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Yüksel Yavuz's *Kleine Freiheit / A Little Bit of Freedom*

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Our conference on “Goodbye, Germany? Migration, Culture, and the Nation State” opened with a screening of Yüksel Yavuz’s film *Kleine Freiheit / A Little Bit of Freedom* (2003) at the Pacific Film Archive, followed by a discussion with the director.

Yüksel Yavuz was born in the village of Karakoçan in Southeastern Turkey in 1964 and moved to Germany in 1980 where he initially shared 12 square meters with his father. Later, he studied economics and sociology in Hamburg from 1986 to 1989. His mother tongue is Kurdish, Turkish was the official language he learned at school, and German is his third language, which he started learning when he arrived in Germany at the age of 16. His autobiographical film *Mein Vater, der Gastarbeiter / My Father, the Guest Worker* (1994) is a documentary about his own family, focusing not only on the life of the father who left home to work for 15 years in a shipyard in Hamburg, but also on the story of the mother who stayed behind in the village. In the long run, the family must travel back and forth, since, in the meantime, grandchildren have been born in Hamburg. Yavuz has been involved in the film industry since 1990 and studied visual communication at Hamburg's Academy of Fine Arts from 1992-1996. *Kleine Freiheit / A Little Bit of Freedom* is his second feature film after *Aprilkinder / Aprilchildren* in 1998.

A Little Bit of Freedom has been shown at a number of international festivals, including the Directors’ Fortnight at Cannes (2003). It was also shown at the Berlin and Beyond Festival at the Castro Cinema in San Francisco in January 2004. The film opened in German cinemas in April 2004 and was a critical success. This low-budget film was produced with funding from the German Ministry of Culture. It also received regional film funding from Hamburg and Berlin as a co-production for television by ZDF (the second public broadcasting channel in Germany). The ZDF’s division, “Das kleine Fernsehspiel” (“The Little Television Feature”), has been influential in promoting innovative filmmaking and supporting young auteurs. This program has facilitated productions of many films by filmmakers from migrant backgrounds and has created a platform for film projects that search for a new rhetoric of ethnic identity and minority cultures.

The film is set in Hamburg’s St. Pauli neighborhood, home to the world-famous red light district, the Reeperbahn. In fact, the German title, *Kleine Freiheit*, refers to the name of a place in that district, which gets lost in the English translation. The title also alludes to *Grosse Freiheit Nr. 7 / Great Freedom Nr. 7*, an opulent Agfacolor production from 1944 by Helmut Käutner, also set in St. Pauli, starring Hans Albers as the eternal sailor, Hannes Kroeger.

A Little Bit of Freedom tells the story of a friendship between two young men, both of them illegal immigrants living in Altona, one of them a Kurd from Turkey. Baran’s application for asylum has been declined, and he has therefore fallen into an illegal status in Germany. That means that he does not have basic rights, such as health care or job protection. He works as a delivery boy in a relative’s kebab restaurant. When he has a toothache, they try to cure him in the kitchen by sticking a hot skewer into his mouth. His scream leads over into the first montage sequence of a bicycle trip. This triple exposure sequence conveys a gripping cross-section of the neighborhood by superimposing shots of city traffic with shots of the various locations to which kebab is delivered, ranging from a Turkish bakery to a construction site and a brothel. The sequence conveys a sense of multilayered locality, which is underscored by the music of Mercan Dede. Despite the excess of mobility displayed in these images, the characters remain confined within the St. Pauli neighborhood throughout the film. Baran’s friend, Chernor, is an illegal immigrant from Africa, a small-time drug dealer, dreaming of

saving enough money to immigrate to Australia. The two are introduced by an old homeless captain who lives on a bench and quotes from Ringelnatz' famous poem: "Es waren mal zwei Ameisen, die wollten nach Australien reisen..." Ça da Bozkurt plays the role of Baran. His family happens to come from the same village as the director, Yüksel Yavuz. Bozkurt, as well as Leroy Delmar, who plays Chernor, make their film debuts in *A Little Bit of Freedom*. They both go to school in Hamburg.

Baran's place of origin is the absent presence in this film, only visible in some fragments of footage from Baran's video camera. The fragments show his family in a Kurdish village in the area of Diyarbakır in Southeastern Turkey, an impoverished war-torn area during the 1990s. Villagers in the region were often caught between Kurdish guerrilla fighters and the Turkish army, and the military would burn down villages to punish them for supporting Kurdish separatists. The refugees from this war were dislocated to the cities of Western Turkey or ended up in Western European cities as asylum seekers or illegal immigrants. Baran is one of them. He has lost his parents in the war. The Turkish government – in its efforts to join the European Union and adopt an international human rights discourse – has recently been more concerned with protecting civil rights, including the abolition of the death penalty and discussions about a redefinition of minority rights. Still, the war has left scars and traumas that are revisited in diaspora.

The film stages the after-shocks of this war in Hamburg/Germany. It also shows the fragmentation within the Kurdish community. Films such as *A Little Bit of Freedom*, which are produced on the platform of European media networks, provide an important forum for articulating the complexities of minority identities and for imagining new alliances and new modes of resolving conflicts in a new land. Alongside the amateur actors, there are two other actors in the film who had memorable roles in previous representations of Kurdish life. Nazmi Kirik (Haydar) has previously acted in *Journey to the Sun* (1999) and Necmettin Çobano lu (Selim, the traitor) enacted the first Kurdish speaking role of Turkish cinema in Yılmaz Güney's *Yol*, the film that shared the *Palme d'Or* award at the Cannes Film Festival with Costa-Gavras *Missing* in 1982, but was not released in Turkey until 1999.) The use of the Kurdish language in the public sphere was banned for many years in Turkey.

In Germany, a new immigration law was passed in the summer of 2004 after long negotiations and took effect in January 2005. On the one hand, the new law acknowledges that Germany has become a country of immigration. On the other hand, just like everywhere else, legislation on immigration also seeks to crack down on illegal immigration, limit the number of people entering the country, and facilitate the rejection and deportation of asylum seekers. Taking advantage of a "Germany in transit," Yavuz's cinematically impressive engagement with locations in Hamburg raises a whole range of interesting questions such as: Where is home? How are transnational mobility and traumatic memory represented in cinema? Do immigrants live in a "parallel world"? Do they care about integration into German society? Do they form new inter-ethnic alliances in this new place? How do questions of race and gender come into play? And where are German (and global) spectators positioned in relation to immigrant spaces and networks?