, the aesthetic and industry-related after-effects of such discussions have been phenomenal and Salzmann, for example, has since also joined Langhoff and *Black Virgins* at the prestigious Gorki theatre.

In 1978, B. H. Fairchild drew attention to Lacombe's interpretation of the alien encounter in *Close Encounters* as "an event sociologique" to move the focus from the UFO landing within the film to the phenomenon the film became upon distribution:

Close Encounters is about a sociological rather than a scientific event, but the film is also a sociological event in itself. We, the audience, become the content of the film. We swarm to the theater to witness a close encounter. (Fairchild 1978: 343)

Equally, an "event sociologique" may be a very good way to describe not only the post-show discussions briefly described above and the media excitement to have surrounded *Black Virgins* but also the artistic encounters which grew out of *Beyond Belonging*. At the time of writing, *Black Virgins* had also been performed in 11 additional professional productions in Germany alone, creating a proliferation of further encounters in the process.²⁹ Taking the playful *Close Encounters* reference "seriously" and re-examining the semi-documentary labelling of the premiere in this light reveals new genre-related connections and becomes a highly productive way of reading the power relationships surrounding the play. Close attention to Çelik's non-documentary articulation of *Black Virgins* can thus be used to shed new light on the play's reception and to frame audiences' "close encounter" with Muslim subjectivity in 2006 in unexpected ways.

28 This is the translation provided by Ellis / Salzmann (2012: 3).

29 Several of these are discussed my doctoral thesis.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted as part of a PhD funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK). A DAAD 1–6 month Research Grant provided additional funding and time in Germany. I am very grateful to Neco Çelik for taking the time to discuss the premiere production with me and for his permission to quote from our interview. I am equally grateful to Nermin Çelik for providing me with a copy of the audio-visual recording of the premiere. My thanks also to the HAU theatre, the Gorki theatre and Neco Çelik for giving me permission to include images from this recording here and to Ute Langkafel for permission to reproduce her photograph. Fereidoun Ettehad kindly provided me with copies of the cut of the script used in the world premiere and I would like to thank Tunçay Kulaoğlu, Insa Popken and Osman Tok for permission to reference this. Tanja Müller of Rowohlt Theater Verlag kindly gave me access to the archives of her department and permission to quote from the dramatic text of the play. Finally, my thanks go to Melanie Dreyer-Lude and Cory Tamler, who introduced me to Neco Çelik in the Ballhaus bar.

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The stage is fully lit here unlike in the recorded performance. Image © MAIFOTO / Langkafel, Ute (2006): "jungfrauen 0094", 15.03.2006, Digital publicity photograph, HAU, Berlin, accessible at: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ballhausnaunynstrasse-presse/4621032491/in/set-72157623969377211/> [last accessed 03.09.2012].

Fig. 2. Screen shot of the opening striptease scene taken from the audio-visual recording of the 2006 premiere. Çelik, Neco (2006a): *Schwarze Jungfrauen*, Unpublished audiovisual recording, 72 min., HAU, Berlin, accessed in the personal collection of Neco and Nermin Çelik, 00:00:55. Image included with kind permission of the HAU theatre, the Gorki theatre and Neco Çelik.

Fig. 3. Screen shot of the opening striptease scene taken from the audio-visual recording of the 2006 premiere. Çelik, Neco (2006a): *Schwarze Jungfrauen*, Unpublished audiovisual recording, 72 min., HAU, Berlin, accessed in the personal collection of Neco and Nermin Çelik, 00:01:57. Image included with kind permission of the HAU theatre, the Gorki theatre and Neco Çelik.

Fig. 4. Screen shot of the opening striptease scene taken from the audio-visual recording of the 2006 premiere. Çelik, Neco (2006a): *Schwarze Jungfrauen*, Unpublished audiovisual recording, 72 min., HAU, Berlin, accessed in the personal collection of Neco and Nermin Çelik, 00:02:04. Image included with kind permission of the HAU theatre, the Gorki theatre and Neco Çelik.

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