

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Angela L. Yeager for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on December 3, 2012

Title: Immigrant Encounters: Film Narratives of the Modern Immigrant

Abstract approved:

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This thesis employs a narrative analysis of more than twenty-five films that are centrally concerned with immigrants and the immigrant experience. In Part One, drawing from the work of Yosefa Loshitzky, I will focus on films that feature an immigrant lead character. In Part Two, I will explore movies that filter immigration through the perspective of a native-born citizen protagonist.

Important to my reading throughout this study is how we, as viewers, are situated by these stories to feel or react to the predicament of the immigrant. By examining two narrative approaches, that of the immigrant protagonist and the citizen protagonist, we can better understand how films engage larger issues of identity, belonging, and citizenship.

The thesis will conclude with a close reading of *Goodbye Solo*. This film uniquely transcends convenient categories of immigrant narrative or Eurocentric perspective; instead it approximates Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's call for a polycentric approach to narrative in their foundational work, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*.

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Immigrant Encounters: Film Narratives of the Modern Immigrant

by  
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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented December 3, 2012  
Commencement June 2013

Master of Arts thesis of Angela L. Yeager presented on December 3, 2012.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Angela L. Yeager, Author

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses sincere appreciation to Dr. Jon Lewis for four years of guidance and encouragement to help me arrive at this point. Jon has been a true mentor and an inspiration as both a scholar and a fellow film fan. I would also like to thank Dr. Joseph Orosco for his guidance in helping navigate some of the tricky areas of immigration policy and theory, and for finding sources for this project. I want to thank the other members of my committee for their time and effort. I would like to thank my family and friends, especially grammar king Jeff Merth, for putting up with endless whining and for allowing me to bounce ideas off them—their support and love was essential to this project. Finally, I must acknowledge Ramin Bahrani for making the best American movies of the past decade, and the films of Robert Altman for inspiring me every day.

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## DEDICATION

For Julian, Squonk, and Libby, with love.

## Introduction

“Never forget who you are and where you’re from.” — Mr. Satrapi, *Persepolis*

Portrayals of immigrants and the immigrant experience have been part of cinema almost as long as the medium has existed. Starting in 1917 when Charlie Chaplin portrayed an immigrant on a crowded boat destined for Ellis Island in the appropriately named film *The Immigrant*, audiences in American and Western Europe have learned about immigrants, and identified with portrayals of immigrants, through film.

Much of the recent scholarship on immigration narratives has been focused on the growing body of work by minority, migrant or diasporic filmmakers. A great deal of this scholarship focuses on the diverse and expanding array of films in Europe and North America by first- or second-generation immigrant filmmakers. Hamid Naficy’s *An Accented Cinema*, for example, is concerned with the filmmakers of postcolonial and Third World nations living in the West, while Eva Rueschmann’s collection of essays, *Moving Pictures, Migrating Identities*, looks at exilic and diasporic films, treating a variety of motion pictures from Europe and the United States in their national and transnational contexts.<sup>1</sup> Other texts focus on immigrant film movements coming out of specific regions, such as Sylvie Durmelat and Vinay Swamy’s edited collection, *Screening Integration: Recasting Maghrebi Immigration in Contemporary France*, which looks at films made by directors from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.<sup>2</sup>



While all of these scholars, and their readings of particular films, have been useful to my project, few texts have examined films about immigration based on narrative structure regardless of region or the filmmaker's personal background. My purpose is to draw parallels between seemingly disparate films about immigration. Close readings of these films reveal that the United States and Western Europe often repeat narratives around issues of alienation, assimilation, cultural difference, socioeconomic struggles, prejudice, and overall societal treatment, including exploitation and acceptance.

In this thesis, I will examine more than twenty-five films. In Part One, I will focus on films that feature an immigrant lead character. Part One draws significantly from film scholar Yosefa Loshitzky's book, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema*. Loshitzky has usefully grouped immigrant narrative films into three broad categories: the journey film, which focuses primarily on the hardship of getting to the new country; the "promised land," which is usually an investigation of the immigrant's encounter with the receiving country; and the third common narrative is centered on the second generation and beyond, which explores the process of assimilation, disintegration and the experiences of children of immigrants.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the seventeen films analyzed in Part One fall into the "promised land" category, although all three major theme areas will be addressed.

Part Two will explore an under-examined area of modern film scholarship, movies that filter immigration and its effects through the perspective of a native-born citizen protagonist to show how societies and cultures frame issues around

immigration. I have divided these films into three categories: films that feature a protagonist who sacrifices him or herself for the sake of an immigrant; films that portray a citizen character learning a valuable life lesson or being changed dramatically after interacting with an immigrant; and finally, films that have a more nuanced or ambivalent perspective and portray the tensions, conflicts and issues that can arise when the citizen and immigrant interact.

Important to our reading of the films that fit into both parts of this study is how we are meant to feel or react to these immigrant narratives. In their foundational work, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue that such media narratives need to become “polycentric,” that is, images and stories should work toward an approach that takes in many perspectives, identities and cultural legacies.<sup>4</sup> Instead of separating films as, to use Shohat and Stam’s phrase, made exclusively for “the White spectator, the Black Spectator, the Latino spectator,” filmmakers must carve a path toward representing diverse peoples, particularly those of the diaspora who may identify with multiple cultures and homelands.<sup>5</sup> These representations should include the blended and multiracial families and neighborhoods that are increasingly the rule, not the exception, in modern cities across the world.<sup>6</sup> Ideally, by examining two narrative approaches, that of the immigrant protagonist and the citizen protagonist, we can better understand how films can portray complex characters with narratives that engage larger issues around identity, belonging, and citizenship.

**Part One: Through an Immigrant's Eyes: Alienation, Hardship, and  
Perseverance of the Immigrant**

“This country is a land of dreams. It can be a hard place, a cruel place. But it's where I work, and I dream of a better place for my son.” – Carlos Galindo, *A Better Life*

“In this damn country, which we hate and love, you can get anything you want.” – Nasser, *My Beautiful Laundrette*

This section examines films about people who have migrated to Western Europe and North America. Cinematic narratives focused on immigrants often repeat themes, patterns and areas of conflict. A film about a woman who leaves Pakistan to find a new home in the American Midwest repeats the same narrative as a film about a woman from Colombia who goes to New York City with her two children. Filmmakers who focus on immigration use storytelling both as a pedagogical tool to help audiences understand, relate with and compare themselves to the immigrant characters; and as a literary device to build tension, portray conflict, and finally, offer the possibility of hope, or the tragedy of loss and alienation.

The first chapter will examine five films where the journey to the new homeland is the central focus of the narrative. The majority of these are journeys from south to north (*Border Incident*, *El Norte*, *La Misma Luna* and *Sin Nombre*), with one exception, the Swedish film *The Emigrants*. The second chapter looks at what happens

to immigrant characters once they arrive in the promised land, a place that holds the possibilities of a new start, but also alienation, isolation and the possibility of tragedy. The third chapter in Part One examines films that portray the second generation of an immigrant family, and explores their experiences as individuals torn between two worlds.

### **Chapter One: Journeys**

As Loshitzky points out, journey motifs are one of the most common tropes in literature and film. The journey can be seen as both literal and symbolic.<sup>7</sup> In films about immigration, these journeys are more often than not “trauma-saturated” as the immigrant character goes through what constitutes a rite of passage in order to get to a new adopted land.

Hamid Naficy, author of *An Accented Cinema*, notes that journey films can take on both a literal and symbolic meaning. “They cross many borders and engage in deterritorializing and reterritorializing journeys, which take several forms, including home-seeking journeys, journeys of homelessness, and homecoming journeys. However, these journeys are not just physical and territorial but are also deeply psychological and philosophical.”<sup>8</sup>

The five films explored in this chapter are primarily journeys of people traveling south to north. In the case of the first two films, *Border Incident* and *El Norte*, the journey is marked by death and destruction, leading a viewer to surmise that there is little hope for new beginnings for immigrant characters. The next two films,

*La Misma Luna (Under the Same Moon)* and *The Emigrants*, portray the hardships of an immigrant's journey, but a happy ending ultimately rewards its characters with the promise of a new life in their adopted homeland. The final film in this section, *Sin Nombre*, portrays a violent and harsh journey that takes its two main characters from Colombia to Mexico and finally to the border of the U.S. The unknown fate of the surviving lead character leaves viewers undecided whether she will be accepted in her new home.

Perhaps one of the earliest border films, and certainly the first to show the journey from south to north (as opposed to the many film noirs and Westerns that show conflicted protagonists who journey south to leave their past behind) is Anthony Mann's 1949 crime procedural/noir/Western *Border Incident*. Typical of Mann's work, the film is an odd blend of genres, and is also believed to be the first that is centrally concerned with the plight of braceros, which translates literally as *strong-arm*.<sup>9</sup> The Bracero Program, also known as the Emergency Farm Labor Program, started in 1948 and ended in 1964.<sup>10</sup> During that time, the United States imported about 200,000 workers a year and thousands more migrated illegally to keep up with the demand for cheap labor.<sup>11</sup> As the official name suggests, the program was originally intended as a temporary fix to help farms provide manpower, but turned out to be so lucrative for powerful agribusiness interests that it was extended indefinitely.<sup>12</sup>

*Border Incident* opens with a helicopter view of the "Great American Canal" which separates California and Mexico, while a voice-over gives a five-minute

overview of the history of Mexican-American relations. “The fields that feed this great agricultural empire are made possible almost entirely because of the sweat and labor of Mexican laborers, or Braceros,” the deep voice intones. After a short scene portraying some laborers trying to return to Mexico being robbed of their money and killed by threatening “coyotes” who hide in the deep trenches of the canyons, the film informs us that it is based on a real case of the U.S. Immigration Service.

The film centers on a Mexican federal agent named Pablo Rodriguez, played by Ricardo Montalban, who goes undercover as a bracero in cooperation with George Murphy’s American agent Jack Bearnese in order to discover who is ambushing and killing undocumented workers at the border. *Border Incident* is also about a character who is passing as something he is not, but with a twist. In many films that explore race, ethnicity and issues of national belonging, it is often those who are disenfranchised that must “pass” in order to fit in with the dominate society. Montalban’s character is a suave, educated man who must pass as a laborer. To do so, he dresses himself in the bracero “uniform” of straw hat and rubs dirt on his jeans. He also befriends a real bracero, the kind Juan, who has been waiting at the border for weeks to get a permit to work in the U.S. Montalban’s Pablo pretends he is tired of waiting for his permits, and pays to be taken across the border illegally with a group of other men, who are hidden in the back of a truck.

*Border Incident* is framed by two distinct journeys. The first is Pablo’s initial entry with the group of braceros across the border from Mexico to the United States “jammed like sacks of potatoes in the back of a covered truck that faintly resembles a

slave ship.”<sup>13</sup> Once they arrive at the farm run by the vicious landowner Parkinson, they find that because their forged papers have not arrived, they will earn considerably less than they expected. When the workers express dismay, Pablo informs them, “We’re here against the law, so the law can’t help us.” As film noir scholar Jonathan Auerbach has pointed out, this is a fairly bizarre thing for a federal agent to say, and *Border Incident* is full of such contrasts and ironies. What we see and hear in this film is consistently at odds with what the film is telling us it is about. While the voiceover informs that this is a film about two nations working together to help the people, Auerbach’s reading of the film proposes that Mann, and his cinematographer John Alton, constantly undermine this nationalistic message by highlighting the fact that these are people in limbo, or a condition of “statelessness or dispossession.”<sup>14</sup> “The result is that these migrants occupy a twilight zone while in the United States, remaining Mexicans by nationality but suffering from a radical geopolitical dislocation and estrangement that parallels the psychic and moral disorientation suffered by noir characters more generally, who typically cross between these domains of the legal/illicit and the rational/irrational.”<sup>15</sup>

The second journey in *Border Incident* happens at the end, when Pablo, Juan and their fellow braceros have been captured by Parkinson’s henchmen and are led into the dark canyon *Valle de Muerte* to be thrown into quicksand. Reversing the expectation that the American federal agents are on their way to save Pablo and the braceros, instead it is Pablo’s own cunning and Juan’s heroism that ultimately saves the men, who in turn save Pablo before he falls into the quicksand. The U.S.

immigration patrol officers arrive after Parkinson has been killed, thus negating their effectiveness from the final climatic scene. Despite a false “happy” ending that saves Pablo, the underlying message for Juan and the rest of the braceros is that they do not belong in the United States, and that they should not have risked leaving Mexico.

While Pablo and Juan’s lives are spared at the end of *Border Incident*, the film’s message reinforces that they must return to Mexico. This forceful lack of belonging undermines any happy Hollywood ending for the protagonists. While *Border Incident*’s characters at least have a home to return to, Gregory Nava’s 1983 film *El Norte* features two immigrants who cannot return to their homeland in Guatemala, but only find poverty and alienation in the United States. Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez) and Enrique (David Villalpando) are forced to flee the lush green hills of their native Guatemala when their father is murdered by the army for union organizing. After a local man gives them advice on how to pass as a Mexican (“you need to say *fuck* a lot”) they journey to Tijuana by foot and bus. On their first attempt at getting across the border, they are apprehended. The white border patrol agents grill them in the office to find out where they are from. As Mayan Indians, Enrique and Rosa are persecuted minorities in their own land, and now must “pass” as Mexicans in order to survive. While Enrique’s attempts at “being Mexican” only elicited chortles from fellow bus passengers in Tijuana, his repeated use of the word *fuck* easily convinces the border patrol agent, who shrugs and says, “I dunno. Sounds like a Mexican to me!” and releases the siblings back to Tijuana.



After they are sent back to Mexico, Rosa and Enrique meet a friendly coyote who agrees to help them across the border, which leads to one of the more notable scenes in an immigration film. They crawl through a narrow, dark, abandoned sewer tunnel, and on the way, they are attacked by rats. This harrowing scene plays out for more than seven minutes while a border patrol helicopter buzzes outside. Nava builds the tension to an almost unbearable climax; when the pair arrives at the other side of the tunnel to the vision of the glittering lights of San Diego, the music swells and the viewer feels relief. However, as Naficy points out, this sets up a false hope for the new arrivals because their journey through the sewer will haunt them until the film's end.<sup>16</sup> Naficy concludes that "*El Norte* demonstrates that border crossing—despite its celebration in much of the border literature—leaves both physical and psychic scars they may never heal."<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, Enrique and Rosa find the odds stacked against them as they try to make a new life in Los Angeles. Repeatedly, the film hints at the possibility of hope for the central characters only for them to be crushed by bad luck, or fate. Enrique gets a decent job as a busboy at an upscale French restaurant, and after a short stint at a garment factory, Rosa pairs up with a friendly woman, Nacha, to clean homes. Yet, Enrique loses his job when Carlos, a fellow employee jealous of the way that Enrique is being promoted, calls the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. His friend and coworker Jorge explains to Enrique that he needs to put aside his good ways and learn to be more cutthroat. "That's the way it is here. You've got to look out for yourself or you're fucked. You have to do whatever you have to do to survive."

After some internal struggle, Enrique decides to accept an offer to manage a factory in Chicago and leave Rosa behind. When he learns that Rosa has been hospitalized and is dying from typhus, he abandons the job opportunity to sit by her deathbed, and loses the opportunity for career advancement.

*El Norte* teaches us that Enrique's inability to adjust to the capitalistic and individualist culture of America results in his downfall. However as Nacha intones to him when she pleads with him to go to the hospital, "if you don't go and see your sister, you are already dead." He is left, as Naficy points out, completely alone at the end. "The family unit, large and extended at the film's beginning, is now reduced to just one member. And he is left for now without a house, a home, or a homeland."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Nava seems to close off the possibility of hope for his immigrant characters by<sup>19</sup> closing the film with a last horrifying image of their father's head swinging from a tree in Guatemala, while dissonant horror movie-style music proclaims that for Enrique, there will be no return and no salvation.

Not all grueling journeys end so poorly for their protagonists. The next two films reinforce notions of immigration as a positive rite of passage. Jan Troell's 1971 film *The Emigrants* is about a family of Swedish peasants in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century who voyage to a new life in Minnesota. Max von Sydow and Liv Ullman play a husband and wife, Karl and Kristina, who work as indentured servants toiling on rocky land in Sweden. After witnessing too many injustices and working to produce very little food, they decide to set off for America. Troell devotes all of part two of a three-part movie to the voyage in a crowded ship full of other (mostly) European immigrants. We watch

as sickness, lethargy, boredom, hysteria, death and near-madness takes hold of the characters. In one particularly gruesome scene, Kristina is huddled in the bottom of the ship next to the body of their dead neighbor as various inhabitants heave and vomit.

The journey for the Swedish immigrants in *The Emigrants*, however, ends fairly well. The family overcomes hardship and sickness to ultimately stake out a piece of land that becomes part of their legacy. The story in *The Emigrants* continues with the sequel, *The New Land*, which tells of the family's difficulties settling in Minnesota, and their eventual success is held up with the final image of a photograph portraying a large, sprawling family of several generations.

Another happy ending comes for the mother and son at the heart of the 2007 drama *La Misma Luna*, or *Under the Same Moon*. Nine-year-old Carlitos (Adrian Alonso) goes on a journey across the border to try and find his mother, Rosario (Kate del Castillo), who has been living for several years in Los Angeles trying to save money to send for her son. As A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* noted, the film is gentle and sentimental, keeping its focus on the cute and disarming Carlitos and his beautiful and brave mother. Scott writes that, "Rosario's life is hard, and her son encounters some serious danger, but the tone is adventurous and mildly melodramatic rather than harsh or upsetting."<sup>20</sup> The film broke box office records for a Spanish-language film in the United States, and was primarily marketed as a mainstream film in large Spanish-speaking areas.<sup>21</sup> The reassuring tone is important, as the film sends its audience a message of hope for a life in the United States, rather than the despair felt in *El Norte*.

*La Misma Luna* at times takes a critical tone when it portrays the contrast between Rosario's hard work as a domestic maid, and her inability to receive the full benefits of citizenship. Yet the gentle tone of the film, and the constant reminder that Carlitos and his mother are always in contact and always together if they look "under the same moon," serves as an antidote to any serious critiques of the global economy. Viewers are comforted knowing that Carlitos and Rosario are united in the end, and able to make a new home in California, where they have already found a community willing to embrace them.

The final film in this chapter on journeys has an ambiguous message, as the film ends just as its central character arrives in the new land. *Sin Nombre* (meaning "nameless"), is a 2008 film from diasporic filmmaker Cary Fukunaga. The central characters, Sayra and Willy "Casper" come from different worlds, but bond in their journey hiding on the various trains that take migrants from Latin America and Mexico to the United States. Willy is a murderous gangster from Chiapas, Mexico, with a romantic streak. When his girlfriend is raped by fellow gang member El Sol, Willy hits the trains to escape with Smiley, a new gang member. The train tracks are being used as a hiding spot for immigrants, including Sayra, a young woman from Honduras who is traveling to New Jersey with her uncle and her long-lost father. During a robbery of the immigrants, gang leader El Sol tries to rape Sayra and as a result is killed by Willy. He then joins Sayra and her family on the rails in hiding. Both have different backgrounds and reasons for going to the North. Sayra is looking for a way out of the poverty of her native land, and a chance to reconnect with a father

she has never known. Willy wants to make a fresh start and shed his violent past. As is common though in films of migrants and displaced people, his past comes back to haunt him. Willy is pursued through Mexico by Smiley, the young man he mentored in the gang, who has vowed to kill him as part of his initiation as full member.

Director Fukunaga filmed *Sin Nombre* on location in Mexico in the same decaying train yards where he found immigrants hiding during his research.<sup>22</sup> The movie is a true “journey” immigrant tale: the film ends with Sayra calling her relatives from a phone booth in Texas, just having narrowly escaped the same fate as Willy, who perished in the river on the border between Mexico and the U.S. Like Enrique and Rosa, Willy will never return home or have his happy American ending, but the film leaves Sayra’s journey open as a young woman of determination and courage. In part, her survival is based on the fact that unlike her uncle, father, or even Willy, Sayra is not a romantic or a dreamer. At one point, her father shows her a map to trace their journey to the U.S. He puts his finger on the border between Guatemala and Mexico where they currently are and traces it to the Texas border. “If there’s no border patrol, we’ll be there in two weeks,” he says, adding after he sees his daughter’s skeptical and concerned expression at the length of the journey: “Maybe three weeks.” She replies, “And where is New Jersey?” His response, “It’s not on the map,” concerns Sayra even more. She is escaping from a place where she has no opportunity as a young, intelligent woman, but is journeying to something she can’t even see. Thus the film’s title “Nameless” has multiple meanings: the migrants who ride the rails are nameless, and once they get to their destination, the ultimate fear (and reality) for many is that

they will remain nameless, as immigrants with no legal status and who must remain hidden. Ultimately, Sayra's fate is unknown as she begins a new journey in America.

## Chapter Two: Promised Land

In *Screening Strangers*, Yosefa Loshitzky states that one of the strengths of films made about a "minority" community is that the "problem of the other is presented from within, from the point of view of the other himself/herself, negotiating whether and how to maintain his or her identity within a dominant culture."<sup>23</sup> Movies in this second category of immigrant narratives, those about the immigrant's experiences and encounters in what Loshitzky calls "the Promised Land," frequently deal with conflicts and issues such as racism, miscegenation, economic exploitation, asylum, and culture shock. Loshitzky has also noted that films in this category tend to focus on "the immediate absorption in the new country, portraying a reception of the migrants by the host society that in most cases is more hostile than hospitable."<sup>24</sup>

In this chapter, eight films looking at the alienation and isolation of recent immigrants are explored. The first two films, *Entre Nos* and *Amreeka*, resolve their narratives with a positive conclusion that leads the viewer to believe the immigrants, who are both single mothers in these narratives, will find happiness in their adopted homelands. On the opposite side of the spectrum are two politically-charged dramas, *Fast Food Nation* and *Dirty Pretty Things*, which portray the exploitation and violence experienced by recent immigrants. Finally, four films, *Persepolis*, *Sugar*, *A Better Life*, and *Monsieur Lazhar*, do not resolve the central character's feelings of isolation

or rootlessness and ultimately are ambiguous as to how the protagonists will fare as new entrants to the diaspora.

A frequent plot device used in immigrant dramas features single parents struggling to establish themselves. In *Entre Nos*, Paola Mendoza plays Mariana, an attractive young woman from Colombia whose husband deserts her and their two young children after bringing them to New York City. Stuck alone in a foreign city where she doesn't speak English and is jobless, Mariana is forced to find ways to survive. Part immigrant survival tale and part feminist tribute, *Entre Nos* is based on the life of actor/writer/producer Mendoza's mother.<sup>25</sup> She survives by making homemade empanadas and wandering the streets of New York each day with her children, collecting cans to turn in for money. The film portrays the family's daily chore of just trying to survive. Mariana has the additional hardship of speaking very little English, and finding out she is pregnant again. Throughout the film, other immigrant and ethnic characters are Mariana's prime contacts. An East Asian landlord brutally evicts the family from their apartment, shouting that he can't understand a word Mariana is saying. Later, the family rents a small room at a rundown motel run by a kind woman of Indian descent, who becomes Mariana's caretaker. And the homeless man who watches her cans, and suggests where she can find more, is African-American. Mariana's ultimate salvation comes from a friendly taco truck owner who decides at the film's end to cut her in on the business to sell her empanadas. *Entre Nos* ends on an upbeat note, with Mariana and family selling their homemade empanadas to lines of hungry customers.

Like Mariana, Muna Farah, the heroine of Cherien Dabis' 2009 film *Amreeka*, is struggling with life as a recently-single mother to her teenage son Fadi. Muna is a banker in Palestine whose husband has left her for another woman. Now divorced, Muna makes the hasty decision to immigrate to the United States after a visa she applied for back when she was still married unexpectedly arrives in the mail. Her initial reluctance to leave the only home she has ever known is swayed after she witnesses her son being harassed and searched by Israeli guards at the checkpoint she spends hours getting through each day just to get work. Muna tells Fadi "It's not that easy you know, moving to a strange place. We'd be like visitors there." Her son's angry response, "It's better than being a prisoner in your own country" is all it takes, and soon they are packing their bags for America.

After initial stresses, including being detained at the airport in Chicago for three hours while immigration authorities grill them, Fadi and Muna settle in at her sister's home in suburban Illinois, but find that life in a post-9/11 U.S. is not what they expected. Muna's sister Raghda, played by the popular Palestinian actress Hiam Abbess (who co-stars in *The Visitor*), has been in the country for fifteen years, but anti-Arabic hatred is popping up in their community and the household is straining. Despite her time spent in her adopted homeland, Raghda is nostalgic for Palestine, and is angry at Muna for leaving. At one point she tells her sister, "Despite all the years I've lived here, I'm still homesick. It is like a tree that is pulled out by its roots and planted somewhere else – it doesn't grow."



Nostalgia is a key aspect of immigrant cinema. Raghda is nostalgic because her time away has made the harsher memories fade, and because her sense of nostalgic belonging is perhaps more complicated because she is Palestinian. In *An Accented Cinema*, Hamid Naficy notes that exiles and immigrant cinema usually posit the homeland as a “grand and deeply rooted referent.”<sup>26</sup> Naficy comments: “As a result, during the luminal period of displacement, the postmodernist playfulness, indeterminacy, and intertextuality have little place in exilic politics and cinema. The referent homeland is too powerfully real, even sacred to be played with and signified upon.”<sup>27</sup> Naficy continues: “Sadness, loneliness, and alienation are frequent themes, and sad, lonely and alienated people are favorite characters in the accented films.”<sup>28</sup>

For the characters in *Amreeka*, and Raghda in particular, the fact that they officially have no “homeland” makes their immigrant status even more problematic. Muna explains to a baffled U.S. Customs officer that she doesn’t have citizenship, raising his suspicion as to her reason for being in the country. “You mean you don’t have a country?” the officer asks incredulously, prompting his next question, “Occupation?” to which Muna replies, with a bright smile on her face, “Yes, it is occupied, for more than forty years.”

Despite being a banker in Palestine, Muna soon finds out that in America she is qualified only to work fast food, and takes a job at a White Castle to pay her bills. At the White Castle, she bonds with her fellow worker, a teen drop-out with blue hair who is a social outcast, and with her son’s principal, who remarks to her that there aren’t many Polish Jews like him in Illinois either. After increased tensions lead to

Fadi being arrested, he proclaims that he wants to go home. Here, Muna relates the film's key message after her son says that "this place sucks." "So what?" she asks angrily. "Every place sucks. You can't make them question who you are. We have as much right to be here as anyone else."

The single mothers of *Amreeka* and *Entre Nos* persevere and succeed with help from family and friends, and eventually find an accepting community in their new home. The next two films, *Fast Food Nation* and *Dirty Pretty Things*, portray immigrant characters who do not find acceptance or success. Both films deal centrally with the economic exploitation of illegal immigrants, and the central conflict of undocumented workers that Mae Ngai explains makes them "... at once welcome, and unwelcome: they are woven into the economic fabric of the nation, but as labor that is cheap and disposable. Marginalized by their position in the lower strata of the workforce and even more so by their exclusion from the polity, illegal aliens might be understood as a caste, unambiguously situated outside the boundaries of formal membership and social legitimacy."<sup>29</sup>

In the case of *Fast Food Nation*, this "caste" takes the form of slaughterhouse workers who toil in unclean and unsafe environments for low wages, daily killing cows (on the gruesome "killing floor") and sometimes putting their own safety at risk for the industrial food system. In Stephen Frears' drama *Dirty Pretty Things*, it is the immigrants' own bodies that are on the "killing floor." A Nigerian refugee Okwe, played by Chiwetel Ejiofor, discovers that his place of employment, The Baltic Hotel, services the tourists, business people and "legitimate" Londoners

through the labor of illegal immigrants. As Okwe, a doctor by training who becomes a hotel worker because of England's refusal to recognize him as a legitimate refugee notes, "We are the people you do not see. We are the ones who drive your cabs. We clean your rooms. And suck your cocks." And in this film, they are also the ones whose organs are being harvested for the black market. The plot revolves around Okwe's horrific discovery of the lucrative dealing of human organs, yet the larger critique the film offers is how immigration policy and economic injustice creates a system where crime thrives. In this way, Loshitzky writes that *Dirty Pretty Things* "inverts the criminalization trope, placing the blame on the contemporary British attitude toward immigration and asylum that creates and perpetuates crime."<sup>30</sup>

*Dirty Pretty Things* also presents a society with multiple layers of acceptance based on cultural and economic stratification. The hotel has areas off-limits to its workers, just as the guests do not see much of the dirty business that the prostitutes, drug dealers and organ harvesters are engaged in. Likewise, even the various immigrants and ethnic groups who work inside the walls are separated by lines of ethnicity, religion, and legal citizenship status.

Like the brutal conditions faced by the workers in *Fast Food Nation* and *Dirty Pretty Things*, the characters in the next four films also face hurdles to success in their adopted homelands. However, the films *Persepolis*, *Monsieur Lazhar*, *A Better Life*, and *Sugar*, ask audiences to consider the sacrifices and hardships faced by immigrants by using an intense focus on the central protagonist and making the viewer relate and sympathize with his or her plight.

Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical 2007 French animated film *Persepolis* (based on her own graphic novel) creatively recounts her experiences in Iran after the Islamic Revolution, and the ensuing personal and political upheaval in her family's lives leading her to her eventual exile to Vienna. Told through an idiosyncratic style that blends black and white hand-drawn animation with a vivid first-person narrative, Satrapi recounts how the political became personal, as friends and family suffered after the 1982 revolution. Merging this political turmoil with a young girl's coming-of-age story told in an open and self-reflexive manner achieves what Naficy believes is one of the best aspects of "accented" or cinema from migrants and diasporic filmmakers: the ability to be both simultaneously local and global, and to counteract accepted film production practices, while also "benefitting from them."<sup>31</sup> Satrapi portrays "Marji's" early rebellion living in an oppressed society, wearing punk clothes under her head scarf, blasting Iron Maiden in her bedroom, and challenging her teachers at every turn. Eventually when her parents decide tearfully that it is no longer safe in Iran for their fiercely independent daughter, they send her to school in Vienna.

As in many other films about immigration, *Persepolis* is focused on transportation. The film begins and ends each chapter of Marji's experience with images of her waiting in airport lobbies in Iran and Europe. As Naficy has noted, borders, tunnels, seaports, airports, hotels and other transportation vehicles are frequent characters in films about migrants and immigration.<sup>32</sup> It is in these filmic sequences where Satrapi takes a pause from the emotional thread of the narrative to reflect on her own journey and experiences.

Arriving in Vienna, the character Marji drifts from one place to the next, from different groups of friends and different residences, but never finds a place where she fits. Her primary contact is with a group of punk rockers and anarchists in Vienna, who she explains in voice-over: “I was the center of attention for all the outsiders. My nationality and my story fascinated them. But I wasn’t like them, as school holidays always reminded me.” Later, when she pretends to be “French” and shamefully imagines a conversation with her grandmother reprimanding her, she is told, “Be true to yourself.” Later, when she finds out that her grandmother has died after she leaves Iran for a second time, she bitterly recounts: “I never saw my grandmother again. Freedom always has a price.”

*Persepolis*’ use of personal storytelling blended with political satire (one scene with puppets portraying the English government and the Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi is particularly memorable) is an example of how exilic filmmakers can, in Naficy’s words, “signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers.”<sup>33</sup> Satrapi’s film is unique in its lack of nostalgia, and equally critical treatment of home (Iran) and host (Vienna, and later France). She undermines notions of nationality by fundamentally critiquing the institutions that cause conditions of migration and exile while remaining firm in her commitment to notions of family, tradition, and self-empowerment.

In contrast to Satrapi’s own jolting personal portrayal of exile and culture shock, the next film reveals its lead character’s alienation by slowly revealing small

truths about his life and his reasons for seeking refuge. Academy Award-nominated *Monsieur Lazhar* (2011) portrays a class of middle school students in Montreal who are traumatized when their teacher hangs herself in the classroom during recess. A young boy named Oliver and his friend Alice are the only two who see the body of their teacher. The school's principal is desperate to replace the position, and so agrees to hire the untested Bachir Lazhar (played by real-life refugee and comedian Fellag), who says he was a primary school teacher for nineteen years in Algeria before seeking exile in Quebec.<sup>34</sup>

The film is about Lazhar's quest to help heal his pupils, and his own internal search to mend a grieving heart. The movie slowly unfolds the tragedy of Lazhar's past, and why he has asked for political asylum in Quebec. Lazhar's differences are at first prominent. He has old-fashioned teaching methods at odds with the school's liberal policies. Lazhar asks the students to put their desks into straight rows (as opposed to the semi-circle the other teachers use) and he uses Balzac as their first writing assignment, to the titters and exasperation of the class. All of his fellow teachers are friendly and welcoming, but Lazhar always stands apart. He takes the bus far away back to his tidy, blank apartment. And he seems clueless to the advances of a fellow teacher who likes to think herself cultural and thus, interested in this attractive Algerian man.

Lazhar's difference, however, is what makes him able to connect with his students, who have so recently experienced their own tragedy. In a school where teachers are not allowed to touch their students, Lazhar breaks the rules and touches

them – physically as well as emotionally. His inability to fit in is what makes him able to help his young students heal, and his ability to recognize that young Oliver, in particular, is struggling with his guilt over the teacher's death is due to the fact that Lazhar has his own demons over whether he could have somehow prevented his own family's tragic end.

Like many immigrant characters, Lazhar's fate is ambiguous at the film's end. His application for political asylum is successful, but he is not allowed to be a teacher any longer. Quiet, dignified but suffering an immense weight caused by his violent experiences in Algeria, Lazhar's seemingly conservative, disciplined methods are just what the children need. But he doesn't change a system that tells teachers to hold their distance from their kids as if they were "hazardous waste," as one teacher complains. The film's ending is gentle, with Lazhar confronting his class for the last time and assuring them: "Don't try to find a meaning in Martine's death; there isn't one. A classroom is a place of friendship, of work, of courtesy, a place of life."

Dignified characters who speak little but have hidden depths and unimaginable experiences are a common trope in films about immigrants. As part of the process of trying to assimilate, immigrants often try to shield who they were and what they have experienced in order to appear "normal" to the adopted country. Like Fellag's Lazhar, the actor Demián Bichir was recognized for an amazingly subdued performance, receiving an Oscar nomination for Best Actor for his portrayal of an illegal immigrant named Carlos Galindo in the 2011 film *A Better Life*. Carlos is a single father trying to do everything possible to make "a better life" for his teenage son Luis, who is tempted

by trouble and gangs in school. Sleeping on a couch at night in their one-bedroom apartment, Carlos is not starry-eyed. His entire posture is about trying to stay hidden so he can work, save money and hopefully do better for his son. As the review in *Sight & Sound* noted, Bichir's subtle performance conveys the mentality of a man who lives his entire life in fear. "On screen almost all of the film's running time, he conveys the accepting, dogged stoicism of someone whose nose is forever pressed against the window of the American Dream but who will never be able to savor its privileges."<sup>35</sup>

Carlos, however, is eventually arrested by immigration authorities, and at the film's end he is separated from his son and sent back to Mexico. Their tearful parting at the detention center is a sharp contrast from the sentimental happy reunion observed by the mother and son in *La Misma Luna*. Unlike that film, which ends as the journey does, *A Better Life* leaves the viewer with a final shot of Carlos starting a journey, back across the border as he makes his way illegally to get back to his son. While *A Better Life* shows the way immigration policy can rip families apart, it also concludes with the final shot which gives a small glimmer of hope that Carlos will keep fighting to be with his son.

Miguel Santos, also known as Sugar, the title character in Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's 2009 drama, does not have to worry about his legal status interfering with his ambitions of making a name for himself in professional baseball. Yet, like Carlos Galindo, Sugar appears throughout the film to be on the outside, looking at a puzzle that he doesn't quite understand. A talented baseball pitcher from the Dominican Republic, Sugar is recruited to the United States minor league system,



where he joins thousands of other immigrants from developing and post-colonial nations who hope to be successful enough to provide for their families back home. Sometimes described as the “anti-*Field of Dreams*,” *Sugar* puts a new twist on the sports movie genre by focusing not on the exceptionally talented guy who beats the odds and becomes a superstar, but on a good (not great) baseball player whose alienation, fear and culture shock work against his success.<sup>36</sup>

The impetus of the film was the fact that about fifteen percent of all major league players and thirty percent of all minor leaguers hail from the Dominican Republic, yet not a single film had focused on a Latino player.<sup>37</sup> If *Sugar* at times struggles under the weight of carrying the history of Dominicans and baseball on its independent shoulders, the film does give a nuanced portrayal of an immigrant’s experiences in the heartland. Unlike his counterparts in culturally and ethnically-diverse cities, Sugar finds himself one of only two members of his team in Iowa who speak Spanish. His character’s isolation becomes more profound positioned against the family he lives with, a white Christian household who seem to mean well, but have no real way of relating with Sugar. Instead, Sugar throws himself into trying to improve his baseball so that he can stay on the team. Yet as Christopher Long notes in his review in *Cineaste*, “*Sugar* explodes the myth that hard work alone is the key to success in America.”<sup>38</sup> He injures himself during a difficult play, and ends up turning to drugs to help him deal with the pain, and to try and improve his performance.

Terrified of failure, Sugar chooses to leave the team and ends up fleeing to New York City, where his friend who was booted from the team lives. While he

initially wanders the city in poverty and loneliness, Sugar is eventually befriended by a Puerto Rican furniture maker and at the film's end, we see him as he joins a game of baseball at the community park with a large group of other immigrant, former pro-players, who like him have found themselves trying to find a community in New York.

### **Chapter Three: The Second Generation and Beyond**

In 2010, almost fifty million people who lived in the European Union (EU) were born outside of their resident country, and a majority of those were born outside of the EU.<sup>39</sup> In the United States, about forty million immigrants were living in the United States in 2009.<sup>40</sup> These new immigrants, according to Ruben Rumbaut, are primarily young adults and their children, and in the U.S., more than thirty percent of people ages eighteen to thirty-four are foreign-born, or of foreign-born parentage.<sup>41</sup>

The children, and grandchildren, of recent immigrants occupy a shaky middle ground between the homeland and the host country. If an immigrant's tale is one of alienation, oppression and nostalgic longing, the second generation's is one of ambivalence, cultural binaries, and conflict between the past and future. Loshitzky believes these films raise questions about the status of ethno-diasporas and ultimately question the issue of "belonging and non-belonging and the culture identity" of a new Europe and an immigrant America. Films about the children of recent immigrants, who are still marginalized or oppressed by the host country, often pivot on the struggle

to find a balance between their parent's culture and expectations, and that of their adopted home.

Of the five films, the first three discussed in this chapter, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *The Namesake* and *In America*, feature second-generation immigrant characters who struggle with their place feeling caught between two worlds, but ultimately find happiness in carving out their own paths. The final two films in the chapter, *The Godfather Part II* and *Avalon*, look at the dark side of assimilation, as both feature second-generation immigrant children who take on what the filmmakers appear to view as the worst traits of their adopted homelands

*My Beautiful Laundrette* (1984) is a comedy/drama of class and ethnic strife set during the period when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister of Britain. The film was ground-breaking not only for its exploration of Pakistani-British relations, but for its portrayal of a homosexual relationship between Johnny, a white working-class Londoner with ties to racist friends, and Omar, the film's central protagonist. Omar is a young man of Pakistani descent stuck between the high expectations of his alcoholic intellectual father Hussein, and the allure of wealth and power offered by his criminal uncle, Nasser. Eve Rueschmann writes in *Moving Pictures, Migrating Identities* that against all odds, Johnny and Omar "find themselves taking advantage of Thatcher's ruthless capitalism by refurbishing an old laundromat in South London."<sup>42</sup> The power dynamic between Johnny and Omar is completely reversed from standard immigrant narratives. Omar has access, however shaky, to his uncle's wealth and resources, and so decides with entrepreneurial zeal to transform a seedy laundromat into a source of

income. The irony is that Omar, the son of an intellectual journalist, does not have the skills or the apparent desire to do manual labor. For this he turns to Johnny, a boyhood friend who lives in poverty and once marched in National Front rallies. Johnny and Omar are also lovers, and the power dynamic plays a key role in their relationship. Johnny takes abuse from Omar, in part because of his guilt over his past participation in racist marches, but primarily from his lack of confidence. The result is a relationship that, as Rueschmann notes, is “historically overdetermined, and like many human interactions, is based on asymmetrical power dynamics and self-interest as well as genuine affection.”<sup>43</sup>

That same description is fitting for Omar’s relationship with his father and uncle, who are paired at opposite ends of the spectrum. Hussein was a celebrated journalist in his homeland. In England, he has turned to alcohol as a way to cope with his loss of status. His brother Nasser is taking full advantage of Thatcher’s capitalist order in England, with both legitimate and criminal enterprises. At one point, as he is throwing out people who are squatting in seedy flats that he owns, Nasser is questioned by one who wonders why a fellow immigrant would treat him like this. “Because I am a professional businessman, not a professional Pakistani,” Nasser says plainly. “And there is no question of race in the new enterprise culture.” His father, however, feels that race has everything to do with the new enterprise culture. “They hate us here in England. And all you can do is kiss their asses.”

Omar feels torn between these two dynamics, and so his eventual decision to choose his relationship with Johnny has much to do with Hanif Kureishi, the English-

born Pakistani screenwriter, and his vision of a future that overcomes England's colonial past to eventually become what Rueschmann calls a "hybrid, sexually and racially diverse community that survives the racism of white working-class London and the isolationist stance of the Pakistani immigrant enclave."<sup>44</sup>

Gogol, the protagonist in Mira Nair's sweeping epic *The Namesake*, is also positioned between two worlds, but unlike the economic focus of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Nair's film is centrally concerned with cultural difference and heritage. Played by American star Kal Penn, Gogol is an American-born teen who wants to be as far away from the traditions and culture of his Indian parents as possible. In much the same way that Omar is situated between his father's longing for the old country and his uncle's acceptance of the new, Gogol is placed between a father who embraces change more readily (it is Ashoke's decision to move the family to the suburbs, for instance), and a mother who longs for her homeland, and stays fixed in her memories of her life as a young woman living in India. Gogol finds that even when he chooses to do as his parents expect, as when he marries Moushumi, a Bengali-American with a hidden wild streak, it does not result in his happiness. At the end of the film, Gogol is alone, having "neither fully replicated nor abandoned the expectations of his own family," and his mother returns to India, a place she only really ever physically left.<sup>45</sup> However, the final shot of Gogol riding the train, reflecting back on his father's transformative train voyage at the film's beginning, gives a hopeful perspective that Gogol is just beginning his own journey.

Although his parent's immigration narrative is essential to Gogol's story, *The Namesake* is primarily focused on his character. Jim Sheridan's *In America* gives equal weight to the immigrant parents' struggles and their children's systematic assimilation. The film is a sunny account of an Irish family's exploits in New York City, and switches perspective throughout from father, mother and the oldest daughter, who records her experiences with her camera. Because they speak English and are white, the family is not obviously coded as "immigrants," but the differences are pronounced enough for the girls to be ashamed of their homemade Halloween costumes: "We don't want to be different. We want to be like everyone else," they plead with their mother. The true "other" in the film is not the Irish family, but their neighbor Mateo, a temperamental artist from Africa who lives next door to the family. Mateo is only positioned in the film for what he can do for the family. He is dying of AIDS, and his character is not given a full back story because Sheridan seems primarily interested in using Mateo as a device to bring the parents together with their children. As Todd McCarthy noted in his review in *Variety*, the children have far less trouble coping in general, both to the death of their sibling and to life in America, than their parents, who are presented as so traumatized that they are barely able to function.<sup>46</sup>

Christy and Ariel quickly bond with their dark neighbor, in a stereotype that links the innocence of children with that of the exotic, ethnic "old-world" character. Mateo's eventual death is seen as a spiritual rebirth for the family, whose new baby is born at the same moment Mateo dies. Before he passes, Ariel asks him why he has

sores on his faces. “I’m an alien from a different planet, like E.T.,” he says. “My skin is too sensitive for this earth.” Mateo’s death, and the baby’s birth in their new home, brings the family together.

While the children of immigrants struggle with their feelings of dividedness in the last three films, other films focus on the price of complete assimilation. The journey of young Vito Corleone is recounted in flashbacks in *The Godfather: Part II*, which juxtaposes his son Michael’s rise to the top of the family empire with his father’s humble beginnings. Early in the movie, young Vito must flee Italy after his father, brother and mother are murdered by a local Mafioso. Vito gets on a ship, contracts smallpox, and is quarantined after arriving at Ellis Island. He also is renamed (from last name Andolini to the name of his town, Corleone) at his arrival, signifying his rebirth as a new American about to begin the process of shedding his past. Part of the larger critique at play in Francis Ford Coppola’s second film in *The Godfather* series is an examination of capitalism, and specifically the way capitalism and American principles sacrifice what is “good” and authentic about the ethnic immigrant. Vito’s early life in Italy, while also incredibly violent and influenced by mafia presence, is steeped in “old world” imagery and music, and sharply contrasted in the movie with the sleek capitalistic business empire of Vito’s son. Film scholar Thomas Ferraro takes issue with what he calls the “romanticized” perspective of the film, which he argues regurgitates old stereotypes about “trading roots for rubles.”<sup>47</sup> Ferraro writes, “The loss of family/ethnicity, coupled with the consummation of Michael’s business deals, spell one thing: Michael has *Americanized*.”<sup>48</sup> However,

Michael's assimilation ultimately fails, as the audience sees his inability to completely conceal his ties with his immigrant past.

*The Godfather: Part II* sets up a dualism that compares and contrasts the immigrant father to his American-born son, and their contrasting values. Like Coppola, Barry Levinson, director of the film *Avalon*, sees the second generation's ability to absorb the changing values of the adopted land as a negative that ultimately leads to the destruction of the family. *Avalon* chronicles five decades in the lives of the Krichinskys, an immigrant Jewish family from Eastern Europe coming to terms with changes in America, including the increasing suburbanization and focus on media and technology. The family patriarch, Sam, played by Armin Mueller-Stahl, arrives in America during World War I, and Levinson captures these speedy scenes in a bright, optimistic color scheme that allude to the hopeful energy of a young immigrant. Sam builds his family in the center of Baltimore, where the family shop is below their flat.

The family adapts, and becomes prosperous, but this is not a tale of immigrants who find happiness through wealth. Levinson summarized his perspective in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* when he said the movie is about the "breakup of the extended American family, not through failure but through success."<sup>49</sup> Sam's son Jules takes the family business and opens a larger shop, specializing in televisions (which become a key symbol in *Avalon*). Jules and his cousin eventually change their names to Jules Kaye and Izzy Kirk, much to the dismay of Sam, who angrily asks, "Who said names are supposed to be easy to say? What are you, a candy bar?"



The family's move to the suburbs is prompted by a violent robbing of Jules as he went door-to-door in their neighborhood. Gabriel, Sam's oldest brother and the one depicted as having the closest ties with the homeland, intones: "I never heard of it — it's not like it used to be. In the old country, I never heard of someone stabbing someone to take their money, never happened."

In another scene, Jules's son gets in trouble at his elementary school for not knowing the difference the words "may" and "can." When Sam defends his grandson, the principal humiliates Sam, stating "I don't think you understand the subtleties of the English language, Mr. Krichinsky." Paul Haspel, who wrote an analysis of *Avalon*, noted that "proficiency in these linguistic subtleties can cause one citizen of the United States to be considered 'more American' than another is unmistakable."<sup>50</sup>

*Avalon* deals with Levinson's concern that suburbanization and technology threaten the foundations of the family, but his decision to frame that as a nostalgic immigrant tale is key to his message. Old World values become synonymous with good moral values that uphold traditions and keep families together, while New World values undermine and ultimately destroy families and pull apart the fabric of society. That Levinson is himself the grandson of an immigrant and the movie is partly autobiographical is telling.<sup>51</sup> He is wistful for a world, and a place, that he never knew but heard stories about from his immigrant grandparents. Ultimately, the film's message may be that while the second generation yearns to pull away from their ethnic, immigrant roots, their children will long for those roots to be placed back in the ground of the native soil.

## **Part Two: A Citizen Changed: Interactions with the Immigrant**

“God, I got more in common with these gooks than I do with my own spoiled-rotten family.” – Walt, *Gran Torino*

While an increasing number of films about immigration are told from the perspective of immigrant characters, and are being made by migrant, diasporic or ethnic filmmakers, there are still a significant number of movies that deal with immigration as an issue or central point of conflict and tension that have citizen protagonists at the center. Unlike the immigrant-focused films in Part One that often fit neatly into three common narrative themes, movies that deal with immigration as an issue or a force that impacts a central non-immigrant character cover a wide array of thematic narratives and issues. The ten films explored in this section can most easily be divided into three categories: films about a protagonist who sacrifices him or herself for an immigrant; a main character who learns valuable lessons from an immigrant; and finally, films with an ambivalent message that portray the complexities and nuances of modern immigration, including tension and conflict between immigrant characters and a character from the dominant culture.

These are films that are told from what Loshitzky calls the “hegemonic” perspective of a native-born protagonist whose life and perspective is radically altered by contact with an immigrant “other.” As she notes, it can be an interesting way to see how filmmakers from the dominant culture use the film medium for pedagogical

purposes to explore the “dominant discourse of anxiety regarding new strangers and others within.”<sup>52</sup> Cinema can both reflect and construct social and cultural attitudes. Films that explore the clash of an immigrant “other” with a central native protagonist can deconstruct and construct stereotypes and set up common tropes about the way nations and society respond to those who may be perceived as different.

### **Chapter One: The Sacrifice**

The three films in this chapter have a life-affirming message and portray white, male lead characters who change dramatically through their interaction and relationship with a recent immigrant, or group of immigrants. The first two films, *Children of Men* and *Gran Torino*, feature lead protagonists who ultimately give their lives to save an immigrant “other” who is positioned as the hope for the future. *Children of Men*, however, does not concretely answer whether or not the sacrifice resulted in actually saving the life of the immigrant. In the case of *Gran Torino*, the immigrant is saved and his future is positioned as literally driving off into the sunset at the end. The last film in this chapter, *Le Havre*, features a lead character who puts his own livelihood at risk to save an immigrant child, but he is rewarded at the end for his efforts.

In the dystopian futuristic world of Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006), women have become infertile and a child hasn’t been born in 18 years. Panic has set in across the globe and a police-state version of modern London keeps the borders locked down tightly as Britain is the last country that hasn’t devolved into complete chaos.

Clive Owen plays the loner Theo living in the city who becomes involved in a plot to guide a young African immigrant named Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) to safety after it is discovered she is pregnant and may be the final hope for humanity. Theo is helping his ex-wife, played by Julianne Moore, who is involved with an underground resistance organization that is trying to fight the government's fascist regime and save the girl before she is taken by authorities. Theo becomes Kee's one and only hope after it is discovered that some members of the resistance planned to use her as a tool in their fight against the government.

Cuarón provides subtle and not-so-subtle visuals throughout the film to clue the viewer in that they are witnessing something not dissimilar to our own post-9/11 state of anxiety regarding terror and a police state. Signs on streets proclaim, "Report any suspicious activity. Report all illegal immigrants." A slum refugee city dense with military and police uniforms is shown as a nightmarish Dante's Inferno-like passageway on their way to meet a group called "The Human Project" which claims to work on a remedy against infertility. Theo is the focal point of the movie; and begins the journey as a cynical alcoholic who is being paid to transport the refugee Kee. The turning point for Theo's transformation into protector and savior comes when Kee reveals her naked pregnant belly to him in a cow barn, which as Barbara Korte points out in her essay on the film, "Black Mother Figures in *28 Days Later* and *Children of Men*," is not only a pointed biblical reference of the stable in Bethlehem, but also associates Kee with nature and Earth.<sup>53</sup> Korte also writes that "In very explicit terms, the film makes the point that a black woman, and a refugee woman, for that matter,

might guarantee a future for Britain and the whole world.”<sup>54</sup> More to the point, by changing Kee from a white woman (as she was written in the P.D. James novel the film is based on) to an immigrant woman of color, Cuarón is making an explicit argument about Britain’s future, which as Korte points out, is inextricably linked in the film to migration and the ability of a society to regenerate itself through its immigrants and new arrivals.<sup>55</sup> The film ends with Theo’s death as he delivers Kee to the ship of the mysterious Human Project group. However, since the true identity of the Human Project was never revealed, the viewer is left not knowing whether Kee and her baby were delivered to salvation or death.

Like Theo in *Children of Men*, Walt Kowalski, the central protagonist in *Gran Torino* (2008) also makes a shift from apathy to heroic action. His sacrifice though, is rewarded by the film’s end with a positive resolution. *Gran Torino* stars director Clint Eastwood as Walt, a retired Korean War veteran coping with his wife’s recent death. He is estranged from his family, and openly glares at his grandkids during his wife’s funeral service (“Dad’s still living in the ’50s,” his son remarks.) Walt is also a racist; he mutters racial profanities and slurs with regularity and sits on his front porch scowling at his neighbors, a Hmong family. In one scene, Walt mutters “Why did all the chinks have to move into this neighborhood?” and spits on his front porch, glaring at the elderly Hmong grandmother next door, who sits on her front porch. In a humorous parallel, the grandmother then spits and says, “Why does that old white man stay here?” Eastwood sets up this parallel between Walt and his next door neighbors early, and continues the theme throughout the movie, as it slowly dawns on Walt that

his Hmong neighbors are more “like him” than his own modern American family. Walt is a relic of the past. His prized possession is the car of the film’s title, and he likes old houses, hard work and home cooking. In this way, his own values are set up as more akin to the “old world” values of his Hmong neighbors, Thao and his sister Sue, who also prize hard work. After Thao tries to steal Walt’s car as part of a gang initiation, he goes to work for Walt, who begrudgingly begins to care for the boy.

In one scene, he witnesses Thao pick up an elderly neighbor’s groceries that she has dropped, after other teen thugs have passed by without lifting a finger. Walt sees that Thao is one of “the good ones” – he is not like his gangster cousins and friends. Various gangs (Black, Latino and Hmong) terrorize Thao and Sue, threatening the new immigrant family until Walt makes the ultimate sacrifice by giving his life to save Thao and Sue. As a final insult to his suburban family, Walt leaves his prize car not to his granddaughter who covets the old Ford, but to Thao, thus signaling that Thao and Sue are his real family.

The film’s troubling stereotypes of Hmong people and minorities in general has already been discussed in both the popular media and academic articles, as have the Christian metaphors rife throughout *Gran Torino*.<sup>56</sup> For the purposes of an exploration of immigration narratives in cinema, the film’s parallels of Walt and Thao seem appropriate. Walt is identified early on in the film as Polish-American, and a retired auto worker from Detroit. Eastwood’s decision to make Walt an American with easily-identifiable immigrant roots (the name Kowalski and his barber’s Polish jokes) seems to obviously beg for comparisons between his own immigrant story and those

of Thao and Sue. In a series of vignettes, Walt tries to train Thao how to be a man, recognizing that the youngster has little male influence in his life. This involves learning to curse, fixing cars, using a tool kit, and dishing out racial slurs and jokes with the locals. Thao is seen as feminized, especially in contrast to his sister Sue, who is smart, sassy and serves as the film's official guide to all-things Hmong, as she imparts pieces of information about her people to Walt ("We fought on the U.S. side during Vietnam," she informs a surprised Walt.) However, the central plot of the film demonstrates Walt's mentorship of Thao, as he gradually teaches him what he thinks the young man needs to survive. The point that Walt has passed his legacy on to his Hmong neighbor is driven home at the end, with the final shot of Thao driving the car, top down, with Walt's dog next to him. According to Hmong scholars Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj, "... the father figure must be eliminated in order for the younger to accede to his manhood. Certainly, the plot has all these twists, as Thao gradually acquires pieces of Walt—from languages, to tools, to knowledge—while Walt's intactness gradually corrodes up to his ultimate demise."<sup>57</sup>

Schein and Thoj read this ending as Walt conferring his masculinity and Americanness on the feminine Hmong boy, "encoding Hmong Americans as feminine, vulnerable and in need of rescue in a process that can result in the achievement of appropriate masculinity only through the subtleties of cultural assimilation."<sup>58</sup> Another possible reading, however, might suggest that the Walt/Thao doubling signals that Walt once was like Thao, before the Korean War scarred him and toughened his exterior. Throughout the movie, flashes of Walt's war experiences are brought

forward, particularly in the scene when points his rifle at a Hmong gang member proclaiming, “We used to stack fucks like you five feet high in Korea and use you for sandbags.” He also confesses to his priest that he killed an innocent boy in the Korean War, and Walt’s war memories saturate the entire film. After Sue is raped, Thao becomes vengeful like Walt, and it is only Walt’s action to trap Thao in his basement and go after the gang solo that saves the young boy from confronting the gang on his own. In this way, *Gran Torino* suggests that Walt is not preventing Thao from becoming a man by preventing his vengeance, but instead preventing the boy from having the same murderous guilt on his conscious that Walt carries from the war.

While both *Children of Men* and *Gran Torino* feature a singular savior who sacrifices himself on behalf of an immigrant outsider, *Le Havre* is a study in how one man’s actions inspires a community to rally around a young African boy who is being hunted by the immigration police in the port community of the title in modern day France. Marcel Marx (André Wilms), a weathered shoeshine man, lives life on the fringes but in happiness with his beloved wife Arletty (Kati Outinen). Soon after Arletty is hospitalized with a terminal disease, a cargo container full of a large group of Africans is found on a dock in the town. Only one escapes, a young boy named Idrissa (Blondin Miguel). Marcel takes the boy and eventually everyone on Marcel’s block helps to conceal Idrissa from the authorities.

Director Aki Kaurismäki’s optimistic vision of a future based on a shared humanity, rather than racial or ethnic distinctions, is distinctly rooted in his proletariat politics. Marcel and Arletty are poor, and scraps of bread and meat are often a dinner



for the couple. Their neighbors are all of the working class, and they have no reason to help Idrissa. In fact, they may only face penalties or imprisonment for their troubles.

In his essay on the Criterion Collection website, film scholar and critic Michael Sicinski points out that *Le Havre* is not unusual in a wave of new French films tackling contemporary immigration issues. He writes that what is unusual about *Le Havre*'s intervention "is its unflagging optimism, its assumption that our best selves will emerge to meet the challenges of history."<sup>59</sup> The film's weakest aspect perhaps is the lack of any character development of Idrissa, who is given little to do. He is merely a sweet and helpful boy, and it is hard to see why Marcel wouldn't help such a charming child. However, like many films that focus on a non-immigrant protagonist, Idrissa's character is simply a symbol to achieve the filmmaker's primary humanistic message for contemporary audiences, which as Sicinski points out, "means negotiating the tight spaces we are given, through desire and creativity, remembering that any society will be judged by how it cares for its most vulnerable members, that empathy, solidarity, and resistance on behalf of one's fellow human beings is a political choice, and that 'society' is little more than the sum total of such choices."<sup>60</sup>

Kaurismäki is primarily interested in solidarity and community among the working classes. Sicinski writes that "Kaurismäki uses cinema to envision a world in which the love of humanity overcomes borders, even the one between life and death. His film demonstrates the necessary humanist dialectic—that opening to the other, being changed, means becoming the other, shifting who our family, the very 'we,' is."<sup>61</sup> Like Theo in *Children of Men* and Walt in *Gran Torino*, there are Christian

undertones here of self-sacrifice and doing good but asking for nothing in return, but this ending is decidedly more upbeat as Marcel's sacrifice is rewarded with his wife miraculously cured of her illness.

## **Chapter Two: A Lesson Learned**

This chapter will explore three films that focus on a native-born protagonist whose life is positively changed because of his or her interaction with an immigrant. The first two films, *Spanglish* and *The Visitor*, are about upper-income white Americans whose encounter with an immigrant transforms their lives and makes them better people. The final film in this section, *Beautiful People*, is ultimately a cheerful movie, but it features mixed results for the lives of its characters, both immigrant and non-immigrant alike.

James L. Brooks' comedy *Spanglish* (2004) is an American filmmaker's attempt to try to come to terms with multiculturalism and a growing Mexican-American population. The film stars Adam Sandler as gourmet chef John Clasky, who lives in Beverly Hills with his high-strung wife Deborah, played by Téa Leoni, and two children. The film is told from the perspective of Cristina Moreno, the daughter of Flor Moreno (Paz Vega), a beautiful Mexican woman who is hired as the housekeeper for the family. While Cristina and Flor are technically at the center of the film since Cristina (as an adult giving the story in voice-over as her application to Princeton) is the primary narrator, their characters are unchanging and are merely the catalyst for the Clasky family's transformation.

In her dissertation exploring multiculturalism, Belle Harrell argues that the term *spanglish* suggests “merging, blending, and browning, but the film does not even consider entertaining the concept.”<sup>62</sup> Flor resists any adaptation of what she perceives as American habits or customs. She doesn’t speak English, and relies on her daughter to translate with the Clasky family. It is only when she begins to fall for Sandler’s patriarch, whom she sees as gentle and loving, but exhausted and beat-down by his high-maintenance wife, that Flor decides to intervene. After Deborah buys her daughter Bernie clothes that are too small as a way to encourage her to lose weight (and incurring the anger of John and Flor), Flor secretly takes the clothes home and alters them to fit. The parallel in the movie is that of Flor’s nature and nurture versus Deborah’s modern ambition. Just as Bernie admires Flor for her warmth and acceptance, Cristina becomes fond of Deborah as a strong-willed, tough American woman. Deborah and Flor are continually contrasted as opposites. Deborah is blonde, sporty and lithe, whereas Flor is brunette, curvy and sumptuous. Deborah is high-strung, demanding and insecure, while Flor is a loving mother, capable and confident in her abilities. Flor is never allowed to develop beyond some sort of fantasy of the ultimate Latina woman. Even her decision at the film’s end, to take her brilliant daughter out of a private school and to deny herself a chance at romance with John, is seen as self-sacrificing and heroic. Harrell states that “it is ironic that the film, which is fixed on the idea that both Flor and Cristina should not integrate but, instead, preserve their Mexican heritage at all costs, even giving up a \$20,000 scholarship, sheds so little light on Mexican culture.”<sup>63</sup> Of course, this is because Flor and Cristina

are the objects around which the Clasky family evolves. John rediscovers his love of cooking and finds the courage to stand up for his kids. Deborah realizes she may lose her husband, and finds the will to humble herself to save her marriage. Their daughter Bernie finds a role model in Flor, and learns to like herself. Flor meanwhile, ends the film much as she started, back in her apartment in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood of Los Angeles. The only change she made was learning English (the film never even suggests that the Claskys could try to learn Spanish). Flor and Cristina are depicted as the morally centered, authentic characters in contrast to the chaotic and consumerist Clasky household, and a meeting of the minds appears to be impossible.

As in *Spanglish*, an immigrant character serves as a catalyst for a bored American to change his ways in the 2007 American independent film *The Visitor*. Richard Jenkins is the character Walter Vale, a lonely college professor whose life is changed by his encounter with an immigrant couple, Tarek and Zainab. Walter is a widower who silently goes through the motions of all aspects of his life, from teaching classes on global economics to trying to learn the piano. When he finds the couple living in his New York apartment (which he admits he hasn't visited in years), Walter strikes up an unlikely friendship with Tarek, a musician from Syria who plays the djembe, or African drum.

Tarek and Zainab are in the United States illegally, which Walter only finds out after Tarek is mistakenly arrested in the subway. Walter, along with Tarek's proud mother Mouna (Hiam Abbass), try to fight his deportation, but all of Walter's financial and legal access cannot save Tarek from his fate. While the climax of the film

involves Tarek's arrest and imprisonment, *The Visitor* is primarily about Walter's journey from lonely isolation to passionate engagement. He not only reengages with music through the drum (he failed at classical piano), but he falls in love with Mouna, and begins to care deeply about the fates of Tarek and Zainab. Tarek draws Walter out of his shell, first by finding a commonality ("You like classical music? Tarek asks Walter. "Me too. But I play the djembe, the drum.") and then by teaching Walter how to find his groove. Despite Walter's attempts to help Tarek, he fails both in keeping him in the country, and at reaching Zainab, who is defensive and understandably fearful. Tarek is the catalyst for Walter's transformation, and the reward for his efforts is deportation. In addition, we learn very little about Tarek and Zainab beyond their status as immigrants, and how they help Walter. Their value is not as flawed humans who deserve a life, but as useful objects for Walter's transformation. Their value, therefore, is in their usefulness as people of color who bring something of value to the table. If they were perhaps more flawed, had more difficult personalities, or did not have artistic talent, would Walter have engaged at all?

This imbalance of power is at the heart of *The Visitor*. No matter how much Walter and Tarek may have in common, there is a wide gap between them. Walter is an accepted member of society. He is white, wealthy, and an American educator at a respected institution. Tarek is a Middle Easterner (from an "enemy" country no less), poor, without the privileges of citizenship, and an artist who works on the margins. In an essay on *The Visitor*, film critic Daniel Garrett points out that the movie continually addresses notions of individual and institutionalized power.<sup>64</sup> Walter refuses to accept

a late paper from a student at the beginning of the film, flexing his authority as a professor. He has the power to throw Tarek and Zainab on the street, and his willingness to allow them to share his apartment keeps him in an authoritative position. Again at dinner with Mouna, he refuses to talk about his book, demeaning her intelligence by stating that she wouldn't understand it anyway. Garrett states that even when Walter softens and begins to help the family, "Walter's empathy and his money do not protect Tarek when it matters most, in his dealings with public or political power. Walter assures Tarek's girlfriend, Zainab, that they will be able to get Tarek out of detention. Why wouldn't Walter think that? How often has his own citizenship, his own white male privilege—his money, his security, his status—helped him to get out of or remain out of difficulties?"<sup>65</sup>

The issues at stake in *The Visitor* question the ability of the individual to oppose or change larger institutional forces. Just as the student could not make his professor accept a late paper, Walter cannot change the government's policies on immigration, nor does the film show us that he has any intention of becoming an activist to try and do so. At the end, he is happily drumming in the subway, alone but at peace. The open ended-question at the end of *The Visitor* is whether Tarek and Mouna, back in Syria, and Zainab, facing the streets of New York without her partner, can find any peace.

Walter finds his happy ending, but is unable to make any difference in the lives of Tarek, Mouna or Zainab. The last film explored in this chapter shows how various characters living in modern-day London come into contact with one another and make

profound changes in each other's lives. The 1995 drama-comedy *Beautiful People* interweaves seven stories framed at the film's opening with a fight that breaks out on a London city bus between a Serbian and Croatian man. The tranquil, everyday reality of the London commute is interrupted by the violence of the two foreigners, who scream at each other in a language no one else on the bus understands. The bus driver's reproach, "This is London transport. We do not act like that," only escalates their violence, which spills out onto the iconic streets of the city, and soon turns into slapstick.

While the film opens with the violent but comedic brawl of the immigrants, the sprawling narrative involves multiple stories centered on a handful of British citizens from various classes with the recent immigrants they encounter. The primary focus is on Griffin, a heroin addict who socializes with English football fans who interpret their national pride and sports fanaticism into a racist creed of "keeping England clean;" as well as Doctor Mouldy, a kind physician who is struggling to care for his children alone after his wife walks out on the family. Other characters include the British television correspondent Jerry, whose life is changed after he witnesses the Bosnian war zone first-hand, and Portia, a wealthy doctor who falls in love with a poor Bosnian refugee. The only immigrant characters whose stories are explored are the Serbian and Croatian men from the film's opening. Both end up in the hospital, where they continue their fighting to the bafflement of an English nurse, who doesn't understand their conflict, in part because she thinks they look and sound alike.

(Pointedly, the two men also do not have names. They are listed in the film's credits as "Serb" and "Croat.")

In *Screening Strangers*, Yoshitzky points out that the gaze, and in this case the gaze of the English citizen, is crucial to understanding director Jasmin Dizdar's perspective in *Beautiful People*. The opening street fight is portrayed through the eyes of the people on the street, who look at the immigrants with fear and bewilderment. As Yoshitzky writes, "the film implies that the outsider will never understand the complexities, subtleties, and depth of the conflict, the pain of the other."<sup>66</sup> Dizdar reinforces this lack of understanding by portraying the Serbian/Croatian fight as childish and as slapstick, thus contrasting the childish conflict of the immigrant to the "civilized, mature mind" of the English citizen.<sup>67</sup>

The Bosnian-born Dizdar, however, is not necessarily arguing that the English are more mature, but instead exploring how this lack of empathy and understanding reverberates throughout layers of English society. The critique of the hooliganism of Griffin's working class football gang is just as scathing as that of Portia's uppercrust Tory family, who cannot hide their amazement when her Bosnian boyfriend plays beautifully at the piano. Dizdar exploits the comic potential of the English native's narrow-mindedness. After the awkward dinner with Portia's family, Pero remarks in his broken English, "Thank you for your hostility," an innocent gaff on a popular expression that is given a double meaning. Jerry, the BBC war correspondent, returns from the battlefield completely shell-shocked, but instead of turning the experience into activism, he turns inward. Jerry tries to amputate his own leg in an effort to



identify fully with the war victims. His frantic wife eventually takes him to a psychiatrist, who proclaims that Jerry is suffering from “Bosnian Syndrome,” or empathy for victims so profound that those who help the Bosnians imagine themselves also as victims. The psychiatrist assures his wife not to worry because “it’s much more curable than Gulf War Syndrome.”

Dizdar leaves much of his sympathy for the character of Doctor Mouldy, the affable but overworked doctor struggling to keep his family together. At his hospital, he cares for a Bosnian woman Dzemila who begs him to abort her child, which is the result of her being raped by soldiers. Mouldy eventually takes in the couple with their infant (named Chaos by the now-proud father Ismet) and the film closes with a series of happy montages. Mouldy and the Bosnian family celebrate in his home while Griffin reforms his former racist ways and cares for a blind boy. However, this Hollywood ending is perhaps undercut by the final scenes with Pero. Pero leaves his immigrant tenant housing to marry Portia (the sight of an African immigrant being arrested by authorities because she does not have the protected refugee status that Pero has is given just a parting glance), but as the credits roll, Pero announces that he is a war criminal who committed horrendous acts in his former homeland. As the review in *Sight & Sound* magazine points out, this jolting scene serves to make *Beautiful People* slightly ambivalent about the unstable future of refugees and immigrants, but the scenes of birth and renewal with the Bosnian family and Mouldy serve as a sugar-coated dose of optimism.<sup>68</sup> Mouldy loses his own family when his wife takes the children back, but gains another in the form of the immigrant family. His gift to the

father in the form of a video camera hints at the possibility of a future where the refugee Ismet is given the tools to create his own story.

### Chapter 3: Ambivalence

The three films explored in this chapter portray the conflicts and tensions between a citizen and immigrant. The films in this section can be better understood in context to Stam and Shohat's call for "polycentric" media landscapes, which give nuanced portrayals of immigrants and native-born characters "across social, political, and cultural situations."<sup>69</sup> These films include Rainier Werner Fassbinder's drama *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), a critical examination of the romantic relationship between a working class German woman and a Moroccan immigrant in post-war Germany. Fassbinder's decidedly fatalistic tone is countered by Courtney Hunt's 2008 independent film *Frozen River*, which features a white female protagonist pairing up with a Native American woman to smuggle illegal immigrants across the Canadian/United States border. This tale of perseverance and female bonding uses immigrants as plot point, but also as a unique way to examine the complexities of Native/Anglo relations. In contrast with the partnership focus of *Frozen River*, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Biutiful*, is about the spiritual and moral journey of an individual Spaniard navigating the system of global capitalism and the many layers of haves and have-nots within that system. Finally, Ramin Bahrani's film *Goodbye Solo* is examined in the conclusion. *Goodbye Solo* is a model for approaching the

multiplicity of experiences of both the immigrant and non-immigrant in an artful, humanistic fashion.

*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* is a loose remake of Douglas Sirk's 1950s melodrama *All that Heaven Allows*. While Sirk's drama was a post-war tale of intolerance and class division among the bourgeois suburban characters, Fassbinder is fascinated with the prejudices and group-think of the working class in 1970s Germany. The film's protagonist, Emmi, is a German cleaning woman in her fifties who begins a romance with a much younger immigrant worker named Ali from Morocco. As Judith Mayne points out in her essay on Fassbinder, Emmi and Ali's relationship is not one of passion, but based on their common isolation and loneliness.<sup>70</sup> Both Emmi and Ali are not respected as members of society. She is a widow, ignored by her grown children, and spends her days cleaning other people's homes. As a middle-aged woman, Emmi is no longer a sexual object, no longer a wife or mother, and so her usefulness seems to have disappeared. Ali is nearly twenty years younger, but he is an immigrant, working in dangerous occupations in the shadow of German culture. The couple loves one another, but also exploits each other's differences. Ali joins his friends when they ridicule Emmi's age and appearance, and she shows him off to her neighbors as a spectacle, boasting of his strong muscles and his cleanliness. At every point, their relationship seems to be on display, leading to what Mayne calls a relationship that exists "in the tenuous margins between public and private life."<sup>71</sup>

Although Emmi is an outsider, her status as a white German citizen marks her as in an entirely different class from Ali. His position as an immigrant worker is

precarious at best, and at no point does it seem possible that he will ever be accepted by Emmi's family or friends, even as he contributes through his labor to the German economic system. Unlike Sirk's happy ending in *All That Heaven Allows*, which reunites the two lovers at the end, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* leaves its lovers with little room for a future together. Ali is stricken ill at the end of the film from a perforated ulcer, described by the doctor as common among immigrant workers due to the stress of their labor. As Mayne describes, it is Ali's very status as an immigrant worker that causes his downfall. The couple is reunited, but their union is limited as we glimpse a tearful Emmi sitting by Ali's hospital bed as "the doctor promises little hope for recovery since the tension which produced the affliction will doubtless remain."<sup>72</sup>

Fassbinder's fatalistic tone is understandable, considering both the tensions in 1970s Germany and the director's own personal demons (he died of a drug overdose at the age of 37). However, Emmi and Ali are very much in love, and despite the tragedy, they proclaim their feelings publicly even at the end. The next film, the 2008 drama *Frozen River*, is about a different kind of couple, two women who start as enemies and become close friends and allies. The film stars Melissa Leo as Ray, a mother of two young boys living on the border of the St. Regis Mohawk reservation, which straddles the border between New York and Canada. After her husband takes off to Atlantic City with their savings right before Christmas, Ray joins up with a young Native American woman Lila (Misty Upham), who makes money by transporting illegal immigrants across the Canadian side of the reservation into America. Both women are tough, cynical and hopelessly living on the edge. Ray lives

in a rented trailer and dreams of having a “double-wide” with plenty of room for her and kids, while Lil lives in the equivalent of a tin shed and struggles to save enough to try and get her toddler out of the custody of her mother-in-law. Ray has what Lila needs, a car with a button-release trunk and a white face to get past the police, and Ray desperately needs money to make the payment on her new trailer. The two women are hostile to one another from the start. Ray’s husband is alluded to as Native (we never see him) and she is suspicious and angry with Lila, who has stolen her car. Lila has had her child taken from her, and is always shown in survival mode, reacting quickly just to try and survive. The immigrants in this story are East Asians (the film never gives much detail on their origin, or what kind of work they are being brought in to do) and Middle Easterners who are held at gunpoint by various nefarious characters, shoved into Ray and Lil’s car, and then dropped off at a hotel. The economic perspective of the poor and working class Americans (white and native alike) are never far from the central story. Ray works part-time at the ironically-named Yankee One Dollar, a store selling cheap plastic goods made overseas for American consumers. During their first smuggling run as Ray looks across the sheet of ice that Lila has ordered her to drive across, Ray says, “I’m not crossing that. That’s Canada.” Lila’s retort that “No, that’s Mohawk land on both sides. It is free trade between nations,” underscores the film’s economic message of illegal immigration as just one part of a larger economic system. The American way of life has not been kind to Lila and Ray, and they exploit the system by using the only people who are lower on society’s strata than they are, the nameless immigrants being smuggled in every week.

Ray and Lila never talk to the immigrants, and show little interest in them, until Lila tells Ray to keep a gun near in case they run. She explains that most of the immigrants are brought into the states and forced to work until they pay off what they owe for their travel, "\$40,000 to \$50,000, depends on where they're coming from. Sometimes it takes years," Lila states matter-of-factly. "To get here?" Ray asks incredulously, imagining why anyone would choose to enter the barren wasteland of trailers and poverty of her own community.

The climax of the film takes place on Christmas Eve, when Ray and Lila make one last smuggling run so they can afford presents for their children. The couple shoved into their trunk is not the visibly East Asian immigrants of past trips. Ray becomes angry and asks Lila, "Wait, these ones are not Chinese." Lila responds, "They're Paki's." Ray has qualms about taking them and nervously tries to talk to the woman and asks her about the contents of the bundle in her arms. When the couple fails to respond, Ray grabs the bundle and puts it the snow. "I can't be responsible for what might have been in there. If they want to come here so bad, they should take the time to learn English." When they drop the couple off at the hotel, the immigrant woman's hysterical cries prompts a conversation that leads to one of the smugglers informing Lila and Ray that the bundle was the woman's baby. Despite the risk of crossing the ice again and being seen by the border patrol, the two women drive back for the baby. At this point, maternal instinct overrides everything. Just as Lila and Ray went from enemies to friends over their shared experience trying to survive and protect their children, now they become joined with an immigrant from Pakistan over

their common experiences as mothers and protectors. When Ray and Lila are finally caught by the police, Ray decides to take the fall if Lila will take care of her children. “It’s just a couple months right? I’ve got no record, and I’m white,” Ray tells Lila, who is seen at the end with her own child, and with Ray’s two sons playing outside the new trailer. There is no longer any distance between Lila, an indigenous woman, and Ray, a white working class mother, but the fate of the nameless Pakistani woman who is marked as eternal outsider is left unanswered.

*Frozen River* is primarily focused on economic injustice through the plight of two single mothers who team up. In contrast, Alejandro González Iñárritu’s 2010 drama *Biutiful* is focused primarily on a single character whose personal journey is examined within the larger framework of global capitalism. His inability to reconcile his own part in the exploitation of immigrants in this system with his spirituality/morality becomes the catalyst for change as he faces his eventual death from cancer.

Javier Bardem is Uxbal, a single father struggling to raise two children in a cramped apartment in Barcelona. Uxbal is a middleman in a large system that exploits cheap labor from illegal immigrants. He helps bring Chinese immigrants into the city to work in factories, and African immigrants to sell the purses they make on the streets. Uxbal is an outsider, in part because he is more compassionate than his brother, who is higher on the chain in the black market ring.

While Uxbal’s economic situation is fragile at best, he is more secure than the Asian immigrant workers who sleep in the basement of the factory or multiple families

from Africa crowded into a small room owned by the company. When Uxbal learns he is dying of advanced prostate cancer, he begins a quest to find a caregiver for his two children, and to make amends with the wrongs in his life.

Much of the film is spent as Uxbal wanders the streets of Barcelona, in contemplation of his pending death, and his wonder at the life he is still able to enjoy. He finds beauty in the gritty streets of his city, which as Maria Delgado in her review in *Sight & Sound*, points out have been “reconfigured by migration.” “The pockets revealed by González Iñárritu—largely the northern suburbs of Santa Coloma and Badalona—are far removed from the art-deco tourist hotspots of the Catalan capital.”<sup>73</sup>

Even as Uxbal becomes more sympathetic, a critical error in judgment on his part to save a few Euros on space heaters for the factory results in the death of the factory immigrants. We experience his horror as he finds their limp figures, and then his complete breakdown when he finds the body of the young girl who often took care of his children. Uxbal’s revulsion at the results of his action propels his later decision to take in African immigrant Ige (Diaryatou Daff) and her daughter into his home. Ige’s husband has been arrested by immigration authorities, and she is unsure of whether she should return to her homeland or risk being caught and having her child taken from her. Uxbal entrusts in Ige his entire savings, and the film shifts to her perspective as she grapples over whether to take the money and leave, or stay and care for the children of a man she hardly knows. In the end, Uxbal’s faith in Ige is rewarded as she becomes the caregiver for his son and daughter, but it is in this space



of trust, and a leap of faith that *Biutiful* makes its mark. Ige does not have to care for Uxbal's children, but she does it because it is the right thing to do, and thus her moral actions help to balance out the many wrongs perpetuated by characters throughout the film. Iñárritu puts the moral weight of the film on Ige's shoulders, and suggests that while it may be too late for Uxbal, his brother and his wife, the undocumented workers are not yet corrupted by the system and can still be saved.

While *Biutiful* is a humanistic and compassionate examination of how immigrants are affected by global markets, the story is almost entirely focused on Uxbal. Ige never becomes more than a symbol of the uncorrupted immigrant. Is there a way then to achieve Shohat and Stam's ideal of multiplicity of multicultural perspectives without resorting to a typical immigration narrative focused on the hellish journey or the complete isolation of the immigrant, or the Westernized perspective of an immigrant viewed only through the eyes of a native-born protagonist? Surely a great many of recent films about immigrants and diasporic people portray a depth of experiences, but one of the best examples of a film that does not ignore our modern condition, but instead embraces it, can be found in Ramin Bahrani's *Goodbye Solo*. Bahrani, an Iranian-American whose parents left Iran during the 1979 revolution, made two films leading up to *Solo*. *Man Push Cart* (2005) followed a former Pakistani rock star as he adjusts to the lonely existence of a food push cart worker on the streets of New York Street. *Chop Shop* (2007) told the story of an orphaned young Latino boy struggling to survive while working in an auto-body shop in an industrial neighborhood of Queens. Both films are primarily concerned with people of the

diaspora who face great hurdles just to survive. *Goodbye Solo* marks a significant shift from Bahrani's past films in several ways. First, it was filmed in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (where Bahrani was born) instead of New York. Second, the film portrays not one solitary lead character, but two central figures, Solo, an immigrant from Senegal, and William, an older White Southerner. The film is about their interaction with one another, and in a surprising reverse, William is seen as the more isolated and alienated of the two characters.

The film opens in the middle of a conversation between Solo (Souléymané Sy Savané), a cab driver and his passenger, William (Red West). William offers Solo a thousand dollars for a one-way trip to the Blowing Rock tourist attraction. Solo eventually learns that William intends to commit suicide by jumping off Blowing Rock. The film follows Solo's journey as he tries to find a way to change William's mind. Solo is a good Samaritan, but he is one with plenty of his own problems. His pregnant wife Quiera wants Solo to give up his dream of becoming a flight attendant and focus on driving his cab to earn money for the family. Solo is close to his stepdaughter Alex, who is wise in her ability to see through the lies of adults (even with her eyes glued to her cell phone).

In a review of the film in *Cineaste*, Michael Joshua Rowin concludes that while Solo is an optimistic and overall morally-centered character, he is also at a crossroads. He has left his homeland in Senegal, and has started to build a life in Winston-Salem, but struggles to find his proper place in the community. He spends most of his time on the move in his cab, which relates to Hamid Naficy's theory that

so many stories of immigrants and exiles take place in these mobile spaces of transition.<sup>74</sup> Rowin notes that “It’s instead the site of his current in-between station in life –between origin and assimilation, between a former wife and a stable family, between the lure of criminal activity (a friend who deals drugs is a sort of devil on his shoulder) and straight living, between a stable but undesired occupation (his usual vehicle is still parked on the driveway, waiting to be repaired) and the gamble of a coveted future career.”<sup>75</sup>

The friendship between Solo and William is tense at first. William resents Solo’s intrusions into his personal life, and Solo does not understand why this taciturn old man is so miserable. Solo insists on being William’s driver for all his errands, and at one point William snaps, “I don’t give a shit which one of you people picks me up.” Solo’s response, “Hey William, that’s not really nice. We’re friends aren’t we?” In the director’s commentary on the DVD of *Goodbye Solo*, Bahrani explains that Solo is not just a do-gooder willing to sacrifice anything to save this man, as some critics believed. Bahrani said that Solo needs William to help change his life, and it is only in knowing William and seeing what happens to a man who gives up his dreams that Solo begins to pursue his own goal of becoming a flight attendant.<sup>76</sup>

While the movie is, in the end, about Solo and his journey and dreams, Bahrani makes a crucial decision to shift to William’s perspective in specific scenes. In one scene, William sits in the back of the cab and watches as Solo delivers a phone card to a fellow Sudanese immigrant friend who works cleaning the hotel. William also

watches how Solo interacts with his stepdaughter Alex, and slowly begins to like this man.

Solo's good deeds though do not mean he does not struggle. A cut to a scene of Solo introducing himself at an interview offers hope that Solo will succeed. "My name is Solo. I speak French. I speak English, as you can see. I speak Wolof. I speak Spanish, well I'm getting better at it. My wife is Mexican. I also speak ten other African languages." Bahrani sets the viewer up to expect Solo to get his dream job, but he fails the written part of the examination.

Eventually, he also fails in his quest to save William. In this way, the film is much more about Solo's journey to learn to let go of what he cannot control. Just as Quiera does not agree with Solo's decision to change jobs, Solo can disagree with William, but must accept his decision and decide to be his friend anyway. In the commentary, Bahrani said it was crucial that Solo not save William. "Solo is a complicated character. He has a lot going on. This is not a magical black guy who saves a white guy. There is this whole genre, if you can call it that, of films with these African characters that have all the knowledge and come in and save some stuffy White guy. Solo is thinking all the time, learning, and discovering."

In other words, Bahrani has given William and Solo the rare feature of individual agency: both men grow and change during the course of the film, and slowly the viewer learns more about their lives. Solo's role is not to save William, but to drive him to his final destination. Alex accompanies the two men to Blowing Rock, where William and Solo unsentimentally part ways while William wanders down one

path, never to be seen again in the film. After Solo stands on the precipice and throws a stick into the air, an abrupt cut brings us back into the taxi, with a melancholy Solo driving. Alex then intervenes, and starts quizzing Solo on the questions for his exam, assuming William's former role as questioner. Rowin writes that *Goodbye Solo's* "intertwining themes allow it to function at both the level of character study and of existential allegory, suggesting various interpretations. At Solo's decisive or most reflective moment the previously stationary camerawork and functional compositions transform into unpretentious, graceful moving images of a man standing on the precipice, a man both particular and universal in significance—neither a deterministic product of his surroundings nor an abstracted figure within it."<sup>77</sup>

*Goodbye Solo* transcends categories of immigrant narrative or Eurocentric perspective; it is not a film made for one just type of spectator or another. Naficy states that the best accented films "signify and signify upon cinematic traditions by means of their artisanal and collective production modes, their aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection, and their narrative strategies that cross generic boundaries."<sup>78</sup> *Goodbye Solo* points to a new way of making films about immigrants and diasporic people; a cinema that not only reflects upon and critiques the host society and culture, but also acknowledges collective human experiences and relationships, and an individual's agency to make mistakes and choices.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> See Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Eva Rueschmann, ed. *Moving Pictures, Migrating Identities* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> Sylvie Durmelat and Vinay Swamy, eds. *Screening Integration: Recasting Maghrebi Immigration in Contemporary France*. (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Yosefa Loshitzky, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 15.
- <sup>4</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 48.
- <sup>5</sup> Shohat and Stam, 350.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
- <sup>8</sup> Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 5-6.
- <sup>9</sup> See Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* and Jacques Tourneur's 1947 noir, *Out of the Past*, as just two of the finest examples of a "South of the Border" film. Unlike Mann's film though, these films are not concerned with those who live in Mexico and Latin America, and are told entirely through the perspectives of white male American protagonist.
- <sup>10</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 139.
- <sup>11</sup> Ngai, 139.
- <sup>12</sup> Jonathan Auerbach, "Noir Citizenship: Anthony's Mann's *Border Incident*," *Cinema Journal*, (vol. 47, no. 4, Summer 2008), 104.
- <sup>13</sup> Jonathan Auerbach, *Dark Borders: Film Noir and American Citizenship*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 135.
- <sup>14</sup> Auerbach, *Dark Borders*, 124.
- <sup>15</sup> Auerbach, *Dark Borders*, 137.
- <sup>16</sup> Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 242.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.
- <sup>18</sup> Naficy, 158.
- <sup>19</sup> Naficy, 243.
- <sup>20</sup> A.O. Scott, "Stories from a World in Motion," *New York Times*, March 16, 2008, accessed Aug. 20, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/16/movies/16scot.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/16/movies/16scot.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).
- <sup>21</sup> See article, *La Misma Luna Breaks U.S. Opening-Weekend Record* in Spanish.About.com web site. <http://spanish.about.com/b/2008/03/24/la-misma-luna-breaks-us-opening-weekend-record-for-spanish-language-cinema.htm>.
- <sup>22</sup> Reed Johnson, "Crossing Borders with *Sin Nombre*," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 2009, accessed July 4, 2012. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-ca-nombre8-2009mar08,0,4485259.story>.
- <sup>23</sup> Loshitzky, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Loshitzky, 15.

<sup>25</sup> A prologue at the end of the film declares that Mendoza is the fictional little girl in the movie. It also states that her mother today is a bookkeeper in southern California and that her brother is a successful admissions officer at a university.

<sup>26</sup> Naficy, 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Loshitzky, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Naficy, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Naficy, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Biographical information on Fellag taken from National Public Radio review. Bob Mondello, "An Inspiring Teacher, Exactly When He's Needed," *NPR*, April 13, 2012, accessed July 6, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/04/13/150466375/an-inspiring-teacher-exactly-when-hes-needed>.

<sup>35</sup> Jane Lamacraft. "A Better Life." *Sight & Sound* 21, no. 9 (September 2011): 57. *Art Full Text* (H.W. Wilson), EBSCOhost (accessed July 6, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> See review in *Screen Crave*, for example. <http://screencrave.com/2009-04-02/review-of-sugar/>.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Long, "Sugar," *Cineaste*, (34.4, Fall 2009), 50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Katya Vasileva, "Population and Statistics," in *EuroStat: Statistics in Focus*, web access, [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_OFFPUB/KS-SF-11-034/EN/KS-SF-11-034-EN.PDF](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-11-034/EN/KS-SF-11-034-EN.PDF).

<sup>40</sup> Ruben G. Rumbaut and Golnaz Kamaie, "Immigration and Adult Transitions" in *The Future of Children*, Vol. 20, No. 1. Transition to Adulthood (Spring 2010), 43.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>42</sup> Eva Rueschmann, ed., introduction to *Moving Pictures, Migrating Identities* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), xviii.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Sue Brennan, "Time, Space, and National Belonging in "The Namesake: Redrawing South Asian American Citizenship in the Shadow of 9/11," in *The Journal of American Transnational Studies*, (3(1), 2011), 16. Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6cm9z5hd>.

<sup>46</sup> Todd McCarthy, "A Sentimental Journey," in *Variety*, (Vol. 388 Issue 6, Sept. 23, 2002), 23. *Vocational and Career Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 14, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Ferraro, "Blood in the Marketplace," in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 197.

<sup>48</sup> Ferraro's emphasis, 197.

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- <sup>49</sup> Donald Chase, "Baltimore Sun" in *Entertainment Weekly*, Oct. 19, 1990, accessed <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,318412,00.html>.
- <sup>50</sup> Paul Haspel, "Avalon Lost: Suburbanization and Its Discontents in Barry Levinson's Avalon," in *The Journal of American Culture* (Volume 31, Number 4, December 2008), 384.
- <sup>51</sup> Chase, *Entertainment Weekly*.
- <sup>52</sup> Loshitzky, 9.
- <sup>53</sup> Barbara Korte, "Envisioning a Black Tomorrow? Black Mother Figures and the Issue of Representation in *28 Days Later* and *Children of Men*," in *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts*, eds. Lars Eckstein, Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker and Christoph Reinfandt (New York, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008 ), 322.
- <sup>54</sup> Korte, 322.
- <sup>55</sup> Korte, 323.
- <sup>56</sup> See Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj article, "Gran Torino's boys and men with guns: Hmong perspectives." in *Hmong Studies Journal* for a detailed discussion of the Hmong reaction to the film. (10: 2009) Academic OneFile. Web. Accessed September 3, 2012 1-52.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., 31.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 16.
- <sup>59</sup> Michael Sicinski, *Le Havre*: "Always Be a Human," *Criterion Collection* web site, accessed online <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2399-le-havre-always-be-a-human>.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> Belle Harrell, "Multiculturalism Must Come to a Truce: Hollywood and the Perpetual Browning of the Nation," PhD dissertation, (Florida State University: April 5, 2006) accessed online at: <http://diginole.lib.fsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1743&context=etd>, 63.
- <sup>63</sup> Harrell, 67.
- <sup>64</sup> Daniel Garrett, "Strangers and Friends, Immigration and Power, in the film *The Visitor*" *Offscreen Magazine*, Vol. 12, Issue 6 (2008) Accessed online [http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/pages/essays/strangers\\_and\\_friends/](http://www.offscreen.com/index.php/pages/essays/strangers_and_friends/).
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Yoshitzky, 54.
- <sup>67</sup> Yoshitzky, 54.
- <sup>68</sup> *Sight & Sound*, review, <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/187>.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 351.
- <sup>70</sup> Judith Mayne, "Fassbinder and Spectatorship," *New German Critique* (No. 12: Autumn 1977), 62.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., 63.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., 70.
- <sup>73</sup> Maria Delgado, "Biutiful," *Sight & Sound* (Vol. 21 Issue 2: February 2011) 48-49



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<sup>74</sup> Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Joshua Rowin, "Goodbye Solo," *Cineaste* (34, no. 3: Summer 2009) 48. EBSCOhost, accessed September 20, 2012.

<sup>76</sup> *Goodbye Solo*, DVD director's commentary by Ramin Bahrani.

<sup>77</sup> Rowin, 49.

<sup>78</sup> Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 4-5.

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