

## Intersecting (and dissecting) cultures on film

Several Sundance premieres depict when worlds collide.

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AN Israeli man and a Palestinian woman fall in love in Berlin against the backdrop of the 2006 World Cup. A white trailer park mom from upstate New York teams with a Mohawk nation woman to smuggle illegal Chinese and Pakistani immigrants into the U.S. A half-Italian, half-English art star living in the states tries to adopt a pair of orphaned Sudanese twins. A college professor arrives at his seldom-used New York apartment to discover a young foreign couple-- he's Syrian, she's Senegalese-- living there illegally. A young Laotian man tells the story of his family's seemingly inevitable but ultimately disastrous immigration to America.

On the surface, these films have next to nothing in common aside from having premiered at this year's Sundance Film Festival. Two are documentaries, the other three features set in diverse locations featuring characters with next to nothing in common. Yet each represents an earnest effort by the filmmakers to plumb the subject of borders and nationality and how they intersect, often violently, with life as it's actually lived in the 21st century.

The festival has been more open to the world this year and, in what seems a marked difference from about a decade ago, films focusing on issues of national identity no longer frame them in terms of identity politics or assimilation. Hyphens don't do justice to the complexity of our transnational world, in other words, where so many identities incorporate several nationalities at once.

### 'The Art Star and the Sudanese Twins'

Documentary-maker Pietra Brettkelly follows international art star Vanessa Beecroft for 16 months as she tries to adopt a pair of twin Sudanese orphans she's included in her artwork some months before. The result is a brutally honest, remarkably self-critical reflection on foreign adoption that touches unexpectedly on issues of alienation and loneliness. Through candid interviews with Beecroft and her American husband, her Italian mother, her English father, as well as others, a portrait emerges of a self-obsessed artist whose obsession with having a big family ("lots of people around who love me") stems from a lonely childhood spent with her mother in a remote Italian village.

Beecroft eventually runs up against Sudanese bureaucracy -- or the lack thereof where foreign adoption is concerned -- and local community leaders who worry about the twins' loss of connection to their culture should they be transplanted to the suburbs of New York. They want to know, will American women want to marry them? Will they learn to speak their language, or wonder why they are different? As Brettkelly incorporates more information about Beecroft's childhood and disintegrating marriage, their point becomes clearer and we are forced to ask ourselves who really benefits the most from foreign adoption.

### 'Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)'

This remarkable documentary was filmed over 23 years, since cinematographer Ellen Kuras ("Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind") first contacted Laotian refugee Thavisouk Phrasavath when he was in his teens. Thoroughly different in tone from the considerably more arch and self-conscious "Art Star," "Nerakhoon" is another deeply personal story about the way nationality and a sense of place shape identity and how their lack can be distorting.

"Nerakhoon" tells the story of a family with deep, long-term if naive ties to the United States -- the family paterfamilias was recruited by the CIA during their secret operations in Laos to work intelligence along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. When the U.S. withdrew from Laos and the Pathet Lao came to power, Thavisouk's father became an enemy of the state, along with his family of 10 children.

After a harrowing escape to Thailand (Thavisouk undertook the journey alone at age 12, living as a street kid until the rest of his family, minus two sisters left behind, could join him), eventually the family is given the choice of accepting political asylum in the United States, France or Canada. They choose the U.S. because, they figure, that's where their father's efforts will be recognized.

Instead, after arriving at JFK, they are piled into a van by their sponsor and dropped off at a crack house in Brooklyn. As Thavisouk's siblings adapt to the brutal conditions of street life, his mother regrets her decision to leave Laos.

### 'Frozen River'

It is the first feature by writer and director Courtney Hunt, and it approaches this theme from a surprising point of view. In the frozen wilds of upstate New York, two mothers left to fend for themselves turn to the smuggling of illegal immigrants to survive. Ray (Melissa Leo) meets Lila (Misty Upham) after Lila steals Ray's husband's abandoned car. (Ray's husband has left the car at

the bus station and skipped town to gamble their house money in Atlantic City.) Lila lives on the reservation, so Ray can't call the police on her. "This is Mohawk nation," Lila tells her at one point. "This is New York!" sputters an exasperated Ray.

This is the stealth element in "Frozen River" -- the invisible, almost entirely conceptual barrier between Lila and Ray echoes the one between Lila and Ray and their human cargo.

What makes them different is academic when compared to what makes them similar: They are both poor working women struggling to raise children on their own. Even Lila's belief that Ray is somehow above the law for being white is poignant in light of Ray's socioeconomic position in life.

### **'The Visitor'**

Tom McCarthy follows "The Station Agent" with the poignant "The Visitor," which follows a lonely and depressed economics professor named Walter Vale (Richard Jenkins) as he arrives in his seldom-used New York apartment only to find a young couple living there. Tarek (Haaz Sleiman) is a young Syrian musician, his girlfriend, Zainab (Danai Gurira), is a Senegalese jewelry-maker and they have been duped into believing they are subletting the apartment by an acquaintance.

Both in the country illegally, Tarek and Zainab are terrified of any situation that might lead to a confrontation with the law. But Tarek and Walter form an unlikely friendship, and when Tarek is arrested for jumping a stuck subway turnstile, Walter does his best to help.

"The Visitor" hinges on a sudden reversal involving Walter and Tarek's, mother Mouna (Hiam Abbass). Although Tarek and Mouna (who were denied political asylum when they first arrived in the country after the politically motivated death of Tarek's journalist father) as well as Zainab suffer the greatest loss, Walter too is left bereft and alone.

### **'Strangers'**

Another film that illustrates how borders and national conflicts can be internalized and transported to other worlds. In Guy Nattiv and Erez Tadmor's "Strangers," an Israeli man and a Palestinian woman living in Paris meet by chance in Berlin during the World Cup finals and fall in love. The war between Israel and Lebanon that begins shortly thereafter sparks a generations-old conflict that threatens their relationship.

Even living far away from the site of the conflict -- in a country that would just as soon not have them -- Eyal and Rana cannot initially escape the borders imposed on their personal lives by their nationalities.

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