



# dirt

TEACHING GUIDE

A NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA PRODUCTION





## TEACHING GUIDE BY INDIRA PRAHST

### ABOUT THE FILM

"What is it about feeling dirty that shames us into silence and disgust?" asks director Meghna Haldar in her feature documentary *Dirt*. From the slums of Kolkata to Vancouver's Downtown Eastside to a barbecue joint in Central Texas, everyone has a different story. Sex workers, poop scientists, sanitation artists, cemetery workers, historians and little kids weigh in. *Dirt* isn't just a four-letter word; it contains a world of meaning, spanning the divine and the profane.

With more questions than answers, Meghna sets out to unearth the mucky secrets of human history and culture, asking: When did cleanliness come to be next to godliness? Where is the line drawn between race, class and dirt? What does it mean to feel dirty? As the parallels between what is considered disposable – garbage or even people – begin to emerge, Meghna confronts her own entrenched prejudices and discovers the true nature of dirt. (Produced by the National Film Board. 2006, 51 min.)



### USING THIS GUIDE

The guide is designed for educators working with youth aged 15 years and up in the following subjects: social studies, sociology, anthropology, Canadian history, cultural and media studies, race and ethnic relations, psychology, women's studies and philosophy. It is also for professionals who

want to explore the complex issues surrounding social class, discrimination and the contemporary immigrant experience.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Viewer discretion is advised. Educators and professionals using the film should review it in advance due to the sometimes explicit subject matter.

The first section raises various issues about people's relationship with and perceptions of dirt. Sometimes talking from experience, individuals discuss how social class and occupation intersect with dirt and otherize people from different geographical locations. This section also examines the social construction of dirt and the ideological function such constructions may serve to dehumanize and marginalize people.

The second section has students think about how different social forces are at play in shaping meanings associated with dirt. This can prompt discussion around the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction and about solutions that educators, service providers and students can implement to address problems.

## KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand how the concept of dirt intersects with social class and race, and how people associated with dirt can become stigmatized and marginalized.
- Understand and identify the meanings of *dirt* and *otherness*, by discussing the social constructions of these meanings, and their impact.
- Prompt critical thinking and discussion about dirt and otherness, and how our views affect individuals and society.

## PREPARING FOR A SCREENING OF *Dirt*

- Preview the film before screening to a larger audience as the subject matter can be overwhelming to some.
- Invite local multicultural communities and resource people to screenings at professional development workshops and educational institutions.
- Research current examples of racial discrimination in your community, nationally and internationally.
- Pre-screening discussion questions and activities:
  - What are some common definitions of the words *dirt* and *dirty*? Write these down and review them again at the end of the film.
  - What type of occupations, practices, places or people do you think of as dirty?
  - Who or what informs our definitions of these concepts? (i.e. the media, family, peers, culture, history, politics)



## EXPLORING DEFINITIONS OF DIRT

### Race: Immigrants of “colour”

While the contemporary immigrant experience is contingent on a complex and interrelated set of cultural, economic, ethnic and political factors, this film sheds light on

one experience that is common to most immigrants – being perceived as *dirty* and *other* in one’s adopted country.

- In the film, what language is used to describe immigrants of colour in reference to dirt?
- “I was a non-resident alien living in Texas in September 2001. Suddenly, without warning, it became about us and them. Fingerprinting and retina scans every six months; being questioned repeatedly at airports; paying \$100 just to fly through US airspace marked some of us as other, outsiders, people to be feared.” [2:27]

According to the film, why was Meghna someone to be feared?

What are the implications when visible minorities are considered dirty?

- “...We were somehow contaminating this mythic land of opportunity known as America. I felt like dirt...That fear and suspicion shamed me; silenced me.” [3:03]

What informs perceptions of visible minorities as dirty?

Can you relate to this or do you know someone who can?

### Definition by Occupation

Society perceives people in certain occupations as dirty and therefore less worthy citizens. Consider the following quotes from the film and discuss how these perceptions have caused such workers to be marginalized.



**A. Pooja Kumar:** Sanitation Worker, New Delhi  
[24:40 - 26:37]

- “In our family, lower-caste people who have come to clean our toilets are not allowed to touch anything.”

In India, how have people been marginalized because of occupation and caste? Do you think the same thing happens here?

The implication is that “dirt” cannot be removed from people whose work involves sanitation or cleaning; is this the perception in your community and culture? Give examples.

- “Even now my parents don’t know what I do...What a disgrace it would be to my family if someone saw me cleaning public toilets.”

Does the stigma associated with sanitation work affect Pooja’s entire family?

Consider the role of honour.

- Pooja says that she is considered dirty “...because my job is dirty. People who perform humble tasks have no value.”

How does this notion connect with social class, with being perceived and treated as other and with being robbed of one’s dignity?

How has being a sanitation worker affected Pooja’s personal life and self-image?



**B.Susan Davis:** Sex worker, Vancouver, British Columbia [26:37 – 28:23]

Susan speaks about keeping her occupation secret to avoid eviction from her apartment because of the perception people have of sex workers. Consider the following quotes:

- “Nobody wants a sex worker living next door for many reasons. People can cite their safety is in jeopardy, the men that I bring into the building...Sex work *is* contagious.”

What associations between *sex work* and *dirt* can you think of?

What comments does Susan make about stigma and her work?

- Consider the following quote from Susan when she talks about how people perceive the activities of sex workers: “People are always surprised because they can’t imagine a sex worker being loved by anyone, having a family or children or anything. It’s almost as if we come from eggs and are somehow hatched somewhere... parentless, childless, loverless beings...”

How does this notion tie in with being constructed as *other*?



C. **Mierle Laderman Ukeles:** Artist, New York City, NY [31:40 – 36:56]

Having studied New York City sanitation workers for one and a half years and been inspired by their stories, Laderman Ukeles used her art to honour their contribution.

- Give examples from the film that describe how society perceived the sanitation workers.
- Mierle attributes the stigma attached to maintenance workers as being directly connected to garbage and says: “People did not want to deal with their own garbage, so you project onto them that... oh it’s their garbage.”

Discuss.

- “I heard terrible names... hundred of names... dirt, filth attached to them and it was not even their filth... isn’t that something?”

What does she mean?

How does the use of language in this example depict and define the workers as *other*?

To what extent does this comment expose hypocrisy?

- “...when you have a culture that accepts degrading material, what comes along with that is the permission, giving the permission to degrade which is garbage, gives the permission of the culture to degrade the identity of human beings as well, certainly those who are associated with the garbage, even though it’s not their own.”

Do you agree or disagree with this viewpoint?

### **Social Class and Segregation**

William Cohen speaks about British anthropologist Mary Douglas’ theory that people who are considered dirty have historically been physically, geographically, socially and economically segregated [11:57 – 18:48].

- To what extent do “systems isolate people who they think are dirty?” Make reference to examples from the film.

- Consider the theme of segregation and how the poor living in slums are separated from the middle class. Reflect on the following quotes in the film:

“Wealthy people move up the social scale.”

“People at the bottom of the social scale come underfoot.”

- Who decides what is dirty and how are people in certain social classes constructed as dirty? Consider the following quote: “The history of filth is limited to a western perspective” and provide examples from the film to support your opinion on this statement.
- Meghna says that “Soaps and toilets became equated with civilization. And hygiene came to function as a moral virtue.”

What do you think this means?

How is being clean associated with being more civilized? Provide examples from the film to support your answer.

- Eileen Cleere says that during the Victorian Era, “A lot of the Pears images were about black children entering a bathtub and coming out white children. And that’s how powerful Pears soap was. It could convert the ethnicity of, um, of someone who was racially other into a European figure.” [17:23]

What are some of the implications of conveying such “Eurocentric” images and messages about race and dirt?

Can you think of other examples with similar messages in advertisements today?

### **The Social Construction of Dirt**

First, ask students a series of broad questions to help them identify the relationship between dirty, social class and race:

- Do you think that the social construction of dirt poses ideological problems?
- For example, do we view people who are “dirty” as less civilized or beneath us?
- Can such perceptions lead to people being treated differently?

The film exposes the fact that people, societies, countries and cultures dehumanize and cast those of other societies as “dirty” to justify various forms of social and political inequality and in its worst forms, assimilation and even genocide.

Consider the following examples and quotes from the film.

A. **Chief Robert Joseph**, Elder Advisor IRSSS  
[18:58 – 20:01]



- Chief Joseph talks about the purpose of residential schools in Canada as being “...to take out the Indian out of the Indian.” Discuss how and why he thinks that the government succeeded.
- As a student at St. Michael’s Indian Residential School, he explains his reaction to being put through numerous delousing and showers: “The first time you sort of wondered what this was all about, then you realize it’s because people made assumptions that we were all dirty, or pagans or heathens...that they have to do these things to equalize our health stature...”

Discuss these statements and provide examples to illustrate the process and outcomes of positing “us” versus “them.” In this case, who is “us” and who is “them”?

B. **William Cohen** [20:35 – 21:35]

- Cohen says “The racial distinctions that were necessary in order to make possible the kind of fascist movements that went through the whole middle part of the century, again, mobilized a language of dirtiness, and infectiousness, and pollution that had to be cleansed from the system in order to make a society whole and complete.” This is followed by a quote from Hitler.

How does the language of dirt serve the process of dehumanization during the Holocaust?

- “The Nazi campaigns against Jews, and gypsies, and homosexuals violated a sense of ordered system: that is people who seemed to be on the outside get designated as dirty. And once they are dehumanized by virtue of their dirtiness, by their state as marked as filth, they can then be exterminated.”



Name some other examples of other fascist movements in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and give examples of how a “language of dirtiness” played a role?

What kind of racial, cultural, social or political distinctions were made to justify war, extermination, and other acts of violence?

**C. Kids in the playground** [36:21 – 38:04]

- A fellow classmate whom these kids consider dirty has a “different smell than us.” One of the children says, “He is our worst enemy.” Show how language is used here to construct a person as *other*.
- The word *dirty* has the potential to harm. How can this be avoided?

## **DEBUNKING AND DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES**

A stereotype embodies generalizations about a specific group of people. Examine general stereotypes of visible minorities, people of lower class and lower caste and consider how some of these stereotypes are connected with dirt. Draw on examples from the film.

- At the end of the film, Meghna says “I have come to realize that I will sometimes be the other here, perhaps dirty in some fundamental way... tainted by association in somebody’s eyes. But who amongst us has never been tarnished, who amongst us has never felt dirty?” [44:14]

What kind of conclusion has Meghna come to here?

- Do you have a different understanding of dirt and the experiences people who are labeled “dirty” face after viewing this film?
- How can perceptions about people associated with *dirt* have real consequences on how they are treated by others?
- Give examples from the film of solutions that empowered individuals to cope.

The following questions can be used for further discussion or as essay topics.

- At the beginning of the film, Meghna challenges herself to “seek my own prejudice out about why I perceive people” as dirty. Watching her journey, has your view about dirt changed? How has the film influenced your perceptions? Has it affected how you treat others? Discuss.
- The film notes that what is sacred can also be dirty. How can this idea challenge a binary view of people, icons and things? Consider the depiction of a “Goddess” as pure and sacred, but also made of dirt. What about motherhood and being “pure” (eg. Pooja)? Is there a double standard?
- We learn how social constructions of people have been used in the past to inform oppressive policies and actions (assimilation, segregation, genocide). What is a current example? What solutions do you suggest?
- How can exposing the real experiences and struggles faced by people associated with dirt be part of the solution?
- What messages do you get from the film about “living with dirt” and being stigmatized as dirty? What role can individuals and institutions play in addressing these issues?

## **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

- Using additional resources such as books, encyclopedias and dictionaries, define and draw a picture of each of the film’s central concepts: dirt, dirty, social class, belief system, immigrants, inequality.
- For one day, log how you or others view dirt and what is considered dirty. Are your feelings and perceptions negative? Why or why not? Discuss your observations in a small group the following day.
- Invite someone from the sanitation industry to discuss ideas raised in the film.
- Take notes and consider writing a short article for a local or student paper. Look at advertisements on TV or in print representing people, social class and occupation. What symbols or images are associated with dirt? In what types of sentences or titles does dirt appear? Write a short critical analysis.

## ADDITIONAL NFB RESOURCES

*Dirt*. Haldar, Meghna. (2008, 81 min 34 s)  
[onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=53616](http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=53616)

### Environment

*Crapshoot: The Gamble with Our Wastes*. McKay, Jeff. (2003, 52 min 43 s).  
[nfb.ca/film/crapshoot\\_the\\_gamble\\_with\\_our\\_wastes/](http://nfb.ca/film/crapshoot_the_gamble_with_our_wastes/)

### Philosophy and Social Issues

*Examined Life*. Taylor, Astra. NFB and Sphinx Productions. (2008, 88 min).  
[onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=55468](http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=55468)

### Aboriginal

*Finding Dawn*. Welsh, Christine. (2006, 73 min 29s).  
[nfb.ca/film/finding\\_dawn/](http://nfb.ca/film/finding_dawn/)

*Invisible Nation*. Desjardins, Richard and Robert Monderie. (2008, 97 min 49 s)  
[onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=56056](http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=56056)

### Racism

*IScreen Test*. Lee, Linda. (2004, 6 min 56 s)  
[nfb.ca/film/screen\\_test/](http://nfb.ca/film/screen_test/)