Discussion Questions for ***Sweet Land***—week one (25 March)

**Directions**: These questions are only for our discussion—no need to write your answers, at least not as homework. When you read the story that the film is based on, I’ll give you a few more.

1. Ali Salem, who expanded the story considerably and adapted it to a screenplay, grew up in Minnesota as the son of an Egyptian immigrant, an economics professor, and a mother of German descent. Of his father, Ali Salem said this:

He retired last year after 50 years as a professor of Economics at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he taught tens of thousands of young students the principles of “supply and demand” and the concept of “opportunity cost” as illustrated through graphs of guns and butter. [. . . .]. My father is a citizen. He taught many minds in Minnesota. Depending on where those students finally lived and worked, you could say he changed the world. A colleague, a priest at the University, was once asked, “Who on campus best exemplifies the Christian values we attempt to inspire in our students?” He responded, “That Muslim in the Economics Department.”

How do you think the **film reflects the filmmaker’s family background**? Why do you think Salem wanted to make this point about his father’s citizenship in his essay about his film?

2. Many reviewers of the film comment on its gorgeous **cinematography** and striking, **“painterly” images**. The filmmaker acknowledges two painters, in particular, who influenced him, Andrew Wyeth and Edward Hopper. Here’s a [good site](https://www.google.com/search?q=edward+hopper+images&client=firefox-a&hs=Wxf&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=jqGOUvSTMOiiiQKzzoHYCg&ved=0CCsQsAQ&biw=1528&bih=888) for Hopper, and here’s [one](https://www.google.com/search?q=edward+hopper+images&client=firefox-a&hs=Wxf&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=jqGOUvSTMOiiiQKzzoHYCg&ved=0CCsQsAQ&biw=1528&bih=888#tbm=isch&q=andrew+wyeth+artist+images) for Wyeth. Look at some of their paintings before watching the film, and then we will discuss those influences.

3. One major theme in this film is **how people deal with change**. Some characters are clearly “early adopters,” while others are more resistant to change. What are some traditions the film seems to be showing to be outdated or just not worth supporting? What kinds of change does it seem to be questioning? Do you find yourself more inclined to sympathize with those advocating change, or those standing by the old ways? (Note: you might split your vote, too.)

Here are some specifics to consider for this question: technology in farming (“bigger, better, faster”), commercial financial monopoly versus collective, embrace of diverse cultures versus enforced unity through homogeneity, inherited connection to the land versus “just business” relationship to development.

4. One conflict in the film that isn’t in the short story it’s based on is between the bankers and the small farmers. Consider how the film depicts this struggle and the role played in it by socialist activists. Is this purely a historical footnote, or would you say Salem is trying to make a point about prejudice? If so, what point is he making? Did you find yourself in sympathy or opposed to this element of the film?

5. Although WWI is mentioned a few times in the film as an explanation for why German-born Inge faces so much resistance in the town at first, we learn almost nothing about her experiences during the war except that she has no family left. Considering what we saw of women’s experiences of that war in England and France, what do you think we can infer about Inge’s experiences? What would you like to know about that part of her life? How would it change the story to add in a flashback or two, or have her tell that part of her story? Would you have liked more information about it? Why or why not?

6. Consider the role of the pastor in the story—a character who doesn’t appear at all in the short story. Does he seem like a believable, well-rounded character, or a flat stereotype of religious bigotry? Explain your answer.

7. Frandsen and Brownie also don’t appear in the short story. How do they contribute to the film’s picture of American society at this time period, particularly in terms of our evolving definition of what it means to be American, even if you were born elsewhere or are descended from immigrants from various places (as Brownie is)? How do they serve as foils to help us understand Inge and Olaf’s characters?

8. At first Inge and Olaf seem to have even less choice about their marriage partner than people in countries with a tradition of arranged marriages (such as Gita) would have. From what we see as the film unfolds, do you believe that they will have a good marriage? Why or why not? If you believe they are really in love by the end, what do you think shows that? What could explain it?