

## ABSTRACT

SANTANA, BRIAN ALLEN. 'Look But Don't Touch': Synthesizing Strategies of Denial in the Later Films of Atom Egoyan, 1994-2002. (Under the direction of Joseph A. Gomez)

Since 1994, Atom Egoyan has become the most internationally recognizable figure in contemporary Canadian Cinema. Prior to *Exotica* (1994), his first major release in America, Egoyan had slowly risen to prominence in Canada through ultra-low budget independent films partially subsidized through governmental arts funds. Films like *Next of Kin* (1984), *Family Viewing* (1987), *Speaking Parts* (1989), *The Adjuster* (1991), and *Calendar* (1993) attracted a devoted art house following for Egoyan in his own country but never really connected with an international audience on a large scale. It was the 1994 release of *Exotica*, a film distributed by Miramax, which finally brought Egoyan a level of commercial success and recognition from American film audiences, but some critics, almost immediately noted that *Exotica* marked a pronounced change in his artistic direction.

Those critics who propose a sharp distinction between Egoyan's pre and post-*Exotica* work are correct in identifying the film as a transition point, but often for the wrong reasons. Egoyan's career (thus far) can rightly be divided into the post and pre-*Exotica* work, but this thesis offers a new critical framework from which to consider Egoyan's later films. This framework recognizes that the pre and post-*Exotica* films are about attempts to come to terms with something larger than an individual's immediate experience and that this progression is directly correlated with the exploration of the psychological process of denial.

'Look But Don't Touch': Synthesizing Strategies of Denial in the Later Films of Atom  
Egoyan, 1994-2002

by

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## DEDICATION

For My Family (including Cocoa and Redd)

## BIOGRAPHY

Brian Santana received a B.A. in Drama from the University of North Carolina at Asheville in 2002. Brian has a diverse number of academic interests that include: theatre, literature, film, philosophy, religion, and museum studies. He has worked as a literary critic, a film instructor, and a professional theatre technician. He most recently worked at the North Carolina Museum of Art. In August 2005, he received his M.A. in English with a concentration in film studies from North Carolina State University. Brian hopes to begin his doctoral studies in the fall of 2006.

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Enjoy,

Brian A. Santana

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## Chapter 1: Creating a New Framework

Since 1994, Atom Egoyan has become the most internationally recognizable figure in contemporary Canadian Cinema. Prior to *Exotica* (1994), his first major release in America, Egoyan had slowly risen to prominence in Canada through ultra-low budget independent films partially subsidized through governmental arts funds. Films like *Next of Kin* (1984), *Family Viewing* (1987), *Speaking Parts* (1989), *The Adjuster* (1991), and *Calendar* (1993) attracted a devoted art house following for Egoyan in his own country but never really connected with an international audience on a large scale. It was the 1994 release of *Exotica*, a film distributed by Miramax, which finally brought Egoyan a level of commercial success and recognition from American film audiences, but some critics, almost immediately noted that *Exotica* marked a pronounced change in his artistic direction.

As a result of this change, the effusive praise that Egoyan received from his early critical supporters, like Jonathan Rosenbaum of the *Chicago Reader*, was replaced by surprise and bafflement at this new work. Even Jonathan Romney, a strong advocate of Egoyan's work and the author of the only comprehensive critical overview of his films, places less value on Egoyan's later efforts. In his book *Atom Egoyan*, Romney writes:

While the later films open out more to the world, allowing for a more immediately cathartic emotional discharge, it is the earlier ones that provide a truly provocative model of how cinema at the turn of the century can be at once analytical, sensual, ironic, and emotionally charged- and, contrary to received ideas about entertainment value, extremely satisfying for any viewer willing to engage with the contradictions of watching. (Romney, 14)

Perhaps taking the lead of Romney and Rosenbaum, many critics make a sharp distinction between the 'pre and post-*Exotica*' work of Egoyan and dismiss the post-

*Exotica* work as inferior because of its more commercial qualities and the alleged abandonment of the director's earlier inquiries. *Sight and Sound* Film Critic Tony Rayns summed up this widely held sentiment in his review of *Exotica* when he made an analogy between Russ Meyer and Egoyan and concluded:

the latest venture from Ego Films is perfectly positioned to cement Egoyan's future as a commercial, name-brand auteur-the prerequisite, of course, for survival these days. (Rayns, 9)

The change that occurs between Egoyan's early work and post-*Exotica* films does feel abrupt if only approached in terms of his earlier emphasis on technological themes. While the early films do place an especially strong emphasis on the role of technology in creating gulfs in interpersonal communication, each film almost to the same extent, also raises concerns about the denial of cultural and personal history: issues addressed much more complexly in the later work. As a result, when viewed in a larger context, the later films represent a new approach to and emphasis on themes not entirely unfamiliar to the director.

Those critics who propose a sharp distinction between Egoyan's pre and post-*Exotica* work are correct in identifying the film as a transition point, but often for the wrong reasons. Egoyan's career (thus far) can rightly be divided into the post and pre-*Exotica* work, but this thesis offers a new critical framework from which to consider Egoyan's later films. This framework recognizes that the pre and post *Exotica* films are about attempts to come to terms with something larger than an individual's immediate experience and that this progression is directly correlated with the exploration of the psychological process of denial.

Denial is a complex concept that informs the narrative and formal strategies of Atom Egoyan's early and later films. In trying to propose an all-purpose definition of denial, one is immediately confronted with a number of nuanced theoretical issues that relate to the actual process. Denial, by definition, is a negation of something in word or act. In Egoyan's films denial should not be viewed as a single act, but as a series of external reactions that reflect a character's changing internal conditions. Denial is frequently an act of coping that is observable in strategies of avoidance, role-playing, representation, illusion building, and self-deception. Denial can be individual and personal or shared, collective, and organized. Egoyan's approach to the complexity and elusiveness of denial is influenced by the work of psychoanalysts, philosophers, and artists.

Sigmund Freud first coined the term "denial" as an extension of his theories related to the mind's defense mechanisms. In his psychoanalytic studies he concluded that the two most common defense processes are denial and repression. While repression involves the internal psyche, Freud argued that denial is focused on external conditions. He viewed denial as a "disavowal" of an external reality. Freud categorized the denial impulse, in his definition, as a reaction that provides, "a defense against a painful stimuli originating in the external world" (Gedo, 97-98).

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre disagreed with Freud's conception of denial, and instead argued that the denial impulse is an act of the conscious mind. Sartre viewed denial as an act of self-deception or "bad faith." Bad faith refers to individual efforts to keep secret a truth that they cannot face. Sartre explained his definition of denial when he wrote, "it follows that the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies

are one and the same, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver, the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Better yet, I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully.” (Sartre, 50) For Sartre, denial is a much more organized process than Freud’s model, which is triggered by the unconscious. Sartre’s use of the word denial makes his definition synonymous with words like manipulation, orchestration, misinformation, and cover-up.

Egoyan’s artistic approach to denial is rooted in the clinical definition of Freud, the philosophical definition of Sartre, and also in a long dramatic and literary tradition that traces back to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Since *Oedipus Rex*, artists have explored denial through characters who reject the “reality” of the external world and seek to create and control their own fate. Miguel De Cervantes relied upon this same strategy in his novel *Don Quixote*, a story that is an extended study of denial, which features a protagonist who seeks to orchestrate and redefine the world around him.

In the early modern era, denial was most fully explored through theatre artists like Henrik Ibsen and Luigi Pirandello in *Liola*. Ibsen was particularly concerned with the nature of denial in his play *The Wild Duck* through the personage of Gregers. Gregers is a moralist who presses “truth” on a young peer, destroying the father’s perspective of his past and present, and inadvertently encouraging the suicide of his 14 year-old daughter. Ibsen concludes the play by defining denial as, “the saving lie” (Ibsen, 572).

Atom Egoyan began his exploration of denial in his very first feature film, *Next of Kin*. In these early films, Egoyan used video images as a device for enabling denial. Video served as a representation of the past, and the early stories were built around

character's attempts to deny their past by restaging, erasing, and manipulating representations of themselves and their personal history.

The main problem with critical reactions to Egoyan's early films was the misinterpretation of these technological devices. Rather than discussing these devices as a way to approach issues of denial connected with representation, memory, family, and personal identity, critics like Rita Kempley and Desson Howe of the *Washington Post* often interpreted them as the complete message. The attention to this single element of Egoyan's films reduced their complexity by offering an easy solution to patterns of behavior and problems that have no definitive answer. Critics analyzed these early films and came to the conclusion that Egoyan was suggesting the culpability of technology in every aspect of life, from the disintegration of individual identity to the dissolution of the modern family structure. For example, in *Family Viewing*, the major critical readings tended to emphasize the significance of the father's actual act of erasing over home movies or "the past" with homemade pornography. Critic Rita Kempley misinterpreted this moment as an indictment of, "remote control relationships in a society weaned on the screen, a civilization that communicates only during commercial breaks" (Kempley, 1988). What these critics failed to appreciate was the lengths Egoyan went to portray the act as a private and particular expression. Egoyan expressed his discomfort with the technology-centered critiques of his early films when he said:

the very thing I like about it [when asked if he had abandoned his interest in technology that "archives and documents experience"] - that it makes people self-conscious and uneasy- is also what people came to expect. So any attempt to use it in a critical way was somehow diffused because it was what people wanted to see. (Falsetto, 138)

Perhaps this realization contributed to a shift in direction that began with *Calendar*. *Calendar* is Egoyan's most effective early work because it balances his theoretical interests with an intimate story of cultural denial and his apprehension over the role of image-makers.

While *Calendar* is the film that most intimately explores denial in Egoyan's pre-*Exotica* films, *Ararat* (2002) is the film that represents the culmination of the post-*Exotica* complex explorations of denial. The post-*Exotica* films place less emphasis on technology as a device to explore the psychology of denial. They instead attempt to understand the process of individual, collective, and historical denial, and with *Ararat*, Egoyan brings together each of these modes of denial in an effort to understand his own personal and cultural history. In order to fully grasp Egoyan's artistic achievement and journey to *Ararat*, it is first necessary to have an understanding of the proper place and continuity of his earlier films. It is necessary to briefly revisit these early films in order to point out the way technology was used as means to examine issues of denial connected to cultural identity, familial structure, imagistic representation, and memory rather than as warning parables about the dangers of mass media technology.

The best place to begin a discussion of Egoyan's early works is with *Next of Kin* (1984), which is often cited as a favorite film by the critics of his later films. Those who champion this work are attracted to the facilitating role that images play in the film, and also its depiction of identity as being flexible. *Next of Kin* is also significant because it marks the first time Egoyan addressed the "Armenian question." The "Armenian question" is Egoyan's exploration of cultural denial (with a reference to his own history) and what it means for an individual to deny a part of their heritage. Most critics

overlooked this issue in favor of placing more emphasis on the film's concern with morality and media. For example, Critic Desson Howe concluded that *Next of Kin* is a "video looking glass" about the way, "modern people find their deepest emotions in their TV monitors" (Howe, 1984).

*Next of Kin* revolves around a young man (Peter) who is unhappy with his family life. This unhappiness leads him to attend video therapy sessions with his parents. One day, while viewing some tapes left by others at the hospital, he comes across the tape of an Armenian family plagued by guilt for giving up their own son at birth. Peter decides to impersonate this son and to present himself to the bereaved parents. The focus of the film, though perhaps very crudely done, is the process of acting out a different role from the one given at birth. Egoyan was just 24 years old when he directed the film, and in many ways the film can be interpreted as an attempt to deal with his own conflicting feelings about his heritage. Egoyan expressed this point in a 1984 interview when he said, "You can play a role. I played up my Armenianism. I used it to create an identity- I used it to cover up my own insecurity" (Mercurio, 27).

*Family Viewing* (1987) continued to explore the way individuals attempt to find happiness by altering the situation into which they are born. In his early films, Egoyan offers the concept of family and personal identity as structures that can be denied and changed. *Family Viewing* is a story of mistaken identities with settings as diverse as a nursing home, a condominium, and a telephone-sex establishment. Images from television, pornography, home movies, and even surveillance camera footage are utilized in an effort to show the fragility of personal history and identity. Perhaps the struggles with personal identity and history recur throughout Egoyan's early films, and mirror

struggles that the director can trace back to his own youth. Egoyan was born in Egypt to Armenian parents but grew up in Victoria British Columbia, Canada. Growing up in Canada, Egoyan spoke three different languages; each was geared towards a particular social setting. Early in his life this division caused him a great deal of confusion. He spoke of this process of acclimation when he said:

The idea of language, when you let a language go, has important implications later in your life. The feeling of what a culture means and what defines a set of communal values, family values and personal values, and the intricate play of those three. When you are aware of absorbing a culture at an early point in life, that colors you somehow. You become aware of the idea that we are constructed, that there are things we drape ourselves in to become functioning members of a community. (Falsetto, 121)

His very conscious ties to these different cultures must have greatly affected his ability to form an identity that allowed for easy definition.

*Speaking Parts* (1989) is the most theoretical and cerebral of Egoyan's early films. The film follows the character of Lance, an aspiring actor who works at a hotel, as he attempts to seduce a young television writer into casting him in her current project. Lisa, Lance's co-worker, who is obsessed with watching and re-watching the films that Lance appeared in as an extra, complicates the storyline. The film is significant because of its skeptical attitude concerning the motivations of those who control the power to make films. The TV producer, who is the most powerful and sinister character, embodies this attitude. At one point, the producer asks Lance, "Did you watch television when you were a kid?...My point is, who the fuck do you think you are?" In a society driven by the media, those who control the images have the power to define identities. The way the TV producer abuses this power suggests Egoyan's wariness about his role as a director, a role that also gives him the power to choose the images. Egoyan articulated this concern in

1993 when he said, “I’m at once very suspicious of why I make movies, but also very seduced by the idea of controlling images” (Glassman, 13)

*The Adjuster* (1991) marked a return to Egoyan’s concern with the familial structure, while also continuing his preoccupation with questioning the role of the film director and all those who control the images offered to society. The film follows Noah Render, an insurance adjuster, as he attempts to help people whose homes have been destroyed by disasters. Egoyan ultimately condemns Noah for the God-like moral stature that he assumes under the guise of simply doing his job. Throughout the film, Noah tries unsuccessfully to help different people rebuild their homes, which becomes a metaphor for stability and refuge. Eventually, a man impersonating a film director destroys Noah’s own home. It is this aspect of the film that encapsulates the two main internal struggles worked out separately in Egoyan’s earlier films: coming to terms with the denial his own cultural and personal history and his conflicting feelings over his own occupation.

Egoyan most successfully addressed these struggles in *Calendar* (1993): his most accomplished and personal early work. It marks a milestone in Egoyan’s filmography because it directs all of his previous concerns and explorations at his own persona. Egoyan and Arsinee Kanjian (his wife) play the principal roles of a photographer and his wife. Egoyan, as the photographer, has been hired to photograph a series of Armenian churches for a calendar. An Armenian guide accompanies the couple and shows them around the various sites. Egoyan’s character is unable to fully appreciate these sites and landscapes because he is perpetually hiding behind the viewfinder of his camera. Repeatedly in the film, he refuses to experience the setting because such an experience would require him to relinquish the control that he so greatly values. By casting himself

in the principal role, Egoyan directly addresses his earlier apprehensions about his role as image-maker and his insecurities about his cultural identity at himself. Egoyan's insecurity about his cultural identity is apparent in the film's conclusion that has his wife (who unlike Egoyan grew up within an Armenian culture) leaving him for their Armenian guide. *Calendar* also features the most elaborate denial ritual of any early Egoyan film. After Egoyan's character returns to Toronto, he engages in highly ritualistic monthly dinners with different women. During the dinners, these women leave the table and through a phone they speak to Egoyan's character in languages that he cannot understand. Egoyan's character uses this ritual to torture himself over a part of his life that has been lost.

I have tried to explain in some detail the trajectory of Egoyan's early work to serve as a context for his later ones. Egoyan's early films, beginning with *Next of Kin*, expressed his two main struggles: his conflicting feelings over his cultural identity and his discomfort with his own role as a director. Both of these issues are connected through the theme of denial and both were worked out in *Calendar*, the culmination of his early work. Egoyan's conflicting feelings over his role as a director are addressed in a voiceover narration from his character when he says: "What I really feel like doing is standing here and watching... watching while the two of you leave me and disappear into the landscape that I'm about to photograph." Egoyan's insecurities about his cultural identity are approached through his character's complex denial rituals, which are both a coping mechanism and a vulnerable expression of the director's disconnect from his homeland and language.

In a similar manner, Egoyan's later films each explore different modes of denial, but in a more complex manner. The change in Egoyan's approach to the psychology of denial is at least partially due to the critical misinterpretation of technological devices in his early work. In his later work, Egoyan begins to move beyond personal denial and into larger modes, such as historical denial, for the first time. In *Ararat*, the culmination of his later efforts, Egoyan synthesizes these different modes in a struggle to understand the nature of the personal and historical denial connected to the defining atrocity in his own culture.

Denial is the consistent theme that informs the narrative and formal strategies of Atom Egoyan's later films. This philosophy manifests itself in Egoyan's later films through a conflicted skepticism towards characters who claim objective knowledge or moral superiority. Egoyan is at once wary of the individualism and narcissism connected with such posturing, but he is also attracted to the way denial arises in these same characters through attempts to push aside, restage, and reinterpret the past.

*Exotica*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, and *Felicia's Journey* demonstrate the intricacies of denial as a coping mechanism. These stories each hint at formal resolution but ultimately express the difficulty in establishing clear and casual responsibility. These films represent an effort to articulate a form of personal and communal denial that psychologist Stanley Cohen describes as, "largely unexplained and inexplicable, a product of the sheer complexity of our emotional, linguistic, moral, and intellectual lives" (Cohen, 50).

*Ararat* is the culmination of Egoyan's later works because it applies his growing awareness of the intricacies of denial to the defining atrocity in his own culture. Unlike

the variations of denial that, while harmful, were made in good faith in his other later films, in *Ararat* Egoyan approaches the conscious mindset of “intentional denial.” Cohen explains that intentional denial works best when “cultures prefer not to have an inquiring mind. Slow cultural forgetting works best when groups have an interest in forgetting” (Cohen, 133). The Armenian genocide is a matter of historical fact, but the Turkish government to this day officially denies this fact. In *Ararat*, Egoyan scrutinizes what happens when a factual incident is clearly known, but for many reasons- personal or political- it is denied. Egoyan focuses his film on stories that serve as representations of core personal attitudes and beliefs in order to illuminate the development of larger attitudes that facilitate genocide and historical denial.

This thesis is organized with a single chapter devoted to each of Egoyan’s later films, beginning with *Exotica* and ending with *Ararat*, his major films from this era. In addition, Egoyan’s short film *Portrait of Arshile* (1995) will be discussed in the concluding chapter as a way of solidifying the connection between Egoyan’s use of denial and his strategies of representation in his later films. Several of Egoyan’s other short films, which were made between *Calendar* and *Exotica*, are not addressed in this thesis because they are currently not available to the general public. One can only guess whether these films would offer any new insight into the theme of denial. Nevertheless, this thesis is written with a sincere hope of demonstrating that, despite the numerous critical attacks on the later films of Atom Egoyan, these later films represent a new and more direct approach to the consistently unifying theme of denial.

## Chapter 2: *Exotica* (1994)

While *Calendar* feels like a summation of Egoyan's earlier interests, *Exotica* signals the beginning of a new journey. The film was Egoyan's largest budgeted effort of his career, and his first major collaboration with an American studio (Miramax). Before *Exotica*, Egoyan's films were linked by a common struggle: coming to terms with his cultural and personal history and his conflicting feelings over his own persona as a film director. The psychology of denial in these early films was closely linked to technological devices, particularly video recorded images. In films like *Next of Kin* and *The Adjuster*, denial was outwardly manifested in character attempts to manipulate the recorded past (i.e. videotapes, home movies, etc). This act allowed them to deny some aspect of their life in the present. *Exotica* is a film less interested in recorded images of the past, but is instead organized around live performance. Characters attempt to deny the past by actively manipulating their present environment.

The story of *Exotica* follows Francis (Bruce Greenwood), a tax auditor, who deals with the loss of his home and family through role-playing at the Club Exotica, a strip club. Francis' story is connected with that of the strip club's deejay Eric (Elias Koteas), the club's owner Zoe (Arsinee Kanjian), a young stripper named Christina (Mia Kirshner), and Thomas (Don McKellar) a gay pet shop owner who smuggles exotic animals into the country. In one of the film's first scenes, a Customs Inspector (David Hemblen), delivers a line of dialogue that lays out the basics of Egoyan's new approach to understanding denial:

You have to ask yourself what brought the person to this point. What was seen in his face, his manner that channeled him here? You have to convince yourself that this person has something hidden that you have to

find. You check his bags, but it's in his face, his gestures, that you are really watching.

The structure of *Exotica* is informed by the question, “what brought the person to this point?” Film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum has described this structure as an “emotional striptease” (Rosenbaum, 244). Rosenbaum’s description is both true and misleading. The film does slowly give out information in a manner that creates a structural allusion to the dancers at the Club Exotica, but the structure is also intentionally self-conscious and complex in a way that such a description threatens to simplify. If Rosenbaum plans to make the strip club analogy, then other aspects of this choice of setting should be addressed. For example, the rules of the Club Exotica are very clear: “look but don’t touch.” This idea is very reminiscent of Egoyan’s early films, with their focus on the past as an unapproachable visual artifact. *Exotica* is much more complex because the strip club setting allows Egoyan to embody the past through the film’s characters. At the club, the characters take on roles in an effort to deny their pasts by reenacting a version of them that could only be possible if tragedy had not struck. By the climax of the film, following the unraveling of the central mystery, the film suggests that the emotional intimacy of touch is the only way to intervene in the denial process. The two predominant modes of denial in *Exotica* are: the psychological denial associated with a singularly traumatic event (in the case of Francis and Eric) and sexual denial associated with abuse and the repression of sexual identity (in the case of Christina and Thomas).

Francis, the film’s protagonist, engages in patterns of behavior in an attempt to deny and to understand why he lost his wife and child. His ritual for denial is role-playing that creates a live representation of his former life. Francis is initially introduced as a

patron of the Club Exotica and a client of the dancer Christina, who wears a schoolgirl's skirt and blouse as part of her act. At first glance, Francis seems sexually attracted to young girls, given the nature of Christina's costume. Christina and Francis sit very still with an intense fixation upon one another. The only sound present is the narration of Eric, the club deejay. While Christina dances for Francis, Eric watches over them and remarks:

Five dollars is all it takes to have one of our foxes come over to your table and get you all hot and bothered. But hey, why be bothered when you're being treated like a king? You've had a rough day. Don't you think you owe it to yourself to do something that'll make you feel like you're someone special?

Shortly after these remarks Francis gets up from the table, leaving Christina, and walks toward the bathroom. The audience expectation is that Francis is going to the bathroom to masturbate.

The possibility of Francis as a lecherous older man is certainly not dispelled in his next scene. After setting up a connection between Francis's preoccupations with schoolgirls, he is next shown pulling into a rough area of town with a different young girl inside his car. We come to discover that the name of the girl is Tracey (Sarah Polley). Tracy sits beside Francis, listening to music through headphones, as Francis hands her some money. The dialogue that proceeds is extremely vague, and is shaped by the knowledge of Francis's earlier scene:

**Tracy:** Thanks.

**Francis:** Are you available next Thursday?

**Tracey:** I think so, yeah.

**Francis:** Good. Tracey?

**Tracey:** Yeah?

**Francis:** I'm not that boring, am I?

The implication is that Tracey is a prostitute receiving money from Francis for sexual services. This early scene with Tracey is also significant because it is the first scene to establish a mysteriously desperate and urgent quality to the character of Francis. When Francis makes statements to Tracey like, “we used to listen to the radio and you used to ask me all sorts of questions,” it suggests that something beyond pedophilia is involved. Indeed, these early lines suggest a subtle longing for past times. The vague statements that Francis makes illustrate the struggle that he has in articulating his pain. Francis, like all of the characters *Exotica*, is haunted by memories of his former life and spends his nightly hours trying to find ways to rewrite the past in order to release its hold upon the present. For Francis, his denial manifests through re-enactments with his “daughter,” which are done in an effort to rationalize, contain, and assign meaning or order to her death.

Francis’ routine with Christina is a form of therapy because it allows him to briefly regain his former role of “father” through a stripper who dresses like a schoolgirl. Later in the film we discover that Francis’ deceased daughter dressed in an outfit identical to the one Christina wears while stripping, and that Christina formerly babysat for his family. As a result, Christina becomes a double for the daughter that Francis has lost. When Christina moves into the role of “daughter,” she leaves behind her role of “babysitter,” which is then assumed by Tracey. The dress Christina wears is synonymous with Francis’ attempt to manipulate the present with a symbolic representation of the past. The rationale behind this act is the equivalent to an earlier character’s obsessions with erasing and re-recording video images in *Family Viewing*. The difference is that the

live nature of Francis' act foregrounds issues of denial in a more direct manner without giving the audience an easy scapegoat (i.e. technology).

The relationship between Christina and Francis is further complicated because they use sex as a form of staged intimacy. During an early scene between Francis and Christina, Francis watches Christina very intently as she dances. As the scene progresses he slowly turns towards the mirror at his side and looks at himself. Christina continues to dance for Francis, but after seeing his reflection, Francis looks lost and distraught.

Christina then questions him by asking:

**Christina:** What are you thinking?

**Francis:** I was just thinking, what would happen if someone ever hurt you?

**Christina:** How could anyone hurt me?

**Francis:** If I'm not there to protect you.

**Christina:** You'll always be there to protect me.

**Francis:** An angel.

**Christina:** Shhhh.

**Francis:** Why would anyone want to do something like that? How could somebody even think of doing something like that?

**Christina:** You musn't worry.

This sequence of dialogue inverts the audience's perception of Francis in two major ways. First, when Francis asks Christina, "why would anyone want to do something like that?" it becomes clear that he is using Christina as a theatrical representation of his daughter. The trauma at the core of Francis' pain is a fundamental guilt over his failure to protect his daughter from harm during her life, and a genuinely perplexed confusion over the sharp turns that have produced such a negative effect on his life. The scene is densely layered due to the very nature of the contrast between Christina's actions (giving Francis a lap dance), and Francis' association of her with his daughter.

It is important that this fact not be read too literally. 'Touch' and physical experience are a recurring motif used throughout the film. The very act of touching another person's body is correlated with forging a connection. Despite the sexual nature of the scenes between Francis and Christina, the act itself is far too staged to be lustful or pleasurable. The strip club setting reinforces the theatrical quality of the representational intimacy that Francis and Christina share during their role-playing sessions. Egoyan differentiates between the orchestrated touching at the beginning of the film with the spontaneous and emotional-centered touching at the climax of the film (between Eric/Francis and Christina/Thomas). Through this choice, Egoyan offers the power of touch and spontaneous emotional intimacy (rather than representation) as the only way to intervene in the denial process of each character.

*Exotica* is a transition film for Egoyan that foregrounds his emphasis on modes of denial, but also retains some characteristics of his early work. For example, home video footage is sporadically used that shows Francis at home with his family several years before their deaths. Francis is notably younger during these scenes, and displays a vitality and optimism previously unseen. He is clean-shaven, constantly smiling, and runs through the house with a video camera taping his wife and daughter. The idea of video as a form of memory is an early convention that is contrasted with Egoyan's new interest in the live re-staging and manipulation of real people. The suggestion of this video footage is that the camera preserves our memories but also forces us to recognize that a moment has passed and can never be resurrected. Throughout the film Francis fights against this notion by trying to create a new self, the protective father, which in reality cannot ever be retrieved. Egoyan creates a visual metaphor for this idea in the last

images of Francis' family in happier times. As the video concludes, Francis' wife and daughter are both smiling for the camera, until his wife reaches forward and puts her hand in front of the camera. The act of placing her hand in front of the camera literally blocks the perception of the viewer, and symbolically insinuates both the grip of the past and the elusive and futile quality of any attempts to relive it.

While Francis' denial is in reaction to the loss of his family, the source of Christina's denial is more ambiguous, but the source is sexually related. In the last scene of the film we discover that Francis was once a generous and gentle fatherly figure for Christina. When Christina worked as a babysitter for Francis, years earlier, she was very envious of his seemingly idyllic life. The final scene of the film involves Francis driving Christina home. During the first part of the scene, Francis brags incessantly about the musical prowess of his young daughter. After a few moments, Christina says, "I was just thinking...about the way you talk about Lisa. You get so excited. It's nice." During the conversation, Christina steals short glances at her house several times with a facial expression of apprehension. The house has a sturdy, yet stern look to the outside. Architecturally, the house appears to be the model of symmetrical harmony, which is in conflict with the sadness in Christina's voice. There is a subtle insinuation within the scene that Christina was abused by one of her parents. Based on her comments to Francis, Christina lacked the close family life that she observed in the relationship between Francis and his wife and child. The last shot of the film has an ominous tone as Christina timidly walks to her house. The viewer is not allowed to go inside this house to discover the source of her anxiety, which adds to the complexity of her denial. She may work as a stripper in order to ritually explore her previous experiences. The sexual nature of her

job hints at the suggestion that this role, one rooted in a sense of control (she touches the men, but they can't touch her), stems from her need to deny the sexual abuse she had no control over as a youth.

The source of Christina's choice of occupation might be ambiguous, but what she gets from this job is more fully explained. Before Francis lost his family, Christina worked as a babysitter for him and his wife. This job is important because a babysitter by definition is someone responsible for another while still being outside of the actual family system. After the death of Francis' wife and child, Christina is able to re-stage the family relations and thus deny the absence of a protective father and close family life. Christina gladly steps into the role of Francis' daughter because she desires the protection of a father figure, which we presume she never had as an adolescent. Later in the film, Christina echoes this idea when she tells Thomas, "I've done things for him and he has done things for me."

The roots of Thomas' rituals, like those of Christina, originate from a form of sexual denial. Thomas' escapes involve picking up anonymous men who want to buy scalped tickets to the ballet each weekend. Despite the different location, the parallels between Thomas and Francis (at the Club Exotica) are numerous. The editing choices by Egoyan are used to show the equivalents between the men. For example, towards the beginning of the film, Francis drops Tracey off at his house to "baby-sit" and just before leaving tells her, "I shouldn't be late." The film then cuts to Thomas arriving at the beginning of his own night.

Despite the minor differences between Thomas and Francis, Egoyan's editing choices reveal an important overlap. The most significant similarity is the way each

reacts to situations of financial exchange. Thomas repeatedly gives waiting men free ballet tickets, while Francis eagerly gives money to Christina and Tracey. Following Thomas' first encounter with a man at the opera, he refuses to allow the same man to buy him a drink with the money he saved from the free ticket. The strange justifications of his refusals are finally exposed during Thomas' second encounter with a man outside the opera:

**Thomas:** Listen, I feel bad about taking your money...

**Man at Opera #2:** Why?

**Thomas:** Well, the tickets were given to me, and I should have given them away free.

**Man at Opera #2:** Well that would have been stupid.

At the conclusion of this scene, Egoyan cuts to a shot of Francis reaching his arm over to Tracey and handing her some money. The ritual of giving another person payment is a physical (and symbolic) representation of what each character is unable to articulate precisely to another. The exchange of money symbolically creates a contract between two people for a service and precisely defines the parameters of their relationship. This is an act of mediated intimacy. Francis' act of giving Tracey and Christina money adds a level of businesslike casualness to what is actually a fairly bizarre relationship. The exchange of money allows Francis to deny the reality of his situation: that he is paying a babysitter to look after an empty house and a stripper to stand-in for his dead daughter. Similarly, Thomas' act of giving away free ballet tickets to other men is rooted in a denial of his own sexuality. The apparent generosity of his act prevents him from having to address how he got to the point of picking up anonymous men. Egoyan explained his fascination with this aspect of Thomas' nightly rituals when he said:

I'm fascinated by the incredibly wide spectrum of human sexuality. Since I'm so unadventurous in terms of my own sexuality, I'm really interested

in people who manipulate their sexuality into something they have to design. (Banning, 16)

Eric is the Club Exotica deejay and perhaps the most complex character in the entire film. Eric is given the most sexually charged dialogue in the film, and serves as a narrator and master of ceremonies over the events at the Club Exotica. Eric is also the first in a series of “directors” in Egoyan’s later films. While the early films often featured literal film directors that manipulated video, the later films feature characters whose denial is expressed by their efforts to orchestrate and control individuals around them.

As a deejay, Eric is constantly watching Christina with a lusty demeanor and repeating the phrase, “what is it that gives a schoolgirl her special innocence?” Despite such remarks, there is another side to Eric that only the audience is allowed to understand. In flashback sequences between Eric and Christina, as they walk through a field, Eric comes across as very sensitive and idealistic. The idealism and sensitivity that Eric has in the flashback is in stark contrast to his distant and aloof demeanor in the present. Eric has ruined the possible relationship he had with Christina by prostituting himself to the Club Exotica’s madam, Zoe. Their monetary transaction is a feeble attempt to give his life a sense of stable structure. Eric is haunted by the past. In a scene towards the end of the film, Eric sits on a bare mattress in his sparse apartment, staring at the ceiling and flicking the lights on and off as Christina emerges from the hallway and peers inside. As they continue stare at each other, a conversation from their past continues to play over the scene:

**Christina:** Do you ever feel like you need a friend?

**Eric:** Yeah, sometimes.

**Christina:** When?

**Eric:** Like right now.

**Christina:** Why?

**Eric:** Because I just met you...and I feel like telling someone.

Late in the film, Zoe tells Francis that the Club Exotica “isn’t for therapy.” This line is appropriate because both Eric and Francis use the Club Exotica as therapy for what they both saw. The theatrical nature of the strip club enables Francis and Eric to take on representational roles that they believe will help them cope with their pain, but in actuality only perpetuate their personal denial. The flashback scenes and Eric’s despondent state in the present, help reinforce that Eric’s identity, as a deejay at the Club Exotica is not a result of his sexual desires. For Eric, sexual acts are very different from meaningful forms of sexual expression. Eric is a character that has lost a part of his identity, which causes him pain, and necessitates him to create a hyper masculine figure to compensate for this loss. This is undoubtedly why he decides to father a child and also accounts for the verbal abuse that he frequently directs towards the dancers. Both of these acts underline the loneliness that Eric feels in a very sexual environment. At times, Eric’s identity as the sexually obsessed club deejay feels more like an outward attempt to cover his own disinterest in sex and to convince himself of his own sexual viability.

Throughout *Exotica*, Egoyan uses a variety of perspectives. Individually, the memory of each character is unveiled to the audience in an attempt to show the parallels between their seemingly otherwise disconnected existences. The one exception that deviates from Egoyan’s main dramatic line is a broken sequence of people walking and talking in a sunny field. The sequences set in the sunny field are used to fracture the very focused perspective of the film’s other scenes. The characters within this scene [Eric and Christina] are clearly the only ones that would be capable of remembering these

moments; however, they are edited in a way that suggests they are the memories of Francis, which is impossible. After all, Christina and Eric are the only ones present at the moment that the body of Francis' daughter is discovered. Based on Francis' final encounter with Eric, it is safe to assume that Francis was not even aware that Eric and Christina were the ones that found his daughter's body. It is only through these flashbacks that we see the event that Eric tries to deny: his discovery of Francis' daughter. When Eric and Christina come upon the body of Francis' daughter, Eric grabs Christina and forces her to turn away, but he looks.

At the end of the film, all of the individual bits of information we get from the main character's perspectives do not add up to a clear understanding of the connection that each has to one another. It is only through the slippery perspective of the film's flashbacks that the connections among the characters solidify. Thus, the storyline that Egoyan uses intermittingly in the film is a reminder of the illusory quality of truth and the difficulty in understanding the complexity of the human experience and mind.

The psychology of denial in *Exotica* is symbolized in the maxim of Club Exotica, the rule that "you can look but not touch." 'Touch' becomes an important barometer for human emotional connectivity. For much of the film each character exists isolated in a solitary existence defined only by their individual rituals, which are not completely understood by the others. Eric presides over these individual rituals and is the only one capable of monitoring Francis and eventually ending the cycle. Initially, Eric's rationale for having Francis ejected from the club seems rooted in jealousy over Christina; however, the film's ending suggests there are more layers to his motivation. Primarily,

Eric appears to realize that things have gone too far, which causes him to end the cycle by revealing to Francis the core traumatic event that both men share.

This gravity of Eric's revelation to Francis is emphasized to the audience by the character's spontaneously touching each other for the first time. When Eric tells Francis, "I found her, man," Francis reaches out and embraces him. Similarly, when Thomas reaches out and touches Christina, Christina takes Thomas's hand, turns it into a fist and playfully throws it back at him. She also looks up at him and really smiles for the first time. The moment recalls a similar motif in Egoyan's early work and asks the viewer to take note of the transition made from these earlier films to *Exotica*. At the end of *Speaking Parts*, Lisa touches Lance in the film's climax. A similar emphasis is placed on hands in *The Adjuster*. In these early films, touch was interpreted as being incapable of offering solace in a technologically advanced society. In contrast, the climax of *Exotica* (and the spontaneous violation of the "look but don't touch rule") signals a change in the focus of Egoyan's later films. While the message of the early films was often lost to critics as a result of the technological frameworks, *Exotica* avoids this trap by foregrounding an emotionally charged metaphor. Touch is used in *Exotica* to suggest that human intimacy is the only thing powerful enough to offer refuge from mediated experience. In a confusing environment of images and memories, the simple touch of flesh, rather than the power of the image, is given the greatest power. It is this new emphasis that announces Egoyan's interest in exploring the nature of denial more directly and outside of a technologically centered landscape.

### Chapter 3: *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997)

The last shot of *Exotica* features the character Christina walking towards her house. Egoyan insinuates in this image that something is drastically wrong in her family life, but he never lets the viewer enter her household to confirm this suspicion. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, Egoyan continues to explore modes of denial, but this time takes the viewer inside these private homes to examine the complexity of motivations behind the individual and communal denial of a series of traumatic events. *The Sweet Hereafter* is a film about the relationship between parents and their children. Every primary character in the film has “lost” a child in some way. This loss is alternately the literal death of a child or the symbolic death of an idealized memory of a child or the past he/she represents. The film explores these different losses and the way each individual copes by denying the existence of the “dead” child and the reality of life after a life-altering trauma.

The story of the film follows Mitchell Stephens (Ian Holm), a lawyer, as he arrives in the seemingly idyllic town of Sam Dent. The outward objective of his journey is to recruit the parents within the town to join a class action lawsuit against a bus manufacturer. He asserts that the manufacturer is responsible for the accident that claimed the lives of the town’s children. His case is built around the testimony of the lone survivor of the accident (Nicole), who eventually lies at the end and effectively dismantles Stephens’ case.

In her review, “A Town Bereft,” Janet Maslin writes that the main question behind *The Sweet Hereafter* is: “in the aftermath of calamity, how does life go on?” (Maslin, 1997) The title of the film is the earliest hint of the way Egoyan formulates the

answer to this question. The film's structure is intended to force the viewer to draw a comparison between life before and after the accident. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, the psychology of denial is approached from a number of perspectives, from the individual response to the larger collective response. The act of denial is a survival impulse that gives the present life a sense of purpose (in the case of Mitchell Stephens), transforms the present life into an exaggerated fantasy (in the case of Nicole), and allows for the "ghosts of the dead children" to be collectively forgotten (in the case of the town).

It is important to remember that *The Sweet Hereafter* is based on a Russell Banks novel, and was also Egoyan's first literary adaptation. Banks claims he was first inspired to write the novel while traveling through a small northeastern town during the Vietnam War era. The town's already small population had dwindled noticeably since a large portion of its young men had been sent to fight in Vietnam. Similarly, Egoyan has claimed he was initially attracted to the novel because he saw it as a fairy tale-like allegory to the Armenian genocide. (Banks, 75)

While Egoyan did not elaborate on this personal connection further, one can read the novel and see what must have attracted him to the material. The novel is organized around a school bus accident but the primary focus is on the psychological response that allows one to deny the pain of such an event. The novel is composed of four different points of view, with each given its own chapter. The chapter length perspectives alternate between the characters of Dolores Driscoll (the bus driver), Billy Ansel (the parent who followed the bus each morning), Mitchell Stephens (the lawyer), and Nicole Burnell (the lone survivor). The denial by each character results in differing patterns of behavior, which ultimately collide with one another. One of the most beautiful and

eloquent articulations of the denial impulse is offered by Mitchell Stephens in the chapter told from his perspective:

And sometimes when I wake, for a few moments I'm like Risa Walker and Hartley Otto and Billy Ansel and all those other parents whose children have died and who have been unable to react with rage-the dreamed child is the real one, the dead child simply does not exist. We waken and say, "I can't believe she's gone," when what we mean is "I don't believe she exists." It's the other child, the dreamed baby, the remembered one, that for a few lovely moments we think exists. For those few moments, the first child, the real baby, the dead one, is not gone; she simply never was. (Banks, 125-126)

Mitchell Stephens bears many similarities to the character of Eric in *Exotica*. Stephens is the second in a series of live "directors" or manipulators in Egoyan's later films. Like Eric, Stephens' denial and his tendency to orchestrate is a natural extension of his occupation. As a lawyer, his job has many parallels with other types of storytellers. In the court of law two sides construct differing narratives around a single event. The side with the most compelling story is rewarded with the judgment. In order to craft the most convincing narrative, a lawyer uses cause and effect patterns that allow the jury to arrive at a definitive and clear conclusion.

Mitchell Stephens' zealous attempt to assign responsibility for the school bus accident is rooted in his personal denial of the "loss" of his daughter. Early in the film, Stephens is on an airplane and is coincidentally seated next to Allie, a childhood friend of his daughter, Zoe. The last question she asks him in their first scene together is, "How is Zoe?" This question forces Stephens into the past, to a time when he first "lost" his daughter. Stephens is repeatedly reminded of this loss by a series of recurring collect calls from Zoe, who has become a drug addict and prostitute. These calls remind Stephens of his life before the loss of his daughter. For example, in the first scene of the

film, after accepting Zoe's collect call, the pain on Stephens' face is evident when she asks if he remembers a particular car wash story from her childhood. At the earliest mention of the past, Stephens cuts his daughter off and quickly ends the conversation. Instead of dealing with his past directly, Stephens tries to transcend his loss by attaching cause and effect patterns to accidents, which allows him to explain to others why they have lost their children. By helping other people assign responsibility, Stephens manages to deny his own culpability as a failed father figure and to forget that the grown Zoe, the constant reminder of his personal failure, ever existed at all.

Stephens can only explain to the parents of Sam Dent why they lost their children by reconstructing the actual event. As Stephens interviews Dolores Driscoll about the day of the accident, Egoyan inter-cuts these moments with scenes both inside and outside of the bus. Inside the school bus, Nicole Burnell is framed in a medium shot and quietly looks out the window with an elusive, yet peaceful smile on her face. In addition, shots of Billy Ansel following the bus show him smiling and waving to his children. The way the scene is edited, with Dolores' voiceover narration, suggests that these moments are from her own recollections of the day. The problem with this interpretation is that many of the moments in the bus (and all of those outside the bus) are things she could not possibly have seen. Once it is acknowledged that Dolores could not possibly have seen these events, Stephens remains the only other possible source. Throughout the film, these brief sequences represent Stephens' attempt to understand what happened. They are very much the product of his ideas and efforts to craft a flawless narrative. Neither Nicole nor Dolores, the only accident survivors, ever give a recollection of the events on the day of the accident. In the absence of such direct testimony, Stephens writes his own narrative

of the events in an effort to attach a definite explanation to a tragedy that does not offer one.

There are two crucial scenes within *The Sweet Hereafter* that must be discussed in order to fully comprehend the character of Mitchell Stephens. One takes place after the loss of his daughter and the other before. The first of these scenes (that represents his life 'after') is his meeting with the Otto family, who lost their adopted son, Bear, in the accident. As Stephens arrives at the house, his car is dwarfed against the backdrop of voluminous mountains, which conveys a feeling of isolation. This feeling is compounded by the viewer's lack of spatial awareness of the town's geography. Stephens seems to appear out of nowhere when he enters the frame. The fragmented nature of the town's physical layout compliments the fractured narrative structure and serves as visual reminder of the effect of the accident on the inhabitants of Sam Dent. The psychology of individual and collective denial is visually conveyed to the audience by creating a disorienting experience that never allows them to gain their bearings.

As Stephens opens his conversation with the Otto family, he quickly changes tactics a number of times in an attempt to gain their confidence and their signature, which will grant him the authority to represent them. He begins by telling the Otto family that he is not asking to just represent their grief, but also to voice their anger. The problem is that the Ottos lack the type of anger that Stephens exudes in his own demeanor. Stephens methodically works to draw out this emotion to show them it exists. He knows it is within them because he has experienced this same range of feelings over the loss of his daughter:

**Mitchell Stevens:** You're angry aren't you Mrs. Otto? That's why I'm here. To give your anger a voice, to be your weapon against whatever caused that bus to run off the road.

**Mrs. Otto:** Dolores?

**Stevens:** It is my belief that Dolores was doing exactly what she's done for years. Besides, the school board's insurance on Dolores was minimal, a few million dollars at most. No, the really deep pockets are in the town or in the company who made the bus.

**Mrs. Otto:** So you think someone caused the accident Mr. Stevens?

**Stevens:** Mrs. Otto, there is no such thing as an accident. The word doesn't mean anything to me. As far as I'm concerned, somebody, somewhere made a decision to cut a corner. Some corrupt agency or corporation accounted the cost volume of putting a \$.10 bolt and a million dollar out of court settlement. They decided to sacrifice a few lives for the difference. That's what is done Mrs. Otto. I've seen it happen many times before...[a few moments later]...and now it is up to me to ensure moral responsibility in this society.

**Mrs. Otto:** So, you're just the thing we need. Isn't that what you want us to believe?

**Stevens:** You listen to me Mrs. Otto, and you listen very carefully. I do know what's best, believe me...If everyone had done their job with integrity your son would still be alive and safely at school this morning. I promise that I will pursue and reveal who did not do their job...who is responsible for this tragedy...Then, in the names of whoever decides to join us, I will sue. I will sue for negligence until they bleed. We must make them pay, not for the money or compensation for your boy, that can't be done, but for the protection of other innocent children. You see, I'm not just here to speak for your anger, but for the future as well.

When describing the character of Mitchell Stephens on *The Charlie Rose Show*, Atom Egoyan said, "he's an ambulance chaser but he's more than that because he does believe in what he says" (Rose, 1998). Despite the theatricality of Stephens' rhetoric, he does understand the grieving parent's frustrations with the unfairness of life. The alternative that Stephens offers is an unapologetic anger directed at an indiscriminating world, "that is killing our children." Stephens tries to draw out this anger by preventing

the parents from denying that, “the dead one, is not gone; but simply never was.” The only possible way to confront these repressed emotions comes from his proposed litigation.

When Stephens arrives the Ottos have embraced a form of grieving that has led to a quiet solitude and disconnect from one another. Egoyan’s blocking, with Mr. Otto sitting on the second floor and Mrs. Otto resting on the lower level, visually represents this idea . It is only after Stephens begins talking about the lawsuit that the husband and wife are brought together again on the same level. They are brought together by Stephens’ attempt to blame the crash on a corporation; a narrative he figured might resonate strongly with them. This scapegoat gives them permission and a reason to bring their own natural grief and anger to the surface. Stephens encourages them to let out this anger because he knows what is best and is willing to fight for it. This idea is conveyed in the compositional staging of the scene, which features a ghostly, enlarged, film negative of Bear between Stephens and the Ottos. The implication is that both sides are competing for the memory of their son. Early on, Stephens’ vision (though we are ultimately asked to disavow it) seems a better alternative than the unexplainable nature of the Otto’s rationale for their suffering. The scene is at once therapeutic for both Mr. and Mrs. Otto as well Mitchell Stephens. The Ottos are given the opportunity to grieve in an open manner, and Stephens is allowed a moment of self-redemption explaining to someone else why they lost their child. He is baffled by his own loss, but every time he is successful in signing a family up for the lawsuit, he gets a little bit closer to understanding the reasons why he lost his own child.

Unlike the immediate (and literal) loss of the children of Sam Dent, Stephens' trauma dates back to the first time he almost lost his daughter, Zoe. In the Banks novel, Stephens explains that these two events have a powerful equivalence:

I felt the same clearheaded power then that I felt during those first days in Sam Dent, when the suit was taking off. I felt no ambivalence, did no second-guessing, had no mistrusted motives- I knew what I would do next and why, and Lord, it felt wonderful! It always feels that way. Which is why I go on doing it. (Banks, 124)

Stephens and his family were on vacation in Elizabeth City, NC and awoke one morning to find Zoe swollen and having trouble breathing. Stephens called a doctor in town who advised them to leave right away for the hospital, and explained how to perform an emergency tracheotomy in the event that her throat closed:

Throughout, I was neatly divided into two people-I was the sweetly easy daddy singing, "I've got sixpence, jolly, jolly sixpence, I've got sixpence to last me all my life," and I was the icy surgeon, one hand in his pocket holding the knife, blade open and read, the decision to cut unquestioned now, irreversible, while I waited merely for the second that Zoe's breath stopped to make the first slice into her throat.

This scene is effective in literalizing the divide that exists in all of Stephens' meetings with the parents of the town's lost children. He exists to comfort them, and to give a voice to their anger, which he does by acting with cold precision. This incident was the first time that Stephens was "prepared to go all the way," but circumstances outside of his control prevented such action. The act of "going all the way" would have allowed Stephens to gain control of the situation, to orchestrate, rather than simply reacting helplessly. His entire life after this incident is structured around a desire to deny the vulnerability he felt at this moment by giving clear meaning to events that have none. The possibility of imposing meaning, the manifestation of his denial, is a survival mechanism that allows him to get by day-to-day.

A hallmark of Egoyan's later films is the tendency to explore a theme on both a grand and intimate level. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, denial as a response to trauma is also explored through Nicole's sexually abusive relationship with her father. In order to deny the reality of her father's abuse, Nicole transforms her daily life into an exaggerated fantasy. This fantasy represents a child's understanding of adult relationships. When first introduced, Nicole is standing on a stage playing her guitar at a rehearsal for the town fair. The choice of setting emphasizes the nature of the staged spectacle between Nicole and her father. Their relationship, like those in *Exotica*, is one built on projected and orchestrated intimacy, rather than a spontaneous emotional response. At the core of this fantasy are Nicole and her father's passion for music and dreams of becoming rock stars. Throughout the song, Nicole stares directly at a middle-aged man whose boyish looks and demeanor suggests he might be her older boyfriend. Following the song, Nicole approaches this man, Sam (whose relation to Nicole is initially unclear), and gives him a hug when he praises her performance. They exchange romantic glances with another and begin walking off together. The viewer perception of the dynamic of this relationship is radically altered when Nicole turns to Sam and says, "thanks, Daddy."

Due to her imagined "adult" relationship with her father, Nicole is obsessed with taking on the identity of a "grown" woman and mother. For example, after putting Billy Ansel's children to bed, she gets out his ex-wife's clothes and models them before a mirror. This moment parallels the importance of costumes in *Exotica*, particularly Christina's schoolgirl outfit. In both cases, clothes take on a greater significance to the wearer due to their own projection of what they signify. The act of putting on the clothes

is an effort to manipulate her environment to validate what she wants to believe is a relatively normal situation.

Egoyan strengthens the fantastical nature of Nicole's denial of her sexual abuse through the parallel between her story and the Robert Browning poem, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." Nicole is intrinsically linked to the poem from the first time she introduces it during a bedtime reading to Billy Ansel's children. As she reads the poem, one of the children stops her and asks, "So he was mean?" Nicole responds by saying "No, he was just very angry." This line comes just after Stephens' meeting with the Otto family, in which he worked extremely hard to draw out their anger. As a result, the audience is led to believe that the "angry outsider" present in the poem is a parallel to Mitchell Stephens. Like the literary Pied Piper, Stephens is a threat to the town because of his ability to take away the town's children (in the form of their memory or representation). In reality, Nicole is the film's "piper" and the poem is the closest the audience gets to an explanation for her patterns of behavior. Jonathan Romney points out that, "in reciting the poem, Nicole tells her story in coded form, in the language of a near-child struggling to articulate the inexpressible." (Romney, 136)

The best example of the way the coded language of Browning's poem illuminates Nicole's denial of her abuse is in a scene following her return from babysitting. When she arrives home, her father is waiting for her outside of the family barn with a guitar and blanket in his hand. As they walk together to the barn, Nicole's "Pied Piper of Hamelin" voiceover begins. Inside the barn, Nicole and her father kiss each other passionately while surrounded by a romantic setting of candles on all sides. Nicole repeatedly quotes the poem throughout the film in voiceover, but the longest quotation is read as she has

sex with her father. This passage is filled with sexual innuendo with remarks like, “a wondrous portal opened wide. The Piper advanced and the children followed.” Then, as the sexual activity between Nicole and her father intensifies, the voiceover comments, “for he led us to a joyous land, where waters gushed, fruit trees grew, and everything was strange and new.” The use of the voiceover adds subjectivity to the incestuous encounters and gives the scene an unrealistic aura that suggests it is presented from Nicole’s perspective. The dream-like quality of the scene hints that it should not be viewed realistically, but instead should be viewed as Nicole’s attempt to deny the fact that her encounter with her father is actually abuse.

When Nicole arrives home from the hospital (following the accident), as a paraplegic, new circumstances prevent her from maintaining the fantasies that clouded the perception of her sexual abuse. In the interim period she has become isolated and cynical. This new worldview is precipitated by two major changes that have occurred in her life. First, her parents appear greedy by enthusiastically signing up for Stephens’ lawsuit and accepting gifts on her behalf. As the sole child survivor, Nicole has unwillingly been signed up as the star witness for a lawsuit that she resents. This theme of monetary exchange is a carry over from *Exotica*. In both films, Egoyan suggests a discomfort with the way adults prostitute children for money. In *Exotica*, Francis uses money as a means of normalizing his relationship with Tracey, his babysitter. Francis believes that as long as he pays for Tracey’s services, then the abnormal behavior she is forced to participate in is okay. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, Nicole is abused on two different levels. She is literally assaulted by her father during their sexual encounters and symbolically prostituted by her parents to Stephens through their assurance of her

courtroom testimony (in the hope of winning a large judgment). This act firmly defines the boundaries of their relationship. These boundaries place Nicole not as an equal (or adult), but as a dependant and child that has been deceived.

The significance of this new status is embodied in the way elements of Nicole's fantasies appear very different when transferred to tangible objects. For example, a bedroom with a princess theme replaces the candlelit lovemaking that dominated her earlier nocturnal delusions. The new bedroom is clearly designed for a child, which makes Nicole angry because she realizes her father does not share her visions of a romantic relationship. In addition, her mother attempts to bribe her with a new computer that is a gift from Stephens. Nicole's face drops when her mother explains that the computer even has a program to help her write songs. Previously, music was shared with her father and the basis for her rock star dreams. Music was a mutual dream that provided a special and intimate commonality between them. The suggestion that the computer might substitute for such a relationship makes Nicole realize that her own perspectives and dreams are not consistent with the reality of the situation.

Nicole's new perception of her relationship with her father parallels the anger associated with the pied piper in the story she recited to Ansel's children. In the story, the pied piper takes the town's children away when the town refuses to pay him the money he is owed. The piper's anger mirrors Nicole's own bitterness over her perceived betrayal by her father. The strong tension between Nicole and her father emerges in her first meeting with Mitchell Stephens. For much of the meeting Nicole stares directly at her father, who maintains an uneasy expression on his face. One particular incident is especially telling: as Stephens expresses confidence in the outcome of the case, Sam turns

to Nicole's mother and warmly smiles at her. Egoyan then cuts to a close-up shot of Nicole, who expresses a look of surprise, hurt, and betrayal. Nicole responds to Stephens' description of her duty to testify by saying, "no matter what I'm asked, I'll tell the truth." On the surface, the comment appears to express concern about testifying, but on closer inspection the line sounds like a vague threat to her father. After the meeting with Stephens, Nicole verbalizes her anger to her father directly when she tells him, "I'm a wheelchair girl now and it's hard to pretend I'm a beautiful rock star." Later in that same conversation she reminds her father of their romantic relationship when she says, "remember Daddy? That beautiful stage you were going to build for me? You were going to light it with nothing but candles." This verbal expression of anger represents the gulf between her life before and after the accident.

The mutual deception (i.e. rock star fantasies) between Nicole and her father previously allowed her to deny the abusive reality of their relationship. Like the motif of money in *Exotica*, in *The Sweet Hereafter*, Nicole and her father's shared fantasies define the parameters of their relationship. When her father violates these parameters, she realizes that she has been betrayed. During their conversation, Nicole's father turns and puts her hand on one of her paralyzed leg. The scene is reminiscent of the climatic "touch" at the end of *Exotica*, except in this film her father's act emphasizes an emotional distance rather than intimacy. It is this moment of betrayal that informs one possible reading of Nicole's perjured courtroom deposition and deepens her parallel with the Browning's piper. Like the piper, Nicole's betrayal causes her to exact revenge by taking away the town's children, or the memory of these children.

In the wake of this “sweet hereafter” (her life after the accident), Nicole takes control of her own narrative. During her testimony, she decides to lie and say that Dolores was driving the bus too fast, which effectively ruins Stephens’ lawsuit. In the novel, following Nicole’s lie, the town gathers together to watch a demolition derby. The implication is that Nicole’s lie has sparked a catharsis that the town needed to begin healing. Thus, some might argue that “the sweet hereafter,” refers to the lie that saves the community through a secret understanding of the deception committed.

In Egoyan’s film adaptation, the consequences of Nicole’s lie do not allow for such a tidy resolution. Nicole’s lie does finally grant her the status of “adult” in Sam Dent by joining her with the town’s other citizen’s in an act of communal denial. This denial is an unspoken collective response that represses the adultery, incestuous abuse, racism, bigotry, and school bus accident that are all tied to the town’s trauma. It is this denial that allows Dolores Driscoll to speak in the present tense about her “children” after the accident, and to tell Stephens what a devoted father Billy Ansel was to his children (which is juxtaposed with his phone conversation with Risa Walker, setting up a way to keep their adulterous affair secret from her husband). This is the same denial that causes Billy Ansel to tell Sam Burnell, “we used to help each other because this was a community,” even after the façade of this idealistic image has eroded. Specifically, this communal denial is also what makes Mitchell Stephens such a dangerous threat. Stephens is a threat to the town’s refusal to accept that their children are gone and cannot be returned. Stephens wants the community to react with rage and deal with the reality of their dead children, rather than “the dreamed ones.” Billy Ansel echoes the town’s underlying feelings about Stephens when he says to him, “you leave the people of this

town alone. You can't help." Stephens responds by telling him, "you can help each other." Instead of trying to help one another to deal with what has happened in the town, Nicole's lie cements the town's divisions and preserves its secrets.

On a personal level, Nicole's lie in the deposition is a vengeful rebellion against her father. During the testimony, Egoyan focuses the viewer on Nicole's demeanor, as she never breaks eye contact with her father. After Nicole falsely implicates Dolores, Egoyan cuts to a close-up of her father's mouth, which is accompanied by the narration:

And why I lied he only knew  
But from my lie did this come true  
Those lips from which he drew his tune  
Were frozen as the winter moon.

By silencing her father's lips, Nicole's act becomes an angry rejection of the pain and lies he brought to her. While the act might appear to be immature (especially in her selfish blaming of the innocent Dolores), it is ultimately one that allows her to take control of her own identity for the first time.

The price of Nicole's independence is that both Dolores Driscoll and Mitchell Stephens no longer have a role in the community. Dolores is the necessary sacrifice needed to preserve the town's secrets, and Stephens is blocked from going as far as he was prepared. As a result, Stephens is once again prevented from understanding the events that caused him to lose Zoe. Accordingly, it is fitting that the last scene in the film unites both of these ostracized characters. In the final scene, which takes place two years later, Dolores meets Stephens at the airport. Dolores is working as a minibus driver, and Stephens is presumably on his way to rescue his daughter once again. Both Stephens and Dolores have a moment of recognition but decide not to speak to one another. It is

Nicole, the film's piper and final manipulator, that is allowed the last words through a voiceover that accompanies their encounter:

As you see each other, almost two years later, I wonder if you realize something, I wonder if you realize that all of us—Dolores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn't—that we're all citizens of a new town now. A town of people living in the sweet hereafter.

Unlike the novel, Egoyan's film omits the demolition derby and refuses to offer any catharsis for the town's pent up angst. The "sweet hereafter," referred to in the final voiceover, is the only way that the town can sustain itself in the aftermath of calamity. It is a way of life dependent upon individual and communal denial of the town's deceptions and the trauma at the core of their grief.

#### **Chapter 4: *Felicia's Journey* (1999)**

*Felicia's Journey* is Atom Egoyan's attempt to bridge his early film's focus on the way technology enables denial with his later films interest in live orchestration and manipulation. Like *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Felicia's Journey* is a film about the relationships between children and their parents, with a particularly emphasis given to the child-mother dynamic. *Felicia's Journey* is a film that explores representations of motherhood on a literal and symbolic level. Hilditch and Felicia, the film's principal characters, are both haunted and shaped by their personal histories surrounding the concept of motherhood. For Hilditch, the absent mother is literal, while Felicia's relationship to the mother motif resonates on more symbolic levels. The concept of the absent mother, and its role in shaping individual identity, informs the character's need to represent the past and manipulate their present environments.

*Felicia's Journey* was Egoyan's second literary adaptation and was based on British novelist William Trevor's story. The novel is told from the perspective of Joseph Hilditch, a serial killer, who keeps a picture gallery of his past victims. Hilditch has designs to add Felicia, a naive young girl from Ireland, to this gallery. While the same general storyline is shared between the novel and the film, the novel is more interested in psychoanalyzing the character of Hilditch. The novel attempts to enter the mind of this serial killer and sort out the way connections and misconnections are made. Egoyan avoids the easy psychoanalytic explanations of Trevor's novel, and instead focuses on the way Hilditch and Felicia's identities are defined through the familial and cultural artifacts that surround them.

In *Felicia's Journey*, Egoyan explores the fragile construction of home, individual identity, and family. Like his previous films, *Felicia's Journey* focuses on the ways individuals experiences from their current lives, their pasts, and their memories intersect to create a unique response to the world. Both Hilditch and Felicia represent differing extremes in the way they perceive their environment. Egoyan stresses Felicia's Irish culture as one that transmits personal history through a strong oral tradition. In contrast, technological fixtures that enable denial, and facilitate the restaging of the past, define Hilditch's identity. Critic Richard Porton has pointed out that Hilditch and Felicia do share another commonality:

Both characters are, to varying degrees, suspended in time. Felicia comes from an almost ludicrously verdant Irish village where her father treats the Easter 1916 rebellion as an event that might have happened yesterday and her great-grandmother evokes Eamon de Valera's memory of Gaelic. Hilditch, on the other hand, lives in a stodgy, commodious house where he recreates the supposedly more innocent 1950s with mementos from his childhood and syrupy recordings of obscure crooners. (Porton, 42)

Hilditch is a character that, like those in Egoyan's early films, is at least partly defined by the technology around him. This is certainly the case when Hilditch talks with a salesman that tries to convince him to buy a machine that will automate food production in his kitchen. The salesman tells him, "there is no more than ten minutes of labor involved each day, Mr. Hilditch. You can't lose." Hilditch responds with a very revealing answer when he says, "but I would lose, Ted. I would lose my staff. Food must be served by caring hands, Ted,...not machines. It allows us to be loved." This line is significant because his demeanor implies that he is talking about something much more than mere food preparation. Outwardly Hilditch comes across as a fairly regular guy: he drives a nondescript car, has a house filled with antiques, is organized, and his employees

(like Iris) long for his approval and affection. What makes the viewer suspicious of Hilditch early on is the type of responses he gives, which quite often sound rehearsed and artificial. Hilditch's unnatural responses parallel the clichés of the 1950s television shows that consume much of his time at his home.

Like other male characters in Egoyan's early films, Hilditch is a manipulator who uses electronic devices (radios, televisions, and video cameras, etc.) to construct a reality he can control. At the center of Hilditch's "reality" is his mother, a former TV chef, whose effect on him is never fully explained. Hilditch's primary relationship with his mother exists through watching tapes of her 1950s television show. It is this relationship that sustains Hilditch, but it also makes him vulnerable and delusional. The film alternately treats this contradiction as comical and horrific. The comical element of this idea is represented in the cooking show that Hilditch watches while he prepares dinner each night. The show is typical of cooking shows from this specific period, but is also intentionally over-the-top. Arsinee Khanjian approaches the role of Hilditch's mother in the same way that a satirist, who is preoccupied with kitsch, might offer an impersonation of Julia Child. Khanjian (Egoyan's wife) is cast here in a role far removed from the seedy strip club manager she played in *Exotica* or the bereaved parent in *The Sweet Hereafter*. She over emphasizes her accent during these television sequences, wears a bright floral print dress, and uses gestures that are typically associated with satirical depictions of 1950s television.

The comical scenes with Hilditch are balanced with more serious critiques that involve his complete immersion in objects that blend pop culture and personal history. For example, in one scene Hilditch eats his dinner at the far end of the dining table, while

a television on the other side of the room plays a tape of his mother's cooking show. This scene represents one of the earliest indicators of Hilditch's unusual relationship with his mother. While he eats, Hilditch picks up a pair of opera glasses and peers through them at the television. Television itself is a form of mediated experience but becomes more complicated when the act of watching a mediated experience (television) *itself* becomes subject to mediation (with the opera glasses). When Hilditch picks up the glasses, the moment emphasizes the multiple levels of perception within the scene. These layers reiterate that media (in contemporary culture) is a total environment for Hilditch that influences what he sees, thinks, and feels (or is unable to feel). This media enables Hilditch to recapture and contain moments from his past. The glasses Hilditch uses during the scene are later revealed to be at the heart of the misguided connection between himself, his mother, his conceptions of sexuality, and his experience at the opera *Salome*.

The synthetic nature of Hilditch's past is largely conveyed through the way his memories are conjured and represented. This idea is observable in Hilditch's behavior in the scene at the hospital (under the pretext of visiting Ada) as he wanders aimlessly remembering the different girls that he encountered over the years. His personal memories are presented in grainy, quick, video blurbs showing different girls who explain how much Hilditch helped them, who claim that most men saw them as lesser beings, and who praise his unique ability to understand their problems. In these short video segments, each girl gives a brief testimonial about the kindness Hilditch offered to them. One of these girls thanks Hilditch by telling him, "in my line of work you usually can't get close to men." These brief video clips convey the predatory nature of Hilditch's

relationship with the girls he set out to help. Susan Sontag in *On Photography* discussed the ideological implications of photography as a predatory act at length:

There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (Sontag, 14)

During the first hospital scene, virtually everywhere Hilditch walks he encounters some image that conjures up a vivid memory from his youth. The most telling connection that Hilditch makes concerns the story of Salome. As Hilditch wanders through the hospital waiting rooms, thinking about the girls from his past, he comes across a television playing the film version of *Salome*, starring Rita Hayworth. As he watches the film, Rita Hayworth (as Salome) demands, “give me the head of the Baptist.” This line triggers a series of quick flashbacks to the girls that he murdered in the past. In the flashbacks, the girls are framed in close-up shots from the video camera in Hilditch’s car. This editing choice draws a comparison between the literal beheading of John the Baptist and the digital equivalent in the video composition (which cuts off the girl’s heads). When Hilditch returns his attention to the film, Rita Hayworth is on screen dancing in a very sexually charged and suggestive manner. The parallel editing draws a visual equivalence between the murder of Hilditch’s “girls” and the story of Salome, which demonstrates the way live representation informs Hilditch’s ritualistic murders.

The television images of Salome lead Hilditch to remember an occasion when his mother took him to see an operatic version of the same story. Like “The Pied Piper of Hamelin” in *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Salome* ties is a fable that encompasses the main conflicts in *Felicia’s Journey*. The story of Salome ties together violence and sexuality, and the film suggests that his mother is the source of this misguided connection. As

Hilditch watches the performance, his mother hands him a pair of opera glasses to watch Salome kiss the lips of the decapitated John the Baptist's head while it sits on a platter. She is oblivious to the violence and gleefully encourages him to look. Perhaps Hilditch's odd relationship with his mother is responsible for the connection he forms between Salome and the "other girls," Egoyan does hint at the similarity between the detached qualities of Hilditch and those of his mother. Hilditch and his mother outwardly appear deceptively lively and normal, which masks the darker sides of their personalities. The similarities between the two are substantial enough that Hilditch seems to have carried his mother's legacy into adulthood, and serves as a form of surrogate or stand-in for her.

In contrast to the industrial settings and technology associated with Hilditch, Felicia is linked with more primitive Irish settings and her attempt to escape their hold upon her life. The first shot of Felicia starts on the Irish coast, then pans down to reveal her standing on a boat slowly drifting away from her home. This sequence helps to define Felicia from the earliest moment through a sense of displacement. The music during this brief introduction is in stark contrast to the 1950s pop melodies used during Hilditch's scenes. Felicia's music has a soothing ethereal and religious quality. The combination of the sound and composition add a spiritualistic aura to her story that is consistent with Egoyan's goal of portraying Felicia as, "the embodiment of every Irish martyr in romance and literature" (Porton, 39). The fairy-tale atmosphere in Felicia's story expands the complexity of the "mother" motif to a mythical level. Felicia is the product of an absent mother, is expecting a child of her own, and also seems to embody a feminized Ireland, the motherland.

Felicia's cultural displacement is emphasized when she arrives in Britain and is detained by customs. She is unable to provide any form of identification, which helps underline her detachment from any kind of modern life beyond her Irish homeland. Egoyan conveys the overwhelming psychological bewilderment that Felicia experiences in this new setting through visual composition. As Felicia emerges from the train station, she is framed against the backdrop of towering buildings that belittle her on all sides. As her bag is searched by customs, the first flashback of the film is used. This first flashback shows the hands of a young man (Johnny) caressing the sides of Felicia's face and telling her, "I've been thinking about you. You will be with me every minute by my side." Felicia's naive understanding of urban life is only matched by her inability to realize that Johnny does not want to be involved in a relationship with her any longer. Felicia's "journey" represents her transition from girlhood to adulthood, which is signified through her encounters with Hilditch, urban life, and coming to terms with the reality of her situation with Johnny.

The common theme that ties together each of Felicia's flashbacks is the fragility of the family structure (a hallmark Egoyan concern) in the wake of cultural pressures. It is these pressures that force Felicia to leave her biological family and deny her cultural identity. For example, one flashback shows Felicia emerging from a church with her father and their subsequent disagreement over her boyfriend, Johnny. Her father's main objection concerns the embarrassment brought upon her family from the gossip that links her with a boy rumored to have joined the British army. Felicia's father tells her that, "Irish boys belong in Ireland." Like many of the characters of Egoyan's early films, Felicia leaves her home and rejects the familial circumstances that prevent her from

finding happiness. This particular sequence effectively demonstrates Egoyan's focus on how cultural pressures can reconfigure families. In a 1989 interview Egoyan explained this perception of families:

I think the family, as a biological structure is suspect because of the psychological and cultural demands that are placed on an individual, especially in North America. The notion that you should surrender yourself to a group of people because they're linked to you biologically is absurd, especially if those people have not attempted to make an emotional connection with you. (Taubin, 28)

The cultural pressures applied to Felicia increase in intensity until her father discovers she is pregnant. Her father responds to the news belligerently by saying, "whore! My God! Carrying the enemy within you. Thank God your mother isn't alive to see this. Damn you to hell!" These pronouncements are offered against the backdrop of Irish castles and churches, institutions that represent the cultural stability that her father defends and which validate his ideas. The father is associated with these structures, which symbolically convey the way cultural history imposes itself on individual identity. While Felicia embodies the traditional, yet romantic and innocent associations with Ireland, her father represents the country's conservative and historically intolerant social structures.

Felicia's new identity, as she travels to Britain, is connected with her pregnancy, and motherhood. Motherhood is an important motif that connects Felicia and Hilditch. Both, for instance, suffer from absent mothers. For Felicia, the absent mother figure has both literal and symbolic connotations. Felicia lost her biological mother (the literal mother) at a young age and lost her symbolic mother (Ireland) when she left her homeland to find Johnny. Similarly, the reverence and apprehension that Hilditch exudes is tied to his cryptic relationship to his mother. His childhood subservience to his mother

extends into adulthood and is evidenced by the way he slaves over his mother's cooking instructions from a television. Hilditch's mother represents the American 1950s paradigm of the ideal woman. This same ideal is transferred to Hilditch, who listens to the same pop music as his mother and tries to manipulate those around him through a parental persona that he assumes. The girls that Hilditch meets and tries to "help" are unable to live up to this standard, since it is implied that they sold their bodies for money. With Felicia, though she is a sexual being, there is a Madonna-like purity attached to her. Even as she consummates her relationship with Johnny, the sound of church bells are used in the soundtrack and edited to rhythmically parallel Johnny's sexual thrusts.

The iconic power of Felicia's representation as a mother is especially prevalent in premonitions that come to her in dreams. Her words and dreams frequently take on an omniscient quality that frightens Hilditch. A prime example occurs when Hilditch and Felicia return to his home, and an entire room full of funeral flowers waits at the front. The flowers were delivered under the guise of Ada's funeral, but on a more symbolic level serve as a visual foreshadowing of the impending funeral that Hilditch has in store for Felicia. Felicia stays at the house and upon waking tells Hilditch about a dream she had during the night. She tells him, "I dreamt that you met Johnny. That you knew exactly where he was." This statement is true because Hilditch did in fact notice Johnny while they were out on the previous night. The information startles Hilditch and adds to the already mysterious spiritual quality of Felicia. As Hilditch recovers and picks up some flowers as he prepares to leave, Felicia sincerely reaches out to him by offering, "I'll pray for her."

Felicia's dreams represent her attempt to deny the reality of her familial situation and restage the parental reactions to her pregnancy. Early in the film, Felicia's flashbacks were framed against the background of a castle or church, which represented a distinctive cultural expression. While sedated for her abortion, Felicia dreams of what could have been: a situation that would have provided her complete happiness. In the dream, Felicia returns to the pastoral setting of Ireland and stands amid crumbling ruins with her father, Johnny, and her child all smiling. These ruins represent a denial of what she was raised to believe, a system of beliefs given to her by her father. The dream is also a reenactment of what has been forever lost: the possibility of reconciliation between her immediate home (her family) and her homeland (Ireland). Both of these ideals are lost when she engages in the culturally taboo act of abortion and begins her journey towards adulthood in which she is now on her own. Felicia's "martyr" status is associated with the pain and difficulty of surviving such a transition.

Following her abortion, Felicia is more vulnerable to Hilditch because he no longer views her as a mother. When they arrive back from the clinic, Hilditch goes downstairs and crushes up sleeping pills and places them into Felicia's tea. Hilditch moves laterally across the frame, but then unexpectedly, he stops and looks directly into the camera. The shot is extremely unsettling because it violates the dramatic contract that Egoyan has maintained previously in the film. The shot is also a visual reference to a similar moment in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which is another film about a boy's relationship with his mother. This is only the second occasion in the film that a character has looked directly into the camera. The first incident occurred when Felicia's father looked at the camera during one of her dreams. In both cases, there is a sense of

desperation implied in the act, but the moment nevertheless remains somewhat ambiguous. The decision to have Hilditch look into the camera might represent Egoyan's homage to Hitchcock; it might be intended to convey Hilditch's feelings of desperation, or it could possibly be interpreted as an indictment of the audience. The ambiguity of Hilditch's acts rest in the complexity of the numerous levels of representation present in such a moment.

Egoyan's reference to Hitchcock supports the idea that Hilditch's reaction is merely the expression of an expression. In other words, rather than viewing Hilditch's gaze as an act of desperation, there is a contained and staged quality to his anxiety that is consistent with his previous attempts to manipulate those around him. When Hilditch enters the bedroom of the waiting Felicia, he attempts to communicate his feelings to her and the reason for the impending conclusion:

**Hilditch:** I can't help but to be fatherly, Felicia, especially to you. The first time I saw you...you were there...your backpack on and bedraggled...you were different from the rest ...

**Felicia:** What rest?

**Hilditch:** the others: Elsa, Sharon, Gay, Bobby, Jackie, Samantha. All on their own journeys, lost girls. I was the world to them. In their time of need they counted on me...and then they wanted to go, just like you. But none of them ever came into this house; there was none of that.

**Felicia:** Well what were they?

**Hilditch:** A chat in the car. I like chats..then sleep, they are always asleep when it happens Felicia. I couldn't let you rest until you had taken care of your little one.

(as Felicia drifts off to sleep)

**Hilditch:** (singing lightly) "you are my special angel...sent from up above."

The quality that makes this scene horrifying is Hilditch's detachment from the "other girls." He slowly recites each of their names but has no sense of who they were, which prevents him from realizing the gravity of his monstrous acts. For Hilditch, the names are simply representations of people who exist outside of his own reality.

Hilditch is unable to appreciate the nature of his evil acts until his gaze is finally returned, which intervenes in his role-playing. This occurs when two missionaries arrive as he prepares Felicia's grave in his backyard. The scene is comical because of the self-absorbed personalities of both parties. Hilditch and the missionaries are both so engrossed with their own worlds that they fail to see what is directly in front of them. The missionaries speak to Hilditch about "the garden of paradise" without ever noticing the fresh grave plot beside them or the nature of the evil directly in front of them. Nevertheless, these vastly different parties connect when one of the missionaries tells Hilditch that he's "troubled." After this encounter, Hilditch goes back inside his house and finds Felicia trying to escape. The horrified reaction on the face of the innocent Felicia allows Hilditch to see himself for the first time. It is at this moment that he is unable to harm Felicia (or anyone) any longer. While Hilditch is incapable of changing after this realization, he has achieved a breakthrough in terms of self-realization.

Hilditch's self-realization is what leads to his suicide at the end of the film. The path he travels to the kitchen to commit suicide is identical to the opening shot of the film (shot from a child's perspective) and even uses the same music. This bookend approach conveys a deterministic suggestion that the trajectory of Hilditch's life was already shaped from his earliest years.

While Hilditch was incapable of change, Felicia emerges as an independent woman through her confrontation with unexplainable evil in the world (embodied in Hilditch). Despite being the trauma caused by her near death experience, she is still around, and one gets the impression in her last words that she has been able to put the past and present in some sense of perspective. During the film's last bittersweet voiceover, Felicia says:

Wherever Johnny is I want him to know I am alright. The pain can wash away. Healing can commence. Lost within the man that murdered, there was a soul like any other. I remember the names of the ones he took away: Elsie, Beth, Sharon, Jackie, Gay. Bobby, Samantha..I remember these names with every new face I meet. May we all rest in peace.

Throughout the voiceover Felicia is planting a new tree. She momentarily pauses from this action and looks over at a young girl with the same backpack she carried earlier. The young girl in the park represents Felicia's own progression away from adolescence and into adulthood. This adulthood is achieved through the cultural denial of systems that prevented her from being a free woman. At the conclusion of the voiceover, Felicia recites the names of the victims that Hilditch passed on to her. These names are a commemoration of those women that did not survive this same transition into adulthood, and are now a part of Felicia's new identity. Following the voiceover, the camera pans away from Felicia and completely around her new surroundings. This area represents her new identity that is both worldly and controlled by her own experience.

*Felicia's Journey* is Egoyan's attempt to make an intimate film about the relationships between parents and their children within a larger cultural framework. These are both recurring themes in Egoyan's later work, which inform his interest in the exploration of cultural, familial, and social modes of denial. In terms of its place in his

filmography, *Felicia's Journey* has the distinction of being the only later film shot outside of Canada, and without a Canadian cast. The issue of Egoyan's geographical displacement combined with the fact that this film is to date his only adaptation of a linear novel, makes *Felicia's Journey* the director's most curious project to date. Regardless, *Felicia's Journey* is important in the evolution to *Ararat* because of the director's attempt to synthesize his earlier technological centered explorations of denial with his later preoccupation with live orchestration, representation, and manipulation. The harmonious combinations of both these approaches in *Felicia's Journey* are used with a greater degree of effectiveness in *Ararat*.

## Chapter 5: *Ararat* (2002)

*Ararat* is the culmination of Atom Egoyan's later films because of the relation of the subject matter to the director and the scope of the questions that he attempts to answer. In *Ararat*, the previously examined modes of denial are utilized in order to understand the intricacies of intentional denial, and the way individuals and artistic modes of representation deal with atrocity. Egoyan uses these different modes of denial (previously examined separately) in order to better understand the defining trauma in his own culture.

Egoyan's own personal and cultural history has a number of direct ties to the Armenian genocide. In terms of his family history, his grandparents were among the victims of the genocide in 1915. In fact, Turkish soldiers murdered his grandfather's entire family. His grandfather's sister was the only survivor from Egoyan's family that lived in Armenia. Even though his childhood was filled with accounts and stories of this horror, growing up in Victoria- British Columbia, Canada, he was isolated from Armenian communities and other Armenian children. These factors made it difficult for him to appreciate his own ethnic history early in life (Romney, 7-12).

It was not until Egoyan attended the University of Toronto that he encountered a large Armenian population. During his sophomore year at school, he joined the Armenian Student Association and became more informed about contemporary politics and the past struggles of his ethnic community. Politically, the 1970s were a time of tremendous unrest that resulted in a number of Armenian led assassinations of Turkish ambassadors. Still, probably due to the dichotomy of his upbringing, the events left him much more conflicted than his peers:

I was completely torn by the political events of the time. While one side of me could understand the rage that informed these acts, I was also appalled by the cold-blooded nature of these killings. I was fascinated by what it would take for a person who was raised and educated with North American values of tolerance to get involved in these acts. (McSorley, 10)

It was Egoyan's fascination with the answer to this question that led him to write *Ararat*. The film is inspired by Turkey's mass murder of 2/3 of its 1.5 million citizens of Armenian descent. The structure of the film is intentionally disorienting, perhaps because the crime of genocide is often the result of many conflicts at the political and personal levels. In order to represent the complexity of the Armenian genocide, Egoyan utilizes three principal storylines that analyze the historical act, attitudes connected to the psychology of historical denial, the psychology of cultural denial and intolerance (that allow genocide to occur), different artistic approaches to representing genocide, and the possibility of illuminating the past and the connection that all people collectively share with it.

The first storyline follows Edward, a director, who is making a film about the historical genocide. Throughout the movie, scenes from Edward's recreation are inter-cut with the making of the film to give the viewer the historical circumstances that led to the genocide. The production of Edward's "Ararat" is then contrasted with Arshile Gorky's creation of his painting *The Artist and His Mother*. This painting is based on the last photograph taken of his mother before her death during the 1912 Turkish raids on Van City. These raids cut off food supplies to the village and subsequently lead to her starvation.

The second storyline involves Ani, a Gorky expert and historical consultant on Edward's film, and her struggle to forge a relationship with her son, Raffi. The strain in

their mother-son relationship is due to an accusation by Celia, Raffi's stepsister and lover, that Ani killed her second husband (and Celia's father). The doubt raised by this accusation causes Raffi to question all the stories his mother told him growing up, stories that go to the core of his identity. As a result, Raffi decides to travel to Mount Ararat, the geographical root of his Armenian culture. His desire is to reconnect with his heritage and to reconcile his uncertainty about his family history.

Raffi is eventually able to see Mount Ararat, but only if he agrees to bring film cans (that were filled with heroin without his knowledge) back into Canada. His attempt to take these cans back into the country brings him into contact with David, in the film's third storyline. David is a customs inspector with conflicting feelings over his son Philip's homosexual relationship with Ali. These feelings are intensified as he begins his last day of work before retirement when he is brought together with Raffi in an encounter that contains one of the film's central messages.

Despite overwhelming evidence, the Armenian genocide is a historical occurrence that is not universally acknowledged today. Egoyan reminds the viewer of this fact just before the end credits in the last text of *Ararat*, which explains that the Turkish government continues to deny their role in this mass murder or even to concede that it took place. The complex nature of this historical tragedy, combined with the fact that no major narrative film has ever been made of the genocide, provides a number of formidable challenges for any filmmaker. It is this complexity that informs the film's formal structure and narrative and grounds large ideas about the genocide's historical denial with the personal storylines of Ali and Ani in order to examine its causes.

Egoyan uses the storyline of Ali, Philip's lover, to scrutinize the attitude that facilitates the contemporary denial of the Armenian genocide. Ali is an actor of Turkish descent who is initially thrilled to land the part of the sadistic villain, Jedvet Bay in Edward's film. In the beginning, after discovering he won the part, he described the character as, "a very...very...bad guy." He is willing to play this role because of his complete ignorance of the Armenian Genocide. In the absence of such knowledge, he plays the part according to Edward's direction. He only becomes uncomfortable when he begins to question the historical accuracy of Edward's over-the-top characterization. His perception of the character changes as he discovers more information about his own culture and questions (like the Turkish government) whether the genocide even occurred. As the Armenian genocide becomes more complicated for Ali, he begins to wonder whether Edward used him to slander his own culture:

**Ali:** Can I ask you something? Did you cast me because I'm half Turkish?

**Edward:** No. It was because I thought you were perfect for the part.

**Ali:** But being Turkish didn't hurt?

**Edward:** No, it didn't hurt.

**Ali:** You never asked me what I thought of the history.

**Edward:** What is there to think?

**Ali:** Whether I believed it happened...a genocide.

**Edward:** I'm not sure that it matters.

As Edward speaks to Ali, and later in Edward's conversation with Raffi, he conveys an attitude of resentment towards Ali. Even though Ali is only playing a part, Edward is so rooted in the past that he is incapable of speaking to Ali as anyone but Jedvet Bay.

Edward is not concerned with Ali's opinion since it might not be congruent with the narrative he is trying to craft. Egoyan is ultimately uncomfortable with Edward because he is unwilling to listen to others (aside from Armenians) on this issue. Edward becomes so distracted with the process of producing his story that he forgets why he is telling it in

the first place. He claims that his motivation to make the film is due to the denial of a historical genocide. Edward hopes to use his mother's personal stories of what she witnessed to combat this attitude. Despite his vast knowledge of the historical genocide, he fails to understand the psychology behind the denial. Denial stems from quick judgments, rigid boundaries, and a failure to recognize the humanity within each individual. Edward's refusal to engage Ali's questions represents the mindset that unknowingly contributes to the denial that he claims to be fighting. Edward's dismissal also causes Ali to fall back on the rhetoric that is typical of those that deny the genocide. This is most noticeable in the scene between Raffi and Ali. After driving Ali home, Raffi engages him in the discussion that Edward refused. At the end of their conversation, Raffi tells Ali that Hitler convinced his commanders that his plan to exterminate the Jews would work by asking them "Who remembers the extermination of the Armenians?" Following this question, Ali leans forward to Raffi and with a smile whispers, "And no one did."

While Ali's storyline involves the contemporary denial of the historical genocide, Ani's storyline questions the authority of art to represent history. Ani is the historical consultant on Edward's film, a position attained as a result of her book on Gorky's painting *The Artist and His Mother*, which sheds new light on the personal circumstances that affected its creation. Ani's storyline is the one that best articulates Egoyan's mixed feelings about the way artistic representation necessitates for historical facts to be denied. This tension is observable in the contrast between Ani's public lectures and her encounters with Edward and Rouben. In the first of these lectures, Ani explains:

*The Artist and His Mother* is not simply a painted version of a photograph. The differences underline the expressive elements that make this such a

powerful work of art...Gorky's homage to his mother was bound to take on a sacred quality. His experience as a survivor of the Armenian genocide is at the root of his spiritual power. With this paining, Gorky has saved his mother from oblivion, snatching her out of a pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal.

The lectures that Ani gives, and her subsequent work on Edward's film, positions her as the representative of "official history." Initially, she places a great deal of importance on this role. Due to Edward and Rouben's interest in her lectures, her understanding is that the film will shoot her version of history, which she believes to be rooted in fact. She assumes that her presence implies the production's interest in maintaining a certain level of verisimilitude to the time and place of the genocide. As a result, she is baffled by changes made for the benefit of the filmmaker's story rather than depicting the actual history. For example, the first time she visits the set, she notices that Mount Ararat would not be visible from one of the settings that provides an easy view. Rouben tells her that the alteration is an artistic one that will benefit the overall story:

**Ani:** It's something you could justify?

**Rouben:** Sure. Poetic license.

**Ani:** Where do you get those?

**Rouben:** What?

**Ani:** Poetic license?

**Rouben:** Wherever you can.

This first conversation, between the historian and the artist, is one in which Egoyan appears to side with Ani. After all, she has spent years of her life trying to understand the genocide, which is an event that has direct ties to her family. These factors make Rouben's justifications less than satisfactory. Still, in typical Egoyan fashion, the issue of poetic license is not as simple as the conversation in this scene depicts. Even Egoyan's own film, though careful and complex, is forced to take a great deal of poetic license. For example, though he critiques Edward's "Ararat," Egoyan still uses scenes from

Edward's emotionally manipulative film to convey "factual" information about the Armenian genocide in his own film.

Egoyan's apparent support of Ani's objection to the film's lack of historical verisimilitude is complicated by the desecration of Gorky's most important painting. After discovering what has happened to the painting, Ani forces her way onto Edward's set and accidentally walks directly into a scene that is being filmed. The scene in question involves a Turkish siege and its bloody aftermath. In the scene, Martin playing Doctor Ussher, a blood-spattered doctor, is trying in vain to save a young girl's life. Ani walks past him and directly up to Edward and demands to speak with him. As she stands just off camera looking at Edward, Ussher yells, "What is this? Goddamnit! We're surrounded by Turks. We've run out of supplies and most of us will die. This child needs a miracle, this child is bleeding to death!...This is his brother. His pregnant sister was raped in front of his eyes...his father's eyes were gouged out of his head...Who the fuck are you?"

The question that Dr. Ussher poses is extremely disorienting because, for a moment, it is unclear whether the angry tone of the question is from Martin the actor (directed at Ani for disrupting the scene) or Dr. Ussher, the character. The confusing layers of perspectives make this moment feel like it was plucked out of an earlier Egoyan film. In *Speaking Parts* a similar moment occurs when the television producer directs this same question ("Who the fuck are you?") at the character of Lance. The question brings Ani into an extreme sense of self-awareness. The awkwardness she experiences becomes synonymous with the film taking a moment to contemplate itself. This reflection questions not only Ani's motives for wanting her vision of history told, but also Edward

and Egoyan's reasons. This self-awareness ties into Egoyan's own description of the film's goal: "this is not a film that is trying to demonize present-day Turkey, quite the opposite. It's asking people today what it means to pass judgment today on the deeds of people who are no longer around." (Glassman, 10)

Egoyan is very conscious in *Ararat* of the way character judgments impact the effect of the film's message. As a result, he frequently undercuts characters just as they are prepared to make a moralistic judgment and assume fully authority on an issue. For example, Ani arrives at the set to complain about the desecration of Gorky's painting, yet, her intrusion on the set has potentially harmed Edward's own masterpiece. She is unable to fully appreciate this moment until she steps back and listens to the words of the scene. Each time she starts to respond to Martin's question she is left silent and without an answer. This silence appears to be a condemnation of Ani's self-assured status as the guardian of history, a position that gives her authority. Martin's question challenges her authority and condemns her selfish behavior; however, his criticism gives the moment an additional level of complexity. Jonathan Romney has pointed out that:

Martin, after all, is only an actor: who is he to assume Ussher's own moral authority? His harangue is surely to be read as self-righteous film-star narcissism: earlier, he smugly assures Rouben there is nothing more he can learn about the genocide, having already researched it. Martin personifies cinema's tendency to claim the last word on a subject. (Romney, 176)

Egoyan scrutinizes the psychology that leads to genocide and the historical denial of it by examining two contributing factors: cultural denial (in the case of Raffi) and intolerance (in the case of David and Philip). The concept of cultural denial is explored through Raffi's struggle to understand his "family" in the largest sense (cultural history) and the most intimate (immediate family). Family becomes a centrally divisive element

in the conflict between Raffi, his mother Ani, and his lover/step-sister Celia. This conflict is introduced in Celia and Raffi's first scene together, as Celia begs Raffi to allow her to read his mother's new and soon to be published book. She reminds him that she is "part of the family," which creates some initial confusion because this reminder is accompanied by her pushing him to the floor and unbuttoning his pants. Celia's pleas to Raffi serve as a catalyst for his quest:

**Raffi:** I don't see why it has to be this way.

**Celia:** Yes you do.

**Raffi:** I was happier when...you got along.

**Celia:** It's wasn't as much fun.

**Raffi:** Says who?

(pause)

**Celia:** The ghost of the father. My father. Not yours. Yours died like a hero. Mine died in a stupid accident....according to her. You look after your ghost, Raffi, and I'll look after mine.

The "ghosts of the father" that Celia refers to are what cause Raffi the most confusion, and what ultimately leads him to visit Mount Ararat. It is notable that Raffi's age and the nature of his quest bear many parallels to Egoyan's own history. Raffi, like the college age Egoyan, becomes interested in his culture at a critical point in his life. He is caught between opposing accounts of his family history given by his stepsister and mother, but lacks his own narrative. Raffi does not seem sure of anything, even Celia's accusation that his mother was responsible for the death of her father. The only thing he knows for sure is that his father was an Armenian "freedom fighter" who was killed during an assassination attempt on a Turkish official. He has heard all of the stories about his culture, but has never experienced it in a way that allows him to understand those closest to him. Raffi's decision to go to his homeland is an attempt to find his identity by coming to terms with his past. This character, more than any other, embodies the

conflicted feelings that Egoyan spoke of when interviewed about his own past. In Egoyan's case, the parallel would be the conflict between his desire to be a part of the Armenian culture and his quest to assimilate into the Canadian culture in which he grew up.

One of the central concerns of *Ararat* is to understand the psychology that facilitates an atrocity like genocide. Egoyan deals with the direct impact of genocide through the storylines of Edward and Gorky, but explores the nature of intolerance through David's relationship with his son Philip. The main external conflict for David in the film is his objection (though never directly) to his son Philip's homosexual relationship with Ali. The nature of this familial tension emerges during a conversation between the two men:

**Philip:** Here's the situation, Dad. Whenever Tony comes over alone, he's fine. We play, he laughs, and he's full of joy. Whenever you're around, he becomes quiet and withdrawn...and we can't stand it...

Dad, you're retiring soon. You're going to have a lot of time on your hands. Either you make an effort to change your attitude, or you're not welcome at our place anymore.

This scene suggests that the intolerance threatening the stability of David's family is related to the mindset responsible for hatred-based violence on a larger scale. At the level of characterization, David is portrayed as someone who distances himself from feeling anything on an emotional level. He must always be in control of a situation and in moments of crisis, he falls back on the rules linked to his job to provide such distance. The way he interacts with Philip, his own son, forces one to recall the similarity it bears to his earlier interaction with Edward, a complete stranger. It is the slow process of David's change that suggests Egoyan's optimistic outlook that attitudes tied to the

mindset that leads to genocide can be overcome. One of the central motifs in the film is the transference of experience from one person to another. This transference demonstrates the way that seemingly disparate people are collectively linked together. In order to recognize and grow from this connection it is not enough to simply bear witness to your own experience (like Edward) but to try and understand one another.

When David does listen, it is to Raffi, who has just returned from Mount Ararat with a new level of appreciation for his family and culture. Over the course of their interview, Raffi helps David rediscover what he loves in his own family. As David talks to him he draws a parallel between Raffi's situation with his mother and his own situation with his son. As Raffi tells his stories of visiting Mount Ararat, David strongly suspects he is guilty of carrying drugs in his possession but is reluctant to open the film cans in his possession. Inside the film cans is the irrevocable truth. Raffi claims that there are no drugs in the can, while David remains much more skeptical. The simple act of opening the can would settle the dispute completely. For David, this is not an easy task because he wants to believe Raffi's story. When Raffi suggests bringing in dogs that detect drugs, David says, "I'm not saying that what a dog does isn't important. But there are other issues involved, aren't there? Things a dog doesn't have the capacity to consider." Raffi places a degree of trust in David by telling him of his personal journey to Mount Ararat, his rocky relationship with his mother, and his desire to start over. By the end of the film, David's definition of "truth" becomes less about *what* a person believes and more about *why* they believe it. Raffi tells David that he "needs" to believe that film and not heroin is inside the can. After turning off the light and realizing that heroin is actually in the can, David does not give this fact away to Raffi, and ends up letting him go. When he tries to

explain his uncharacteristic actions to Philip, he tells him, “I trusted him.” Philip is shocked by his father’s revelation and asks him why he let him go despite the fact that he lied to him. David responds by telling him, “the more he told me, the closer he came to the truth. Until he finally told it. I couldn’t punish him for being honest.”

In an attempt to deal with the historical genocide, Egoyan offers two distinctly different artistic visions: Edward Saroyan’s “Ararat” and Arshile Gorky’s *The Artist and His Mother*. Edward’s portrayal as an artist suggests that he is a Hollywood director, comparable to someone like Richard Donner. This is a type that can best be described as a competent and reliable craftsman. He has obviously achieved a certain level of prominence and recognition (evidenced in both Ani and Ali’s enthusiasm about working with him), but he suffers from a pronounced middlebrow and unsophisticated aesthetic. In contrast, Gorky is one of the most respected of Armenian artists. His work is not only personal but also idiosyncratic and distinctive. Edward and Gorky’s contrasting visions of the Armenian genocide are from vastly different personal histories. Edward’s film is very much the work of a child that grows up hearing stories from survivors, while Gorky’s painting is the product of witnessing the genocide first hand.

In terms of Edward’s “Ararat,” the temptation might be to draw a parallel between Atom Egoyan and the character of Edward. After all, both are film directors motivated by the very best of intentions to make the first ever film of the Armenian genocide. The difference is that Edward makes a film that Egoyan would never attempt. Edward’s film is epic, broad, and glossy. Edward’s film presents a view of history that is overly simplistic and exaggerated. Even the scenes with the most brutal content are marred by a conventional tone. In contrast, Egoyan’s *Ararat* is personal, complex, and clearly bears

the mark of its director. Egoyan's principal concern in the film is not to give a complete historical account of the Armenian genocide, but to understand the psychology that allows such an event to be denied. Rather than trying to understand the genocide, Edward seeks to evoke the visceral horror of the event. This becomes problematic because the viewer is repeatedly reminded that he is staging the events. He started the project with the goal of telling his mother's version of the events she witnessed. In doing so, the project became a form of therapy intended to help him understand his family better. Ultimately, he does not experience the feeling he anticipated when the film is finished. During the film's premiere, Edward sits silently emotionless while those around him react to the film's brutal content. Edward does not react because he realizes that while he set out to make his mother's story, he ended up staging a commercialized version of what he heard growing up. As a result, he is brought no closer to the actual event, and has only produced a work that is destined to increase the divide between Turks and Armenians.

In contrast to Edward's story, the storyline involving Arshile Gorky illuminates what Egoyan is trying to accomplish in *Ararat* and, in a larger context, embodies the culmination of the director's personal growth through his later films. It is Gorky's storyline that opens *Ararat* and establishes the film's interest in the intersection between the psychology of denial and modes of representation. In the film's first scene, which takes place in a New York studio, Gorky is shown working on a painting based on a photograph taken with his mother in 1912. This photograph is the sole artifact left of Gorky's life with his mother. The photograph signifies his connection to her and his cultural association with his Armenian people.

Gorky's painting of this photograph does not attempt to create a realistic copy but instead possesses a dream-like quality. Art Historians like Jim Jordan have pointed out that this look was a very conscious choice by Gorky, which was achieved by repainting, sandpapering, and scraping the surface of the painting's canvas with a razor blade. In addition to the dream-like quality of the painting, there is another noticeable difference between the photo and Gorky's representational painting. In the original photo, Gorky and his mother's arms are clearly touching one another, however, in Gorky's painting of the photo, this "touch" has been removed and replaced with a space between the mother and son (Jordan, 50-53).

Art Critic Diane Waldman interprets the physical space that Gorky added to the painting as being emblematic of the spiritual distance between the painter and his deceased mother. Gorky's painting is the work of a genocide survivor, which does not seek to sensationalize his loss or manipulate the viewer. Instead, the painting is an attempt to deal with the personal and cultural void that the genocide created. Gorky's widow spoke about her husband's immense pain during the creation of *The Artist and His Mother* when she recalled, "he often said that, if a human being managed to emerge from such a period [surviving the tortures of genocide], it could not be as a whole man and that there was no recovery from the blows and wounds" (Waldman, 41). She went on to say that it was not until he started working on the creation of *The Artist and His Mother* that, "he realized fully what he had and what he had lost" (Spender, 162-164).

Egoyan's later films seek to understand the psychology of denial, and the way that this impulse finds external form in modes like representation. When understood in this context, the appealing characteristics of the historical Gorky to Egoyan become more

understandable. Gorky was born Vosdanik Adoian on April 15, 1904 in the Vann Province of Armenia. Gorky's life story, from fleeing Armenia to his life in America, provides a very vivid example of the connection between denial and representation. Gorky escaped to America shortly after watching his mother starve to death in his arms on March 20, 1919. When he arrived in America he took on the name of Gorky, and spent much of his early life claiming he was related to the Russian writer Maxim Gorky. The irony is that, as Hayden Herrera points out, this name was taken from a writer (Maxim Gorky) who himself took the name as a pseudonym. Thus, there is a long history associated with personal denial through representation with Arshile Gorky's name alone (Herrera, 183).

Much of Gorky's early life in America was spent denying his Armenian heritage. It was not until he began work on *The Artist and His Mother* that he finally confronted his past as a genocide survivor and his cultural identity as an Armenian. It should be noted that *The Artist and His Mother* is the first in a series of, what Gorky called, "The Armenian Portraits." These painting were modeled closely on Gorky's personal memories of his family and people from his hometown. Diane Waldman argues that these painting represent the first time that, "he overcame his need to identify with the great artists of the pasts and engaged, instead, in a quest for contact with his own past and personal identity" (Waldman, 32-33).

It is important to have an understanding of the historical Gorky because his story, in *Ararat*, serves as a parallel to Egoyan's growth. Egoyan is a long time admirer of Gorky's work, which informs the complexity of the *Ararat*'s formal style. Gorky's paintings are most famous for their abstract style. Rather than focusing on the severity of

the carnage of the Armenian genocide, the intensity of Gorky's work (about this period of his life) seems to come from his lyrical style. Gorky's approach to painting parallels Egoyan's cinematic style, which uses multiple storylines that are edited together to create a complex meditation on the subject of genocide, without assigning blame or judging the film's characters.

*Ararat* is Egoyan's most complex film because it is about the very nature of denying, remembering, and representing atrocity. Throughout the film, Egoyan offers a number of different approaches to representing genocide: Ani's book, Edward's film, Gorky's painting, and Egoyan's own film all confront genocide in different ways. The origins of each of these stories can be observed in Egoyan's recurring thematic concerns in his artistic development. For example, Edward's film seems to represent Egoyan's earlier concerns about his role as a director, while Ani's storyline continues Egoyan's interests in the complexity of the nuclear family. Gorky's story represents the closest parallel to Egoyan's struggle with his conflicting feelings over his cultural identity.

The climax of the Gorky storyline signals Egoyan's personal confrontation and resolution of his cultural denial through the motif of "touch," which recurs throughout his later works. In the later films, the power of human touch is offered as the only way to intervene in the denial process. Following his completion of *The Artist and His Mother*, Gorky falls to his knees and rubs his mother's painted hands. This moment represents Gorky's attempt to close the spiritual void that he built into his painted version of the photo with his mother. The moment also represents Gorky's acknowledgment of the Armenian culture that he spent the first part of his adult life denying.

Just as Gorky denied his cultural identity, Egoyan did the same for much of his career. While his early films featured Armenian characters and offered some insight into the director's cultural insecurities, much of the later works avoid addressing this issue directly. Instead, the later films focus on the psychology of denial, which one could interpret as Egoyan's attempt to deal with his own cultural past. Egoyan takes this new understanding of denial, gained from his later films, and applies it directly to the defining atrocity in his culture. In *Ararat*, Egoyan seems to have, like Gorky, confronted his past and his insecurities. His decision to make the first film about the Armenian genocide alone is the first indicator of a change that has taken place between *Calendar* and *Ararat*. Egoyan's work in *Ararat* is in stark contrast to his character in *Calendar*, who tortures himself over his status as a cultural outsider by paying women to have dinner with him and to go to a phone during the dinner, call him, and speak to him in languages he can't understand. Another indicator of the change within Egoyan's work is his choice to represent Arshile Gorky, the most famous and well respected Armenian painter. In doing so, Egoyan makes reference to the influences of abstract representations on his fractured filmic style, and he also makes a statement about the inadequacy of conventional forms to deal with the complexity of genocide. Abstract forms allow for a complexity that does not simply assign blame, but instead seeks to understand the nature of denial and the intolerant attitudes that facilitate genocide. It is this approach that produces Egoyan's most complex study of the psychology of denial, and also hints at Egoyan's new comfort with his cultural identity.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

Denial informs the narrative and formal strategies of Atom Egoyan's films. The main difference between the early and later works is the strategies the director uses to approach this consistent theme. Egoyan's early films are characterized by an interest in the way technological devices enable individual and collective denial, while the later films approach denial through a definition synonymous with words like orchestration, representation, manipulation, and cover-up. The later film's emphasis on live performance and its connection to individual coping rituals demonstrate a greater degree of complexity and intimacy than the director's earlier efforts.

*Exotica* is a milestone in Egoyan's artistic evolution because it approaches denial through ritualistic live orchestration and role-playing. This orchestration is an intimate coping mechanism that connects every character together by way of a common tragedy. Repeatedly in the film characters step into roles that would only be possible had tragedy not occurred. The role-playing that dominates much of the film is interrupted in the climax by the power of touch, which intervenes in the denial process. The ending of the film suggests that healing can only begin through a direct and emotionally spontaneous connection to others, rather than the orchestrated touch of role-playing.

It is possible to view *The Sweet Hereafter* as a sequel to *Exotica*. Both films are concerned with parents' exploitation of and relationships with their children. While *Exotica* concludes with a haunting final image of Christina walking towards her house, in *The Sweet Hereafter* Egoyan takes the viewer inside these houses. The film explores denial on an individual and communal level in order to express the difficulty in establishing clear and casual responsibility for an accident. All of the characters are tied

together by a common desire to deny the death of their children in order to perpetuate the existence of the “dreamed baby,” which can be equated with the memory of their life before the accident. *The Sweet Hereafter* hints at formal resolution, but in the end the characters are unable to emerge from the cycle of role-playing and manipulation.

*Felicia’s Journey* is a meditation on individual denial, which results from cultural and familial pressures. The film’s most lyrical moments are Felicia’s dreams, which are set against a backdrop of pastoral hills and crumbling castles. The tone of these scenes is reminiscent of the mythical atmosphere created in *The Sweet Hereafter*. Nevertheless, *Felicia’s Journey* is the most difficult of Egoyan’s later films to classify. Perhaps this film is best understood, within the context of his later work, as a transitional film. The film incorporates Egoyan’s interest in technological devices as a means to enable denial, while also containing elements of live orchestration, representation, and manipulation- all of which are hallmarks of his later works. This combination is significant because both approaches are utilized in *Ararat*, the most important and personal work of Egoyan’s later films.

*Ararat* is the culmination of Atom Egoyan’s later films because of the relation of the subject matter to the director and the scope of the questions that he attempts to answer. The film synthesizes his pre-and post-*Exotica* interests in order to better understand the defining trauma in his culture. *Ararat* has the distinction of being the first film produced by an American studio that is devoted to the Armenian genocide. This fact alone is an indicator of Egoyan’s artistic and personal growth since 1984. Beginning with *Next of Kin*, Egoyan’s early works addressed the director’s insecurities and denial of his cultural heritage. This theme of cultural denial reaches a climax in *Calendar*, which

at times feels like a masochistic self-torture in the way it exposes the director's insecurities.

Following his later film's exploration of strategies of denial, Egoyan comes to terms with his artistic and cultural identity. In *Ararat*, Egoyan not only becomes an outspoken member of the Armenian community, by taking on the responsibility of telling the story, but he also traces his artistic roots to the Armenian painter Arshile Gorky. Egoyan's choice to use Gorky as an organizational device for the film contains many resonate suggestions. Perhaps most importantly is the way Gorky's struggle with his cultural identity parallels Egoyan's history. Gorky eventually confronted his personal and cultural history, after years of denial, with his intensely personal "Armenian Portraits." Egoyan's trajectory is characterized by a similar hesitation, followed by a return to his past. At the end of *Ararat*, Gorky falls to the ground and touches his mother's painted hands. This moment represents his acknowledgement of his past and a more generalized grief over the suffering of his people. This same resonance can also be applied to *Ararat* in the context of the later films. The complexity of the personal tapestries that compose *Ararat* collectively form a meditation on genocide, and express the director's connection, as an Armenian, to his cultural past.

Egoyan's efforts to forge a connection to his cultural past in *Ararat* are foreshadowed by his work in *Portrait of Arshile*. In addition to his major later films, *Portrait of Arshile*, a short film made between *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Felicia's Journey*, also reflects Egoyan's interest in denial through representation. The film was commissioned by the BBC and was part of a larger project that asked filmmakers from different countries to choose a painting that is important to them, and make a film about

it. Egoyan chose Arshile Gorky's *The Artist and His Mother*, and took advantage of the freedom that the BBC guaranteed by making an unconventional documentary. For much of the film's three minutes, Egoyan's entry consists of home video footage of his son playing before the camera. Egoyan's son is named Arshile and the film consists of Egoyan and Arsinee Kanjian, explaining to him the significance of his name.

*Portrait of Arshile* is Egoyan's first attempt to combine his early and later interests. In the film, video footage, a frequently used device in his early works, is used to convey the instability of individual identity. The video camera is fully zoomed for the first half of the film, which causes pronounced digital distortion. This technique is used, as it is in early works, to remind the viewer that image and identity are manufactured products. In addition, the film features his wife speaking in Armenian while Egoyan translates her words into English. This choice places Egoyan in perfect linguistic harmony with his wife, who grew up in an Armenian culture. Egoyan's role in this film as a translator is drastically different from the pronounced the language barrier that divided him from his wife in *Calendar*.

*Portrait of Arshile* also reflects Egoyan's emphasis in his later films on role-playing and orchestration. On a basic level, Egoyan is using his son as a stand-in for the historical Gorky. The complex history of his son's name is then paralleled with the complexity of Gorky's creation of his own identity. In one of Egoyan's voice-overs, he says, "he changed his name because of what he felt when he remembered his mother's face." Egoyan goes on to explain that Gorky's changing identity can be understood through the significance of the last photograph taken with his mother; his relationship to this photo encompasses his life before and after the genocide. It is this approach that can

be viewed in the narrative designs of Egoyan's later films, which are structured around life before and after a trauma. The comparison between life before and after trauma is of great importance in Egoyan's later works, which analyze the strategies of denial that individuals construct to deal with their new life and identity. Egoyan's alludes to this idea in his commentary for *Portrait of Arshile* when he says, "this notion of reinventing is fascinating because it is a way of dealing with trauma and identity." In short, this statement summarizes the themes that can be traced through Egoyan's films. Despite the change in his approach to denial between *Calendar* and *Exotica*, his films are nevertheless linked together by a common interest in the rituals and strategies of the denial impulse.

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