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Linda Dittmar

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8 Contrary to conventional wisdom about assimilation, Gans observes a tradeoff between “becoming American” and making economic advances: “The people who have secured an economically viable niche are acculturating less than did the European 2nd and 3rd generation and those without such a niche escape condemnation to dead end immigrant and other jobs mainly by becoming very poor and persistently jobless Americans” (188).

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Immigration Filmography for Educators

Compiled by Linda Dittmar

A web search yields long lists of films about immigration—many more than can be included here. National and international, feature length and short, fiction and documentary, video and film, big budget and small, the lists go on even as new films enter into circulation. If anything, this quantity of titles calls for an encyclopedic treatment like Tom Zaniello’s *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Expanded Guide to Films About Labor* (Cornell: URL Press, 2003). Clearly this brief filmography cannot do justice to the complex issues at stake, including some basic questions about what constitutes immigration as a subject matter: Are we talking here about *immigration* or *migration*? Do *exile* and *refugee status* count as kinds of immigration? And what about collective *expulsions* (ethnic cleansings and mass *transfers* of population) born of violent conflict—are they modes of immigration, or is immigration a personal choice quite apart from collective coercion?

The following list, then, barely skims the surface. It leans towards major “hits”—that is, films that had substantial theatrical exhibition and should therefore be easily available on DVD. It also stresses U.S. films. That some of the titles

are available at diverse venues suggests that some immigration-themed films are edging towards forming a canon of sorts. When shopping for DVDs, consider comparison shopping. Unless noted otherwise, all films listed are fiction.

FILMS MADE IN THE UNITED STATES:

The Betrayal [documentary]

Dir. Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath (2008). A moving, compassionate account of the courageous journey made by a Laotian mother and her children escaping from war-torn Laos to Brooklyn, N.Y. The “paradise” they reach is, in its own way, as harrowing as the world they left behind. Though several layers of political and familial betrayal occur here, including the U.S.’s abandonment of the Laotians who fought alongside it, the film is finally about recovery and the start of a new life.

Bread and Roses

Dir. Ken Loach (2000). A gripping story of the struggle for fair working conditions and unionization by immigrant workers who take a stand against the million dollar corporations set to exploit them. It is the story of two sisters who work as janitors and the abuse suffered by undocumented workers. A young man’s effort to organize the janitors creates a new crisis.

Brincando El Charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican

Dir. Frances Negrón-Mutaner (1994). This film explores identity through the experience of a young Puerto Rican woman living in the United States. Using a mix

of fiction, archival footage, processed interviews, and soap opera, the film tells the story of a middle-class, light-skinned Puerto Rican photographer/videographer who is attempting to construct a sense of community in the United States. It is a meditation on class, race, and sexuality.

El Norte

Dir. Gregory Nava (1983). A lyrical film about a Maya-Indian brother and sister who escape from Guatemala to the United States when the army devastates their village in response to a peasants’ uprising. Determined to reach the United States, or El Norte, the two teenagers—uneducated, illegal, and alone—manage to survive and reach Los Angeles.

Frozen River

Dir. Courtney Hunt (2008). Taking place in upstate New York at the Canadian border, in a gray and frigid pre-Christmas desolation, the film concerns two women (a white trailer-mom and a Mohawk woman who lost custody of her child) who team up to smuggle illegal immigrants from Canada into the U.S. Unlike most immigration films, where the emphasis is on the plight of the outsider, this one interweaves the anguish of gender, class, and ethnicity on “our” side as it confronts those of immigrants.

Golden Venture [documentary]

Dir. Peter Cohn (2006). An acclaimed documentary about the U.S. immigration crisis. Focusing on a freighter smuggling 286 immigrants that ran aground near New York City (1993), this documentary is a compelling and timely portrait of courage, resilience, and compassion in face of U.S. bureaucracies: the Immigration and

Naturalization Services (INS), the Justice Department, and the courts.

The House of Sand and Fog

Dir. Vadim Perelman (2003). A gripping drama about an Iranian colonel trying to buy a house at an auction for his family, while the woman to whom it belonged, and who lost it through a bureaucratic error, is putting up a fight to keep it.

The Immigrant

Dir. Charlie Chaplin (1917). A silent Charlie Chaplin classic, the tramp, traveling steerage, comes to the United States with throngs of other immigrants. Acted with humor and poignancy, the film offers an intimate and loving view of the immigrant experience in the early 20th century.

In America

Dir. Jim Sheridan (2003). A touching story about a young Irish couple who lost their only son, told through the eyes of their spunky daughters. Trying to run away from their grief, they move (illegally) with their two daughters to a junkie-infested apartment building in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen. Their hopes and dreams are brought to life again with the help of a neighbor dying of AIDS.

The Jazz Singer

Dir. Alan Crosland (1927; remake 1980). Known in film history as the first feature film using synchronized dialogue sequences, this is a melodramatic but also touching film about the son of a Jewish cantor torn between his traditional Jewish identity and the new modernity he can reach for as a jazz singer. Al Jolson in blackface opens up yet another layer of otherness.

La Ciudad (The City) documentary/docudrama]

Dir. David Riker (1999). A series of four short films combine to explore the lives of Mexican workers in Manhattan, lives full of dreams but also fears of the city. Filmed in black and white in the tradition of socially conscious photographers and filmmakers like Walker Evans and Vittorio de Sica, the film makes a powerful statement about the difficulties facing such immigrants.

Lone Star

Dir. John Sayles (1996). Part Western, part murder mystery, and part love story, this film tells the story of a small Texas border town where Mexicans cross the river illegally at night. When the remains of the former sheriff are discovered, the current sheriff has to solve this mystery, uncovering a web of lies and corruption.

Lost Boys of Sudan [documentary]

Dirs. Megan Mylan and John Shenk (2003). Two teenage Sudanese refugees, survivors of Sudan's brutal civil war, embark on an extraordinary journey from Africa to America. The film tells the story of Santino and Peter, two of the almost 4,000 who were resettled in the United States. Once on safe ground, they grapple with being a world away from home—with cultural differences and with the extremes of abundance and alienation. Also of interest is **God Grew Tired of Us**. [documentary]. *Dir. Christopher Quinn (US 2006),* which follows three Sudanese boys who are refugees. Showing their honesty and goodness, it raises the question, what conditions create a civilized society?

The Namesake

Dir. Mira Nair (2006; based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel). A first generation son of Indian immigrant parents tries to make a place for himself even as his parents, too, struggle to make this transition. He is not always able to straddle the two worlds to which he belongs.

Northern Light

Dirs. Jim Hanson and Rob Nilsson (1979). Based on a real life diary, this unique and powerful film concerns farmers' struggle and organizing against commercial interests and government regulation meant to thwart them. Though the focus here is on farm labor and organizing in North Dakota and not immigration, the farming community is Norwegian and still speaking Norwegian in parts of the film.

Salt of the Earth

Dir. Herbert Biberman (1954). A classic labor film about a New Mexico miners' strike, based on the events of a 1951 zinc miners' strike. Though not strictly about immigration (the Spanish/Mexican community it concerns antedates the Anglos), the film's focus on ethnicity and gender within the struggle to unionize make it unique. Also unique are its explicit left politics during the height of Cold War repression. Many roles are played by the strikers and their families. See also **A Crime to Fit the Punishment** [documentary], Dirs. Stephen Mack and Barbara Moss (1982), which concerns the blacklist and the making of **Salt of the Earth**. A book titled *Salt of the Earth*, containing the screenplay and other materials, is available from The Feminist Press.

Sentenced Home [documentary]

Dir. Nicole Newnham (2007). This documentary follows three Cambodian-American men who were brought to the United States by their refugee families. Raised in the grim public housing of Seattle, bad choices as teens alter their lives forever when immigration laws sentence them to return to Cambodia.

Stand and Deliver

Dir. Ramon Menendez (1988). The true story of an immigrant teacher, Jaime Escalante, and his success in having his Hispanic L.A. students turn away from gang life and become top math students.

Under the Same Moon

Dir. Patricia Riggen (2007). A heart-warming story about a mother who leaves Mexico to make a home for herself and her son. When the boy's grandmother dies, leaving him alone, he sets off on his own to find his mother. (Searchlight Films established a website that provides links to organizations that help reunite immigrant families.)

The Visitor

Dir. Tom McCarthy (2007). This film concerns a lonely economics professor from Connecticut whose life changes forever—and for better—when he finds a couple of illegal immigrants living in his New York apartment. Sensitive and insightful, the film follows the Syrian “visitor” facing deportation as all three grapple with the INS legal processes post-9/11.

Well-Founded Fear. [documentary]

Dirs. Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini (2000). Made for PBS's Point

Of View, this is an unprecedented, in depth, inside look at the asylum process of the U.S. Federal government (INS). The filmmakers take their cameras behind locked doors, where bureaucrats decide the fates of thousands of asylum-seekers who must demonstrate a “well-founded fear” that their lives would be endangered were they to be deported back to their countries. Covering multiple ethnicities, religions, and nationalities, the film is riveting, detailed, and emotional. [Some description of torture.]

FILMS MADE IN OTHER COUNTRIES:

Baran (In the Rain)

Dir. Majid Majidi, director (Iran 2001). A lovely, wistful film about Afghan refugees working in Iran. A new boy arrives at a construction site where he is assigned cooking duty for the workers because he is not physically strong. The boy he displaces resents him only to discover that the new “boy” is actually a girl. The fragile situation of migrants is described beautifully.

Black Girl

Dir. Ousmane Sembene (Senegal 1966). A young woman from Dakar, the capital of Senegal, goes to France with her white French employers, expecting to serve as their children’s caretaker. Once in France, her employers demote her to a maid. The film powerfully charts the many forms of subtle and obvious racism and disrespect that assault her as, increasingly alienated, she descends into apathy and depression.

Cache (Hidden)

Dir. Michael Haneke (Austria/France 2005). When surveillance tapes start arriving mysteriously at the home of a

successful TV host of a program about books, the comfort of his bourgeois family is disrupted. His search for the origin of the tapes (they start including disturbing drawings) leads him to an Algerian man who grew up with him after his Algerian parents were killed in the Paris Massacre of 1961. A powerful statement about resistance to assimilating the Other.

The Class

Dir. Laurent Cantet (France 2008). Francois Begaudeau plays a version of himself as he negotiates a year teaching a class of racially mixed students from a tough Parisian neighborhood. The class is a microcosm of contemporary France. Though Francois insists on an atmosphere of respect and diligence, classroom ethics are put to the test when students begin to challenge his methods.

Dirty Pretty Things

Dir. Steven Frears (UK 2003). An illegal Nigerian immigrant in London, a doctor in his homeland but now working days as a taxi driver and nights as a hotel desk clerk, gets entangled in a snare of desperation, poverty, and black-market body organs. His only friend, a Turkish hotel maid, may be the next to be caught. This is a thriller about a gruesome underworld in London that preys on the desperation of immigrants.

East is East

Dir. Damien O'Donnell (UK 1999). This comedy/drama is about a modest but happy family in the UK whose troubles begin as the children begin approaching marriage age. Though the mother is British and attempts to meld the two cultures, the Pakistani father wants his chil-

dren to live a more traditional life than he himself had. Trouble inevitably brews.

The Edge of Heaven

Dir. Fatih Akim (Turkey/Germany 2007). A poignant film, thoughtful and subtle, about Turkish-German relations as characters cross over between the two countries. Delving into relations between the two people, it also brings up questions of gender and class relations and the generational divide.

In This World

Dir. Michael Winterbottom (UK 2002). Two Afghan boys journey through Iran, Turkey, Italy, and France to the UK. As they meet one challenge after the next, the film registers the desperate risks these boys, and many like them, take with their lives in order to escape life-threatening situations in their home countries. "Borders" lose all meaning in this world of migrant workers.

Journey of Hope

Dir. Xavier Koller (Turkey/Switzerland 1990). Based on a real story, the harrowing journey of a Turkish-Kurdish family's attempt to immigrate to Switzerland is the core of this film. Inevitably, this dangerous journey involves a series of threats from predatory humans and, then, heartless bureaucrats. Though the film exposes traffickers and other exploitative individuals, its main criticism is of the merciless system where social rules that are designed to safeguard the rich from the poor.

La Promesse

Dirs. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne (Belgium 1997). Written and directed

with unflinching integrity, this film is a powerful exposition of the cynical exploitation of foreign workers (in this instance construction workers), set in motion by the moral dilemma thrust on an adolescent Belgian boy when one of his father's workers falls off the scaffolding. Igor's promise to the dying worker to take care of his wife and infant child comes up against his father's ruthless determination to cover up the accident and get rid of the woman and her child.

M. Ibrahim

Dir. Francois Dupeyron (France 2004). A moving, understated film about a friendship developing between an "Arab" (a Muslim of unspecified origin) grocer and an adolescent Jewish boy whose father, his sole caretaker, disappeared. Set in 1960s Paris, this coming-of-age story is also a love story and a tale of endurance, where two outsiders come to share their common humanity but also face a common disregard by their host country.

Moonlighting

Dir. Jerzy Skolimoski (UK 1982). Novak, a Polish construction worker, leads a team of builders working illegally in London. The film stresses the tensions and claustrophobia of their situation, as they are essentially under "house arrest" and unable to live normally for the duration of their job.

My Beautiful Launderette

Dir. Stephen Frears (UK 1985). A multi-layered picture of the immigrant experience in the UK, filtered through a Pakistani family living in London. The story focuses on Omar, who prefers to take over a run-down launderette from

his sleazy uncle than continue his education against the wishes of his journalist father. Omar revamps it with the help of his English friend and sometimes lover, Johnny.

My Son the Fanatic

Dir. Udayan Prasad (UK 1997). A powerful film about the life of immigrant British Pakistanis in a small town in the English Midlands. The father drives a taxi, saving penny to penny for his son's education. While the father develops a friendship with a prostitute/client of his, the son breaks off his engagement to a young English woman and hosts a holy man in their small flat. He becomes a "born again" Muslim and together with other young Muslims assault the prostitutes in an attempt to purify their town

The Other Europe [documentary]

Dir. Paul-Erik Heilbuth (UK 2006). Unlike most coverage of immigration issues, this film explains why undocumented workers are an integral part of Western economics. Depicting a cross-section of the immigrant experience from successful to disastrous, it is a penetrating study of the economics and politics behind the immigration debates and an unambiguous call to develop humane, consistent immigration policies. The film's focus on Spain, Germany, and England is not without parallels in the United States.

The Secret of the Grain

Dir. Abdellatif Kechiche (2007). When the father of an immigrant North African family loses his job at the shipyard of a small French port town ("little Marseille"), he decides to open a couscous restaurant.

Focusing on issues of family, poverty, and anti-immigrant prejudice, the film concerns not only the tenacious struggle to survive, but to survive with dignity.

SELECTED SOURCES

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(Includes a special section "Recommended for high school use")

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Murthy Law Firm: <http://www.murthy.com/films.html>

Sentimental Refugee (an online magazine): <http://www.sentimentalrefugee.com/movies.html>

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