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"Frontiers in Atom Egoyan's films: identity, imagination and crossing through images"

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Abstract: Atom Egoyan is a Canadian filmmaker, born in Egypt in 1960, to parents of Turkish nationality, descendants of Armenian refugees. This amalgamation of identities feeds his work, particularly his first films. The frontier theme is expressed in different ways: a symptom of a problematic search for a cultural identity, a relationship to an imaginary territory, a confusing boundary between the past and the present, reality and imagination or even between cinema, video and photography.

Scenes at customs are noticeably frequent in Atom Egoyan's films (*Exotica* 1994, *Felicia's Journey* 1999, *Ararat* 2002, *Adoration* 2008). Going through a border for travellers is never a pure formality: they have something to hide, a secret to preserve: smuggled eggs of protected birds (*Exotica*), fruit banned from import (a pomegranate that Saroyan, the fictive filmmaker in *Ararat* wants to bring in to Canada), even drugs that Raffi, the young man in *Ararat*, is unknowingly carrying; or a bomb, at the very least in Simon's fiction in *Adoration* (Simon is an orphan who is writing a play where he pretends that his father, of Lebanese origin, tried to kill his mother while she was carrying him, by booby-trapping her suitcase). In these scenes at customs, characters face their identity: the customs officer reminds Raffi of the fact he is the son of an Armenian terrorist. In *Adoration*, the fictive customs scene questions

Simon's Arabic ancestry, until this point, this ancestry has been denied (his maternal grandfather is the only survivor who can tell him who his father was, but the old man is racist and pretends that Simon's father deliberately killed his mother in a car accident).

Peter (in *Next of Kin* 1984) and Van (in *Family viewing* 1987) face this identity issue as well. Van rebuilds his Armenian identity aiding his grandmother. Peter completely fabricates his identity passing from Peter, useless son of a middle-class family, to Bedros, the son of an Armenian family, lost during the exile. In *Calendar* (1993), Atom comes back to Armenia with his wife Arsinée, the land of their ancestors, in order to photograph twelve churches for a calendar. But Atom does not recognize Armenia as part of his identity. As he says in the film: 'We are both from here, yet being here has made me from somewhere else.' On the other hand, Raffi, who undertakes the same trip, recognizes both Armenia as his country of origin and his father's legacy.

In *Calendar* or *Ararat*, crossing the border is signified by Mount Ararat, it is a genuine emblem of Armenia, nevertheless it is in Turkey. Mount Ararat is the talismanic image of an ancestral but prohibited territory (the Turkish border is still closed). Thus, frontiers are symbolic: the sea between Ireland and Britain in *Felicia's journey* or, metaphoric, the river which separates Simon from his mother (when, as a child, on his grandfather's estate. he was looking at her, playing violin, perched on a pontoon on the river). Later, Simon returns to his childhood home, which he observes, once again, from the other side of the river. In this house, he carries out a ritual to restore the identity he is symbolically separated from by the river. He burns his grandfather's effigy and saws off the scroll of his mother's violin. Through this ritual, his line of descent is given back to him: despite all separations (including the radical separation between the living and the dead), Simon looks at his parents in a literal way, and recognizes them. The shot (Simon's view at the end of his journey) articulates with the reverse-shot (his parents' view of him), the present and past blur.

As we notice, there is a large element of imagination here, like the sea in *Felicia's journey* is imaginary when Felicia dreams about Ireland and Johnny, her child's father. Water (sea or river) is a symbolic frontier which separates the characters from a golden age or an inaccessible promise (Felicia dreams once more time about Johnny in Ireland, carrying their son, who she is having aborted).

Just like Felicia, the filmmaker Edouard Saroyan (*Ararat*) is haunted with the pictures that he is about to direct, when he crosses the Canadian border: the missing pictures of the Armenian genocide. His face dissolves into the image of Mount Ararat as a stimulation of the Armenian imagination. This film is structured in a particularly complex way, mixing several temporalities: the genocide, the painting of a work by Arshile Gorky, the shooting of Edouard's film, Raffi's journey to Armenia, his examination by the customs officer… There are no fewer than seventy-eight temporal transitions in the film; some give an illusion of continuity. Egoyan said to Hamid Naficy (2010: 50) that 'the viewer has to identify the whole organization of time.' about *Calendar*, but the structure of *Ararat* is just as complex.

In *Calendar*, sequences from the two-week journey to Armenia and sequences from the next year in Canada alternate. In the Armenian sequences, we see Arsinée breaking up with Atom. In the Canadian sequences, he stages a strange ritual consisting of inviting women to phone up their lovers. Time has a peculiar elasticity: two weeks and a whole year match. However, the editing blurs the boundaries between these two temporalities, each one is subdivided in temporal areas which slide between each other. For instance, we slide from a temporality located in the Past (the taking of photographs of a church) to another past temporality, much more drifting (as this sequence is recurrent in the film: Arsinée running among a flock of sheep) over which the dialog about the church is going on, entangling of the past temporalities that the viewer finally identifies as Atom's recomposed memory. Music in

the previous sequence is an anticipation of the ritual (we recognize it in the Canadian sequences with the invited women). So there is a new sound overlapping, between present and past: the woman's voice phoning up her lover is superimposed over Arsinée's voice, speaking to Atom's rival: Ashot, their Armenian driver. Through this polyphonic overlapping vocal effect, we go back to this mixed past time: Arsinée running among the flock and at the same time, continuing to speak to Atom. A new sliding occurs: we are not in the Past anymore, or in memory (the limit between the two is indeterminable) but in the temporality of Atom's viewing of the videotape which documents the journey in Armenia), as the speeding up and the freezing frames indicate. The temporality of the viewing is identified as it is. Not only do temporalities slide into each other but they are also held in a relation of simultaneity: the picture of Arsinée running among the flock is at the same time a flashback, a recomposed memory, the mechanic reproduction of the video tape shot in Armenia. Arsinée is also a picture of a ghost, the women Atom has lost and who is addressing him: 'Why don't you answer me?' And Atom begins to write an answer. The viewer can temporarily consider that Arsinée's message and the writing are contemporary, thus, a new slide happens between Atom's voice beginning his answer and his message in the answerphone. What we took for the continuation of the answer ('It's May twenty-third.') is flung into another temporality thanks to the simple dialling tone. Temporal boundary is made indeterminable, by latency, combination and migration.

For Atom, Armenia is an imaginary country, this is why he does not recognize it in the real Armenia. And that confrontation is violent, as Egoyan has remarked to Jason Wood:

As an Armenian born in Egypt, so much of what I thought was Armenian was actually Middle Eastern, but that's the culture I was raised in and certainly that my wife has been raised in. Arsinée Khanjian was raised in Lebanon and what we share as what we think are Armenian are actually Middle Eastern traditions and when you go back

to Armenia you realize that it's not a Middle Eastern culture at all. It's a Caucasian culture and their habits and their social manners are really different to what constitutes Armenian; and that was a shock. (2010: 105)

At the beginning of *Calendar,* Mount Ararat is a symbol consistent with his imagination, a 'visible' in Merleau-Ponty's point of view (1964: 171), a 'tissu conjonctif des horizons extérieurs et intérieurs' [connective tissue of external and interior horizons.]

There is no definite boundary between reality and imagination; the picture is what stitches them together. Often – in *Family Viewing, Speaking Parts* (1989), *Calendar, Ararat* especially – the introduction of video carries out the transition into imagination. In *Speaking Parts*, the different narration levels are particularly porous, particularly contaminated with the characters' imagination: Clara remembering her brother, who sacrificed himself by giving her one of his lungs, the director distorting Clara's script which tells this tragedy, Lisa in adoration of Lance, the actor chosen to incarnate Clara's brother.

This porosity culminates in the talk-show scene where different textures of pictures blend (analogue cinematography and several video formats), different narrative levels between fiction, reality show, fantasy, film-within-the-film, slide into each other, in a "time-space" 'd'empilement, de prolifération, d'empiètement, de promiscuité' [of stacking, proliferation, encroachment, promiscuity] (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 152). This effect of proliferation and stacking particularly follows from totally unpredictable substitutions: the true brother for the false one, as a manifestation of the struggle which opposes Clara's imagination and the director's one, of the nurse by Lisa, a figment of Lisa's own imagination. The sudden appearance of Clara who threatens to commit suicide: this is the imagination of Lance who has betrayed her by accepting the director's new script. Lisa literally enters into the picture after having touched the screen, that interface screen which materializes this site, as Raymond Bellour (1990: 197) described it, 'où la vidéo empiétant sur le cinéma lui permet d'entrer dans l'image comme lieu manifeste de vibration et de métamorphose.' [where the

video, encroaching upon cinema, allows it to enter the picture as a manifest site of vibration and metamorphosis.] Vibration and metamorphosis, confusion of several worlds and conflicts between imaginations which become muddled and jumbled are particularly important in this sequence from *Speaking Parts*, but are also noticeable in *Calendar, Family Viewing* or *Ararat*.

Without reaching this level of confusion, there are numerous sequences where it is impossible to determine if they are the creation of one character's imagination or the 'reality' of the film. In *Adoration*, several sequences show Simon's parents: are these sequences flashbacks, scenes from Simon's play or even his memories (in one of them, we see the child looking at his parents)? In *Ararat,* the sequences of young Gorky with his mother appear to belong to a film-within-the-film but this remains uncertain. The second fiction (the film-within-the-film: Saroyan's film) and the first fiction (Egoyan's film) are in a relation of indistinguishability. This is what Gilles Deleuze (1985: 93) calls 'image cristal' [crystal-image], an image where two sides coexist namely: virtual/actual, imaginary/real, past/present et cetera. Even the characters are tricked: as in *Ararat* Ussher, outraged by the intrusion on the set of the script-consultant Ani, while he is performing a surgical operation. He is no longer Martin, the actor of the prime fiction, but Ussher, the missionary of the second fiction. In *The Adjuster*, we can also see a film-within-the-film. The director character – named Bubba – slides imperceptibly: he gets ready to sacrifice himself in the house which is his film set. Surprised by the owner of the house, he passes the limit between the two levels of fiction: 'You've come in just at the moment that the character of the film – the person who is supposed to live here – decides that he is going to stop playing house. So, are you in or are you out?'

In the crystal-image, Deleuze noticed:

L'image actuelle et l'image virtuelle coexistent et cristallisent. Elles forment une seule et même scène où les personnages appartiennent au réel et pourtant jouent un rôle. Bref, c'est tout le réel, la vie tout entière, qui est devenu spectacle (1984: 112)

[the actual image and the virtual image coexist and crystallize. They enter into a circuit which brings us constantly back from one to the other; they form 'one' and the same 'scene' where the characters belong to the real and yet play a role. In short it is the whole of life in its entirety, which has become spectacle] (2000: 79-80)

The whole of life has become a show, that is to say a film shoot. The boundary between the film-within-the-film and the film itself is then extremely blurred. Bubba is preparing to shoot a scene: he is fixing the frame of the camera, his own just like Egoyan's one, and gives his instructions to the actors: 'Don't move these wedges. These wedges allow the smooth movement of the camera.' Which camera is he talking about: the acting camera (that we cannot see on the set) or Egoyan's camera? In the same way, in *Speaking Parts*, during Lance's audition, Clara advises him to look carefully at the camera: Clara's supposed camera and Egoyan's one are perfectly superimposed when the two characters are looking directly at the camera.

The presence of a character who is filming or taking photographs is systematic. To a lesser or greater degree, there is always a director figure making decisions about the *mise-en-scène*. Another indeterminable frontier is drowned: the frontier between fiction and autobiography. *Calendar* is certainly the film where Egoyan plays the most with the confusion of these two registers, as he said to Hamid Naficy:

Calendar is a very interesting situation because a lot of people felt that it was directly autobiographical. Even people who were close to us assumed that Arsinée and I had broken up. This is great that the film is able to translate that feeling, but in face it wasn't true. […] we were really playing the opposite of what we were experiencing. (2010: 65)

Egoyan even told Jason Wood (2010: 105): 'I play a character who I think was involved in my own worst nightmare of who I might be.' Maybe, following Bellour (1990: 250), it would be necessary to write here 'self-portrait' rather than 'autobiography' because cinema is a favourite site of elaboration for the self-portrait 'quand il se tient entre documentaire et fiction, témoignage et récit, hanté par la présence insistante, constante et pourtant intermittente, dérobée, d'une voix et d'un corps.' [when cinema lies between documentary and fiction, testimony and narrative, haunted by the insistent, constant and yet intermittent, hidden presence of a voice and a body.] In *Calendar* we are actually 'between': between documentary and fiction, past and present, here and there, film and video. As for Atom Egoyan's body, its presence is radically hidden in Armenia since he stays behind his video camera or his photographic camera. On the other hand, its presence is heavy in the Canadian sequences, and very staged. As for his voice, it is omnipresent. We are still 'between': between the voice's presence and the body's absence, between the hidden body and the fictionalised body.

In Armenia, Atom restricts himself to the place of a viewer. When Arsinée invites him to go for a walk with Ashot, he refuses. 'It's not a question of wanting to go or not. It is much stranger than that. What I really feel like doing is standing here and watching. Watching the two of you leave me and disappear into a landscape that I'm about to photograph.' There is a limit not to cross, the limit of the frame. Atom dialogs with Arsinée on both sides of the camera lens. Arsinée, then, looks at the camera to signify that she's looking at Atom. When, at the end, Arsinée and Ashot disappear into a cave, an unambiguous moaning from Arsinée is heard, Atom stays in the limits imposed by his frame, by his field of vision. *Calendar* is the journey of a view that will never work against its limits.

Atom shares this viewer's destiny with numerous characters in Egoyan's films. In *Exotica*, the customs and the nightclub have the same optical system: a one-way mirror through which clients or travellers can be watched. On each side of the one-way mirror, as on each side of the lens, there is a frontier: the optical interface which allows the view, but only one way. The viewer is standing in that strange position which consists of looking at a voyeur who is watching, as in *Felicia's journey,* Hilditch looking at his mother's television show through his binoculars, and later he will look at Felicia's legs in the same way.

For Egoyan's characters being a viewer consists of looking at archived pictures: in *Speaking Parts*, Clara looks at her dead brother's picture while Lisa loses herself in the contemplation of Lance. Hilditch watches his mother's television cooking show intensively. Examples abound. Looking at a picture is essentially lived through separation: from the deceased for Hilditch or Clara, from the beloved person for Lisa or Atom. Once again, when a character looks at a picture, the limit is indeterminable. In *Family viewing*, Van discovers the image of his own childhood, and after a jump in the video, his mother's smile: is it really what his father has recorded or a picture fantasized by the young man? At the end of the film, his father collapses in the hotel room where he intended to find his fugitive son, and he sees, the woman that he has lost in the television screen.

From the moment that the picture slides from recording to fantasy, going through the screen is possible: the pictures acknowledge the characters. Lance invites Lisa to meet him on the other side of the screen, as Arsinée invites Atom to leave his camera for a while and sing with the shepherds. In the same way, Hilditch sees his exasperated mother shouting 'Joey' at him, no longer addressing the child who has just spilt some stuffing and run out of the frame, but the adult who is on the other side of the screen, even though his mother is dead, even though she is speaking to him from the television set. This shot / reverse shot represents the unrepresentable, what Bellour (1990: 38) has called 'l'entre-espace, ou l'entre-temps formé de

la disjonction-conjonction entre représentation mentale et perception, surface et profondeur, envers et endroit, présent et passé, conscient et inconscient.' [The between-space, or the between time, shaped with the disjunction-conjunction between mental representation and perception, surface and depth, front and back, present and past, consciousness and unconsciousness.]

In Egoyan's films the characters look directly at the camera very frequently: Hilditch's mother, or Van's mother's. As early as *Next of kin,* when Peter looks at the camera, it is the sign that he is addressing Bedros, the son Peter is usurping the identity from. In *Family viewing*, Van fixes his eyes on the viewer at the same time on the screen; this glance materializes the interface between the viewer and the character. On the contrary, Clara's brother moves right into the foreground, up to the frontal limit of the picture and watches Clara beyond the screen and beyond the death. He is watching Clara who is filming him, just as Van's father filmed his mother, or Atom filmed Arsinée. A symmetrical game plays out on both sides of the screen. They are watching us as much as we are watching them. Now the screen can be pierced and the camera enters its forbidden space: Clara enters the frame, her small camera in her hand. And moreover, the end credits of *Next of kin*, are made up of a sequence of photographs that relate the week Peter has spent in the Deryan Family. Thus, the viewer revisits some moments of the film, the simulated heart attack of the father, for instance, that Peter has photographed. Now, in the very last shot of the film, behind the father together with his wife and daughter, we discover Egoyan's camera. In an ultimate transgression, the camera enters its forbidden space, above all: the frame.

At the end of *Next of kin,* Egoyan gives a hint of what he will develop later on: the migration of one visual support to another. In his films, he mixes photography, analogue cinematography and video, in a relation of permanent and mutual transformation. And once

again, Egoyan works hard to blur their boundaries as much as possible. In *Calendar*, we discover Atom's photograph in the calendar, but never full frame. What interests Egoyan is the imperceptible transition from cinema to photography. This transition works during a long and steady sequence shot ending with the camera release. This is an example of what Bellour (1990: 139) has called 'le photographique' [the photographic]

In other sequences, the imperceptible mutation works from video to photography: in *Calendar*, the video frame freezes on Arsinée's face, slips into a photographic portrait, without precise boundary as we need *some* time to perceive the photographic immobility of the frame. According to Raymond Bellour (1990: 15), video is 'un lieu de passage et un système de transformation des images les unes par les autres' [a place of transition and a system of transformation of the images by each other.] And that's exactly what happens in *Family viewing* particularly. Sandra, the father's partner, is watching him, gripped by sexual frustration. The shot / reverse shot is perfectly organized, but the supporting images are heterogenic: one-inch Beta for Sandra and one-inch Beta re-shot on a screen for the father, this process gives the picture a very pasty and ghostly aspect. Literally, a body of flesh and blood is watching, in the same physical space, a body reduced to an image, just as two psychic worlds, radically divided, are mutually intensifying their natural difference. It is also a strange mirror effect of the viewer's position since Sandra, by physically watching Van's father, is looking at picture on a screen.

As Atom Egoyan said to Rebecca Comay:

> When you watch a film projected, you tend to assume that the image is caught by the truth of the camera – that it is real. But the moment you show a video monitor within a film, you become aware of this being a decision that someone has taken: that both images are constructed. This awareness comes about precisely by becoming conscious of the interface between the two mediums. (2010: 142)

This interface is materialized by the presence of a device of picture diffusion: a television set, a monitor, an LCD screen of a handy cam or a mobile. In the frame within the frame, composition is manifest. The construction of the frame is pointed out as deliberate. In *Adoration*, Simon shows the LCD screen of his mobile to the web cam of his computer: we are viewers of an image inside an image inside an image.

Video pictures are, by definition, very versatile. With electronic enhancement, they can transform before our very eyes. In a sequence from *Calendar*, we pass from an analogical photographic picture (a ruined fortress), to the same subject but in a video picture. With a white toning, the picture is decomposed and recomposed and shifts in its nature. The video picture can be frozen, rewound, accelerated: there is thus transition from an image in analogous relation with what it is representing to an image that is representing itself. According to Bellour:

> La grande force de la vidéo a été, est, sera d'avoir opéré des *passages*. Passages entre mobile et immobile, entre l'analogie photographique et ce qui la transforme. *L'entre-image* est ainsi (virtuellement) l'espace de tous ces passages.
>
> [the great power of video has been, is and will be to effect *transitions*: transitions from mobility to immobility, from photographic analogy to what is transforming it. The between-image is thus (virtually) the site of all these transitions.] (1990, 12)

In *Speaking parts*, the video image is transformed through being blown-up. Then another frontier is reached: the frontier of visibility. The number of pixels being fixed, the picture cannot be endlessly magnified. Going beyond the limit, the pixel is obvious and the picture becomes unintelligible. There are numerous shots in Egoyan's films which are at the very limit of visibility, whether it is by superimposition in *The Adjuster*, by an out-of-focus effect in *Exotica*, by interference with the pixels in *Speaking parts*. Beyond this limit, the picture is

reduced to the materiality of its support: the long black shot after Hilditch's suicide in *Felicia's journey*, with scratches and dusts, or the white noise in *Speaking parts*. Then, these pictures that reach the limit of visibility suppose that there is something to see beyond this invisibility. Merleau-Ponty (1964: 295) has described that hereafter of visibility by saying that 'Voir c'est toujours voir plus qu'on ne croit – il ne faut pas le comprendre dans le sens d'une *contradiction*, il faut comprendre que c'est la visibilité qui comporte une non-visibilité.' [Seeing is always seeing more than what we believe – that should not be understood in the sense of *contradiction*; it should be understood that visibility involves a non-visibility.] This non-visibility has to be discovered in the shot at the beginning of *Calendar*, a fleeting, fragile and ghostly shot of Mount Ararat which is shying away from our very vision, which is manifesting something hidden. Related to what Egoyan said to Hamid Naficy (2010: 65), this non-visibility has a much stronger meaning than a simple representation of the mountain: 'The most autobiographical element in the films for me is the notion of the submerged culture. The notion of a culture that has somehow been hidden, either for political or for personal reasons.' Jammed, blurred or bleached, the video image effects transitions: from an illegible visible to a beyond of visible. In the first shot of *Family viewing*, TV dinners obstruct our sight, obstacles that we have to cross to reach what is behind. It is the frontier of the picture itself that is to be crossed; the image is no longer a simple surface, but a volume of an inexhaustible depth. According to Georges Didi-Huberman:

> Regarder, ce serait prendre note que l'image est structurée comme un *devant-dedans* inaccessible et imposant sa distance, si proche soit-elle. Car c'est la distance d'un contact suspendu, d'un impossible rapport de chair à chair. Cela veut juste dire que *l'image est structurée comme un seuil*.
>
> [Looking would be to note that the image is structured as an inaccessible *front-inside* which forces it distance, however close it may be. Because it is the distance of a suspended contact, of an impossible contact of flesh to flesh. That simply means that the image is structured like a threshold.] (1992: 192)

To conclude, let us return to the customs. Curiously, a scene is recurrent: a young woman reaches the customs, pregnant, pursued by the theme of one film to another one, as if the child that Felicia is carrying has grown in Simon's mother's womb. In *Exotica*, Thomas is experiencing a kind of pregnancy: he is carrying eggs around his stomach. In this link between gestation and border crossing, there is a metaphor of the cinematographic creation process. The passage of frontiers, the quest for identity that goes with it, the secret and the endless interference are its catalysts. In Egoyan's films, identity is a construction, as he said to Hamid Naficy (2010: 35) 'I am definitively sensitive to the idea of our identity being a very, very self-conscious construct and to the possibility that our whole notion of personality is the thing that we choose to represent ourselves as opposed to something that is ingrained.' It is blatant in *Next of kin, Family viewing, The Adjuster, Ararat* or *Adoration*. Yet, this identity construction requires us to decide the scenario (Did Simon's father love his mother or want to kill her?), to take on a role (like Peter who becomes Bedros) and to represent (staging his grand-mother as a tramp in *Family viewing* or staging an auto-da-fé as Simon at the end of *Adoration*). Cinema itself is thus in gestation, beyond what is simply visible, in these shots of Felicia, Simon's mother or Thomas, crossing the border carrying a child or birds.

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