

Model Number ‘in transit’: Postnational *Heimat*film. Moving Multiculturalism to the Next Level

ABSTRACT

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In this paper I discuss how the films Andrea Staka’s *Fräulein* and Yilmaz Arslan’s *Brudermord* explore the themes of ,nationality’ and ,postnationality’, both in terms of film-story content as well as film production. *Fräulein* presents the development of two immigrant characters who successfully realize a new home in Zurich out of a lack of home, when they are able to see their mother country and their host country not as binary opposites, but as an intercultural place within themselves. *Brudermord* criticizes Germany as anything but the promised land for those seeking a new home, but places the blame on both the host and the immigrant communities for stubbornly replicating and maintaining old boundaries, instead of adapting and working toward a necessary intercultural third reality. In addition, as evidenced by the multinational production teams of both films, these films self-reflectively create such an intercultural space in the process of making the films as well as in the film products themselves.

Serving as multilingual models promoting intercultural understanding and collaboration, Andrea Staka’s 2005 film *Das Fräulein* and Yilmaz Arslan’s 2006 *Brudermord* complicate the stereotypes of the German/the Swiss/ and the immigrant. *Fräulein* posits the possibility of what Rob Burns calls „cultural hybridity“ (Burns 2007a: 21) and a boundary crossing rather than boundary-maintaining multiculturalism/ multilingualism in Zurich. *Fräulein* and the seemingly fatalistic and pessimistic *Brudermord* posit the act of actual or metaphoric emigration itself, the leaving the known for the unknown, the literal intransitiveness of the emigrating wanderer, as the actual place of postnational *Heimat*. It is the filmic response to *Heimatlessness*, the act of creating and editing, the act of remembering and re-remembering the *Heimat* on film in the transnational context of postnational film, which is celebrated in *Fräulein* and *Brudermord* as an important means to postnational European identity formation. The films perform and reflect upon the process of creating not only global film products, but global citizens, are movies moving Germany and Switzerland

from a state of being which Kingsley terms as „far from being multicultural“ (Kingsley 2005: 55) to a new level of „multicultural“.

Globalization can both perpetuate and strengthen nationalism, which the films define as a negative form of self-identification. As a result, both films represent their protagonists, and thus the current state of multicultural Europe as sick, and in need of immediate and drastic treatment. Both posit the need of individuals to resist falling into self-perpetuated/ing cultural stereotypes, and suggest that film is an important medium to foster cross-culturalism and cross-lingualism, in other words, cultural and linguistic crossings. Not only are Switzerland and Germany but also the former Yugoslavia and Turkey shown to be multicultural und heterogeneous, rather than states of homogenous „national“ cultures. The films argue that „nation“ and the concept of restrictive national allegiance seems outdated and dead-ended. The future lies in postnationalism.

The films are about characters in search of a *Heimat*, who recognize and come to terms with their complexity, and realize that defining themselves only in terms of ethnicity or national boundaries, leads to death (literal and metaphoric). My focus, and the films' focus, is on life, in spite of everything. To this end, I believe both films return the idea of multiculturalism to the definition of culture as „what a person did to assist the growth of an organism.“ (Wax 1993: 103) „[I]mplicit in this usage is the notion of an organism that could naturally grow, and that in this instance someone tries to facilitate or assist this growth.“ (Wax 1993: 103) Both Staka's and Arslan's films suggest that postnational *Heimat*films culture the spectator and the film production teams into growing more „global“, that is, into growing beyond national identities. Viewers of and participants in these films, learn to cross boundaries, to push boundaries, whether actual national borders or cultural and linguistic borders. Film, and specifically the type of film both are, namely, postnational *Heimat*film, is a growth culture for a postnational, globalized Europe.

Das Fräulein begins and ends with images, which represent film as a medium (as well as of course being literally film). The first „dream sequence“ represents the restrictions and confines of „national“ film, while the open-ended „film story board“ at the end, symbolizes postnational *Heimat*film.

To a soundtrack of Serbian music and the harsh cutting sound of shears, Ruza dreams of branches being cut in the pollarding process, which is a tree-trimming process used to stunt a tree's growth in a particular way, usually, because of

limited space. The new growth on pollarded trees resembles new roots on cuttings; it is as if the stout tree's roots are sticking up into the air. Ruza sleeps on a brown pillow, while her green sheets show green branches, as if cut. Is she the tree being pollarded? Is she one of the branches being cut? Is she rootless, stunted? Who is doing the cutting?

Ruza is all of the above: she is the tree trunk, which survives the pollarding, which survives the symbolic cutting at the roots, the „rootlessness“ of emigration, as well as the stunting of her new branches, of new growth. However, she is also the tree, which despite being cut off from its „roots“, can continue to produce new growth – new „roots“ and „branches“, if she will allow herself to grow them. The film traces Ruza's development from stunted tree, whose stunting is the result of her own intense trimming, of her own strict and restrictive need to isolate herself, in order to appear strong, independent, and successful. She left what was then Yugoslavia to make a better life for herself. As she tells Ana, her employee and friend, she was ambitious, full of life, positive and energetic; in short, in some sense what Ana appears to be. However, although Ruza risked everything for her life in Switzerland, she gave up living in the process. The act of pollarding, with which the film opens, is a metaphor for the process of „national“ film – film controlled/ limited/ contained by traditional practices and expectations. Pollarding is also a metaphor of what Ruza, has done and continues to do to herself.

The dream sequence ended abruptly with a cut to a black screen. This black screen, this metaphor for *Heimatlessness*, is an abyss, a black hole, Ruza is scared to acknowledge, is frightened to look into. It is the unknown seemingly uncrossable space between Ruza's two cultures, between her two *Heimaten*. Ruza's morning routine shows a woman, who is very meticulous, very habitual, very orderly, and very structured. It seems as if she needs to hold herself in and up. As a result of wearing her watch so tightly, she wakes up with its clear mark still embedded in her skin. In a practiced almost violent gesture, she tightens the belt of her coat so tightly, that it almost „hurts“ the viewer, who both sees and hears its tightening against her, reminding the viewer of the abrupt cut in the dream, which resulted in the black screen.

Ruza's apartment is impersonal (like her restaurant), almost like a hotel room, without any pictures adorning the walls, although there is a mirror. Before leaving the apartment, Ruza stands in front of this mirror which is oddly placed, so that only her torso is caught in its small frame. Reflected back to her is not

her face, but the image of someone tying her coat. This mirror by the door is there, it seems, to reassure Ruza before she leaves her apartment that she is indeed „held in“, contained. Ruza is trying too hard to be one-dimensional, to be the successful, independent boss, who needs no one and wants no more than what she already has; in short, she is „protesting too much“, must forcefully keep herself (her „Serbianness“) in check, in order to fit the stereotype of a cold, distant, money-oriented, successful Swiss boss.

In order to maintain this front Ruza also refuses to speak Serbo-Croatian with her Bosnian and Croatian employees. As the film progresses, however, Ruza realizes she can no longer contain herself within the „Swiss“ stereotype she has created of herself. She literally seems to be about to break out of her too tight clothes/ her camouflaged outer layer, as if her tight shell that she has built around her can no longer contain her. The film traces her molting process as it were, not into a completely different individual, but rather, into one, who allows herself to take chances again, to change, to feel, to see and choose the view, to experience, to walk out into the „black screen“, as opposed to continuing to live in a shell she had developed to get through the initial pain and homesickness of her immigrant experience. During the film she returns to her *Muttersprache*, not exclusively, or as a replacement for German. She crosses fluidly between them in a single conversation. Both languages are „hers“.

It takes a young Bosnian immigrant, Ana, to remind Ruza of what she was and what she could be. Ana allows Ruza to remember her roots, accept them as part of her, not as something which she tore out and needed to cut off, but something, which she has taken with her, and which give her strength and hold in the life she has made and the person she has and will become in Switzerland. During the course of the film Ruza comes to the realization that she no longer needs to mourn her choice of emigrating, which cut her off from her old community, by refusing to remember it, because remembering the „dead“ is now not a means of feeling the hurt, because it is no longer a source of pain. Ruza comes to terms with the fact that she has chosen her view, and that while she sacrificed for this view, the view was worth it. She recognizes that Switzerland is her home, but that she no longer needs to think of *Heimat* as an either/or, or of herself as either Swiss OR Yugoslavian. By admitting the plurality of herself, she can begin to connect with others, to form friendships, to be part of a community.

Staka's film began with a dream sequence of pollarding, it ends with images of in a sense, reverse pollarding. Ruza opens the blinds in her apartment, opens her space to the view of Zurich lying beneath her. She also moves her bed, so that, when she wakes, she will not only see her Swiss *Heimat*, but also the wall, on which she begins to tack her postnational *Heimat*film's „story board“. Ruza is finally willing to open the box of pictures, which have been on top of her closet, one assumes for many years. Arranging the pictures of her youth, the pictures of her past in the then Yugoslavia on the wall in a „linear“ storyboard, with different levels (Ruza no longer is tied to straight and rigid one-way lines; her storyboard is linear in that it moves in a horizontal direction, although it also contains some vertical movement as well) is her way of connecting the past with the present and the future. *Heimat* is process and she is *mitten drin*. Not only is there a picture of the young Ruza alone, who smiles back at the smiling older Ruza, who pins it to the wall, but also pictures of Ruza smiling amidst smiling friends. Ruza had been part of a community, had not always been cold, distant, and lonely. Ruza remembers her past, but this wall is not just a memory of the past. It is a re-remembered past, a conscious arranging in a story, which has no end. Her bed, with the leaf sheets, is now a place, where she can dream through both views and create a third postnational view. „Between two cultures“ (Göktürk 2004: 102) is shown as a positive place of growth and possibility. The film leaves the viewer with a Ruza remembering the young Ruza, who took chances, and an older Ruza, who again takes chances, is open to making connections, is in motion.

Brudermord begins „in motion“, with the camera literally inside a car filming the Turkish countryside. It is the story of brothers – blood brothers, feuding sets of brothers, chosen brothers, and the death of brothers. It follows the development of a reluctant immigrant determined to make the best of his situation, into the stereotypical perpetuator of ethnic violence, into a „martyr“/„murderer“. While the film criticizes Germany as being anything but the promised land for those seeking a new home, it places the blame on both the German and the immigrant communities for stubbornly replicating and maintaining old boundaries, instead of adapting and working toward a necessary intercultural third reality. The film itself as film produced a community in which Germans, Kurds and Turks formed a working community – the memory of which is the film itself. The fact that the film was produced and distributed and shown internationally also attests to the fact that transnational collaboration is possible.

Like *Fräulein, Brudermord* very self-reflectively also posits film as a positive means of achieving postnationalism. The film is a story of a journey, but not one that goes full circle, but one that begins and ends on the road, a road, which fades into a white screen. Film then is the road, is the journey into the space of „between“. This particular film traces the journey of Azad and of Ibo, both Kurds, both of whom leave their rural homelands in the mountains for an unnamed city in Germany. Azad, a former shepherd, joins his brother Semo, former Kurdish freedom fighter, now an abusive pimp of Russian prostitutes, in Germany, in order to send more money home to his family. Ibo is sent alone as a child who has already lost his childhood – his parents were murdered as a result of the Kurdish/Turkish conflict – only to lose what is left of his childhood by being raped twice as a result of the same conflict which has crossed the borders into Germany.

Azad takes Ibo under his wing, two Kurds against an indifferent German world. The real trouble begins, however, in the public space of a subway when Azad and Ibo encounter Ahmet, the son of Turkish immigrants, whose fighting dog frightens Ibo. Azad asks Ahmet in Turkish to control the dog, referring to Ahmet as „brother“. The dog’s owner curbs his dog, but takes offense at a Kurd calling him brother, telling him in German „*Ich bin nicht dein Bruder*“. Later, in another encounter, Ahmet and his dog antagonize Azad, whose brother, Semo, defends him by stabbing Ahmet, whose dog kills his owner, by eating the exposed intestines.

As a result, Ahmet’s brother, Seki, now wants revenge. Azad is willing to die to protect his brother Semo, but gives Semo up as Seki rapes Ibo. As a result of the rape, Ibo also becomes violent, punching another boy bloody who threatens him over his paper route turf. When Azad tries to get Ibo to tell the police about what happened to him, in an attempt to get the rapist off the street, and Ibo to move past his rape, Ibo gets defensive and announces he plans to wait until he grows up and then he will kill Seki. Semo is killed in jail and his intestines are smuggled out to be fed to Ahmet’s dog. Despite his accomplished revenge against Semo, Seki rapes Ibo again, who now wants to die. Azad has had it with Germany, and plans to take Ibo with him as he follows his girlfriend to Albania. Right before he goes, however, he slits Seki’s throat, and cuts off his ear. Azad is shot running away from the scene by his victim’s friends, and although he manages to make the bus and join his girlfriend and Ibo – who do not realize he is shot in the back – dies en route to Albania, giving Ibo the severed ear as a

parting gift.

This film is not, however, a film in the older vein of Turkish-German films, which posit the immigrant as victim of a cruel and indifferent Germany. In fact, despite its seeming pessimism, *Brudermord* is optimistic about the power of postnational *Heimat*films. The film traces Azad's journey from an isolated and aloof spectator, who wants to be left alone, to one who can imagine an end to the cycle of Turkish/Kurdish violence, to a fanatic actor in a world divided into black and white, and finally, to one who sacrifices himself for the idea of a postnational/postbinary community.

In short, this film is a film against national boundaries, against a world coded in binary. It is a film that finds hope in film, in the process of making films, in the process of creating intercultural spaces. The scene, which best exemplifies the hope of postnational *Heimat*film is found at the center of the film, during a German language class.

Azad brings Ibo to class, encouraging him to learn German. Ibo, having never been to school, is frightened, but as he looks around the room at the students repeating the words the teacher asks them to repeat, and looks at the pictures of the animals on the blackboard, he feels a sense of belonging and joy. The drawn dog on the blackboard begins to wag its tail and Ibo is pulled into the blackboard, riding a horse in his Kurdish homeland, laughingly and enthusiastically telling his parents, who lie under their tombstones that he is in school for the first time. A chorus of women sings a Kurdish upbeat song, butterflies fly around, and everything is happy and hopeful, despite the fact that at the center of the board are the two tombstones of his parents. Ibo's vision of paradise (he has told Azad that his parents are in paradise, a statement Azad misunderstands at first to mean Turkey) is a re-membered one of the present – his parents are dead, but they care for him, and are happy for him, and are worried about his present safety.

Up until this point, the film viewer has only seen Ibo's memory of his homeland in conjunction with blood – his grandfather sacrifices a goat and marks Ibo's forehead, as the boy speaks off camera, telling the viewer that the only thing that one can count on in life is to be accompanied by death. The other flashback scene is when his parents are shot by Turkish soldiers, who then place their own guns underneath the bodies and take a picture which they will send to the papers to justify their murders. These memories, are, in a sense, restrictive „national“ films, while the positive animated cartoon view of Ibo's homeland is a space of

boundary crossing, a multicultural space (Kurdish, Turkish – most of the other students in the room as well as the teacher are Turkish, German – it takes place in a German language class). Distanced, both actually and metaphorically, from his *Heimat*, this educational space allows Ibo to remember his childhood, to, in effect, for a moment become a child again, one who has not become bitter and jaded by the reality of growing up too soon as a result of interethnic violence. Unfortunately, this moment is snatched away too soon, when the vision fades, the students laugh at his announcement that he wants to bring back the dead when he grows up, and his rapist appears on the other side of the glass.

As a film which emphasizes the importance of the state of transit as the place of *Heimat*, language is an important medium not only to take with one on a journey, but part of the journey as well. It is the sound of the German words repeated in the context of a German language class, which, for a moment, gives Ibo hope for the present and for the future. The rhythm of the German words turns into the rhythm of the Kurdish „Ibo song“. It is the sense of community, a sense of a safe place, which allows Ibo to laugh, to remember his *Heimat* and to have a sense of identity and future, to the extent that he can say, without hesitation, what it is he wants to be when he grows up. Having created and seen his animated cartoon, in some sense as a result of „hearing“ German in a positive space, Ibo has had his first glimpse of filmmaking/ his first vision of bringing back the dead (his mother and father, even if only as voices from gravestones). It is in this classroom that Ibo decides to become a filmmaker.

I argue that the entire film *Brudermord* is actually the grown-up Ibo's film, „proof“ that he became what he wanted to, namely one who brings back the dead. The coming to paradise, the coming home to the *Heimat*, the safe space, the place of community and belonging, is, in the end, the white screen with which the film ends. This is a film about the power of the film medium in *Heimat* creation. As Ibo's film, it attests to the end of the violence cycle, indicating that Ibo grew up and instead of being filled with hatred is able to remember his German experience and despite the horror associated with it, use the memories to remember his friend, Azad, to bring him back to life as the protagonist in the film *Brudermord*. Ibo does not whitewash Azad, does not see him one-dimensionally but shows him to be conflicted, proud, stubborn, as well as compassionate.

Ibo's voice is the voice-over of the film, accompanying the viewer from the beginning of the film, and periodically commenting throughout it, by

interspersing his and Azad's story with that of the Kurdish legend of the blacksmith who killed the serpent tyrant. Yet, the montage of these sequences, suggests that the story is not just a story to keep the idea of Kurdistan alive, but rather a universal story of hope, which ties all families who have sacrificed/lost children together in equality and potential understanding, even if they happen to be on opposite sides of a conflict.

Much like Ibo's classroom, the greengrocer's shop had the potential for being a site of imagination and boundary crossing. Both Azad and the Turkish father attempted to make Germany a third space, an alternative to the binary Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Their attempts are unsuccessful, leading Azad to give up on the idea, but the film *Brudermord* does not.

Azad finds and enters the grocery belonging to Ahmet's parents, although it seems, his real reason is to let them know, that their surviving son is a rapist. The result is that the parents, especially the father, reject their son, disown him for hurting innocent children. However, the Turkish father makes Azad examine his own motives, and tells him, that he should not be a hypocrite seeking justice for rape, if he does not do his part in seeing that justice is done for Ahmet's murder, by giving up Semo. Azad seems struck by this, as he stands at the door of the grocery, on which is a large sticker, spelling „fantasy“. Azad opens this door, leaves and gives up his brother to the German authorities. He returns to the grocer and a hesitant truce is established. In an attempt to end the cycle of violence, both Azad and the greengrocer break familial bonds for the greater bonds of community. However, this truce does not last, since Seki refuses to be part of this imagined better place of Turkish-Kurdish „peace“. Both Azad and Seki's family too easily fall back into being enemies. Seki is allowed back into the family; Azad stops believing in a more „objective“ justice as represented by the German police, which fails him and Ibo, forcing him to take justice for Ibo and for Semo into his own hands, killing Seki.

Despite „reality“ replacing the „fantasy“ of an end of revenge violence between Kurds and Turks, which was tentatively posited as possible in the „truce“ between Seki's father and Azad and despite Azad turning into the stereotypical fanatical avenger (as evidenced by his „crazed“ expression as he kills Seki), Ibo's „brother“ does not, in the end, give up on the idea of a third option, of a place beyond binaries. In a sense, Azad sacrifices himself to the binary code, in order to give Ibo the chance to move beyond it. Azad dies „seeing paradise“, dies watching a „postnational *Heimat*film“ if you will; or at least, pretends that

he does, for his young „brother“.

Ibo makes clear, that despite the seeming fatalism of the film, Azad always had a choice. The film emphasizes this through the device of recurring blind figure („blind to the national?“) who represents the possibility of transnational *Heimat* – a third option. The blind man helps Azad onto the truck out of his homeland on his way to Germany and tells Azad: „May I give you some advice? You will lose a brother, but find another. Go quickly to the home of your beloved.“ *Heimat* is the process of being in motion, in transit, changing.

This blind figure recurs as a German blind man walking along the street as Ibo teases Azad for being in love, reminding Azad that he has the choice to leave, to opt out of the cycle of violence. Right before Azad commits the murder, after he kisses the coffin of his brother during a pro-Kurdish anti-German demonstration, the original blind figure who gave him the advice in Turkey appears standing facing the opposite direction of all Semo's mourners. The mourners walk by chanting „Semo, you are not dead, as long as there are those who remember you.“ Azad made the choice to kill, and Ibo's film indicates it was the wrong choice, although Ibo understands and is grateful for having a friend like Azad who tried to and did make it possible for Ibo to live in a world where he would not have to grow up and murder his rapist. Azad helped Ibo see the third possibility between Turk and Kurd, between immigrant and German, a place of meeting – in film. Ibo's animated film of bringing back the dead as well as „his“ film *Brudermord* are juxtaposed with the supposed bringing back the dead of the rally around the body of Semo, which only encourages the binary world view – Kurd vs. Turk, only spurs further hatred and results in more deaths.

In a nod to the traditional *Heimat*film, there is a return home at the end of the film – Olga, Azad's girlfriend – is returning to Albania. Olga is less an individual than an allegory for *Heimat*. Olga provides comfort for Azad, and hope, and despite or in spite of himself he begins to believe in a better place, in life, in a *Heimat*, in a place where he belongs as opposed to just existing. Interestingly, this hope occurs in the German language, as it is the language in which they communicate. She is also associated with Catholicism. During the Easter service, where the preacher reads the part about „resurrection and the life“, Olga gets up and wishes Azad a „Happy Easter“. It is on „Easter“ then that Azad begins to believe in a postnational „Heimat“, begins to make bonds beyond those he has made with fellow Kurd, Ibo. Arslan thus alludes to the

traditional Catholic strains of a traditional *Heimat*film, as he does in the end of the film, but with a difference.

The last scene at the back of the bus driving to Albania presents the viewer with the iconography of the martyr who dies looking and trusting in the better life, in the paradise that awaits him. Yet, *Brudermord* is not a religious film, and the film in no way suggests that Catholicism as a religion is a path towards a better world. Important, however, is that Azad's „followers“ (Olga and Ibo) sleep at the time of his death. They feel secure, and like Azad, can „see“ a better *Heimat*, a paradise, in their imaginations.

The light at the end of the tunnel is not the light of money as it had been in the beginning of the film, and is not the religious paradise, but rather the lights from the headlights from the vehicles behind the bus. The camera moves toward these lights, they become fuzzy, and the screen turns white. The paradise, in fact, is the screen, the blank screen, the screen at the end of the tunnel of the film being projected through the dark movie theater. Anything is possible here: Azad „can already see paradise, little brother, and it is wonderful“. This is his message, this is the parting gift to Ibo, not the ear, to which Ibo does not have much of a reaction, other than to go back to sleep, which is the reaction the film suggests is necessary for a world beyond restrictive binaries. The implication is not that we go to sleep and not face „reality“, whatever that may be, but that we dream, that we (the film audience) imagine a different world. Postnational *Heimat*films are a good place to start. We do not need Ibo's voiceover in the end we do not need his prompting, as we have had throughout the film, because we are now on our own. It is a white screen, our turn, to bring back the dead. As the credits role we hear the Ibo song again, the song that accompanied his animated film. The credits are not just credits to be ignored as we walk out of the theater – they are part of the film, in that they reflect the transnational community that produced it and the transnational community of movie spectators.

Ibo began his film with the voice-over „When they take everything from you / When you have nothing left except memory/ Then is the time to be reborn.“ He ends it, with the blank screen, daring the viewer to imagine.

Both Staka's *Fräulein* and Arslan's *Brudermord* are examples of postnational *Heimat*films, which celebrate their medium as not just representative of possible postnational *Heimat* creation but as literal embodiments of the process they thematize as content. Both show how becoming „like“ the host culture, by denying one's own culture, either explicitly or implicitly, as well as adamantly

rejecting the host culture completely, by denying its right to existence, are both ways, in which the immigrant will fail to find a new *Heimat*, once s/he has left her/his homeland. Success lies in between those two extremes, in the middle, and, as both films imply, ‚in transit‘ – literally and metaphorically. The acceptance of the state of being in transit, both films stress, is key to becoming a postnational and thus, a global instead of a displaced and „lost“ citizen. Postnational *Heimat* is the idea that everywhere or anywhere is on the way home.

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