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Two Canadian Auteurs: Arcand and Egoyan

I make films for Ingmar Bergman, and he will
no doubt never see them.

—Denys Arcand (Gural and Patar, 1982: 53)

It's the difficulty of representing the self in a
society completely obsessed with representation
that interests me.

—Atom Egoyan (Taubin, 1992: 19)

The idea of the filmmaker as an artist with a personal vision is usually associated with the *politique des auteurs* developed by critics writing for *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s. These critics would go on to become the filmmakers of the French New Wave, whose work revitalized the idea of 'art cinema' as an alternative to the commercial production of the Hollywood studios. In Canada, there has been a tendency on the part of critics to limit auteur cinema to the work of directors who write their own screenplays, but it is important to note that the *Cahiers* critics championed such directors as John Ford, Howard Hawks, and many others who worked within the Hollywood studio system. What was important to these critics was that the filmmaker used film language in a distinctive and consistent manner, in the same way that a literary author develops a personal style using the resources of written language. These auteurs were true film artists, unlike *metteurs-en-scène*, directors who relied on the written word of the screenplay.

The art cinema circuits that developed in North America and elsewhere were closely associated with the growth of film festivals throughout the world. Exposure at festivals is often important for Canadian filmmakers, and the establishment of major international festivals in Montreal and Toronto has boosted their profile. Yet the repertory cinemas in many Canadian cities tend to privilege 'foreign' art films. Canadian films usually lack the assured treatment of complex psychological or social situations found in European art films, as well as the exotic appeal of films from less familiar parts of the world. Not quite popular, Canadian films are not quite art cinema, either.

The auteur theory came under attack in the 1970s from theorists who saw it as an outmoded relic of the romantic glorification of the artist as a lonely individual, ignoring both the collective nature of filmmaking and the social and political contexts that shape films and their reception. However, while these criticisms have been widely accepted, the idea of the director as author remains a central principle in film studies, in the practices of art cinema, and, increasingly, in the publicity discourses around even Hollywood productions.

This situation in Canada changed, to some degree, in the 1990s with the new funding policies of Telefilm Canada and the establishment of provincial film development offices and arts councils. It now became possible for filmmakers in both languages to develop a significant body of work in relative artistic freedom, although the process of raising the budget for a feature film is now extremely complicated and the situation of even established auteurs remains highly precarious. Indeed, Jean Pierre Lefebvre, among others, has recently lamented the decline of 'the *cinéma d'auteur*' in Quebec, because the funding bodies insist on dealing with producers rather than directors (Harcourt, 2001: 63).

Many of the directors discussed elsewhere in this book have been or can be regarded as auteurs, and I have approached many of them from this perspective (while also acknowledging the social, cultural, and industrial factors that help shape even the most personal vision). In this chapter I will focus on Denys Arcand and Atom Egoyan, two filmmakers who have achieved international recognition with a substantial body of films that reward analysis in terms of their distinctive personal visions. As we shall see, despite the evident differences between their films and the contexts in which they

make them, they share a commitment to ambiguity and uncertainty that is characteristic of 'art cinema' but that also seems to reflect a distinctively Canadian sense of cultural instability.

Ups and Downs: Denys Arcand's History Lessons

Many critics acclaimed Arcand's *Les Invasions barbares* (2003) as a mature work by a major filmmaker and celebrated its Academy Award as best foreign-language film as a major accomplishment for Canadian cinema. There were dissenting voices, especially in Quebec where Arcand has always been a controversial figure, but there seemed little doubt that he had confirmed his status as an auteur.¹ The film itself encourages this view since it is a belated sequel to *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* (1986), which established Arcand's international reputation, and includes characters from *Jésus de Montréal* (1989), in which he successfully built on that reputation. Arcand seemed to be reflecting on his past work and reassessing it in the context of the new millennium.

Yet, the long gap between the earlier films and this reflection is typical of Arcand's career, which may appear to lack the consistency required of a genuine auteur. He had made films in the meantime, but these were generally regarded as minor works—although true adherents to the concept of the director as auteur would insist that even minor works by an auteur are more rewarding than any film by a *metteur-en-scène*. A similar gap appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Arcand, like many other Quebec filmmakers, was unable to work on his own projects. In any case, even his more important films before 1985 did not correspond to the usual definitions of 'art cinema'. Arcand's status as an auteur rests on finding links between three different modes of filmmaking: the three 'art films' already mentioned, three feature-length documentaries—*On est au coton* (1970), *Québec: Duplessis et après* (1972), and *Le Confort et l'indifférence* (1981)—and three genre films—*La Maudite Galette* (1971), *Réjeanne Padovani* (1973), and *Gina* (1975).

The key underlying feature that runs through this disparate body of work and shapes his personal vision stems from Arcand's training as a historian. He studied history at the Université de Montréal and, after co-directing the student film *Seul ou avec d'autres* with Denis Héroux, he joined the NFB in 1964 to work on historical documentaries. His historical perspective persists in his later films, but he noted that his training convinced him that 'we know so little about the past that to me it would be absolutely inconceivable to do a period film' (Barker, 1990: 4).² Apart from the specific historical references, always used to judge the present, the films betray Arcand's roots as a historian in their ingrained pessimism about the possibility of changing the course of events and the detached perspective they take on human endeavours, both highly controversial aspects of his work.

At the beginning of *Québec: Duplessis et après*, Lord Durham (played by film director Robin Spry) reads from his report to the British government after the 1837–8 rebellions, describing the inhabitants of Lower Canada (Quebec) as 'a people without history or literature'. Arcand then cuts to newsreel shots of Maurice Duplessis invoking

'our ancestors' in a political speech. The appeal to history is an attempt to counter Durham's denial of a cultural heritage, but Arcand's documentary on the 1970 provincial election shows not only that all the political parties echo Duplessis's rhetoric but also the persistence of Quebec's problems despite the much-vaunted changes wrought by the Quiet Revolution. At the end of *Le Confort et l'indifférence*, dealing with the 1980 referendum campaign, a final caption, taken from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, reads 'our lives are so short compared with the slow unrolling of history.'

For Arcand, this unrolling involves 'a kind of blind force that advances like a glacier and . . . it will continue to advance' (Dorland, 1986: 18). His version of history is thus one that has little appeal to those committed to bringing about political change in Quebec, especially since his films combine this pessimistic outlook with a dark sense of humour. In *La Maudite Galette*, a heist film that depicts a morally bankrupt society, the voice of Pierre Trudeau, justifying the invocation of the War Measures Act 'last October', is heard on the radio as Berthe (Luce Guilbeault) sits impassively drinking in the kitchen. When the stripper (Céline Lomez) is gang-raped in her motel room in *Gina*, 'O Canada' is playing on the television. However, despite such satiric moments, Arcand insists that his films have 'never defended a cause' and that he does not know whether he is 'for or against independence' (Loiselle, 1995: 149).

Arcand is thus, as Pierre Véronneau suggests, 'the filmmaker of uncertainty: he doubts the certainties of others, he scorns the complacent possessors of truth, he does not believe in the existence of a unique version' (1987–8: 24). He most fully demonstrates his openness to contradictions in *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*, in which he incorporates his thesis that 'the key to our history is to be on the margins of the American Empire' (Jutras et al., 1987–8: 6). In the pre-credit sequence, Rémy (Rémy Girard) lectures on the power of 'numbers' in history, arguing that the blacks will prevail in South Africa but not in North America. He does not mention Quebec, but Arcand inserts a close-up of a female Vietnamese student intently listening, foreshadowing Rémy's admission of his sexual attraction to his female students but also alluding to the changing demographics in Quebec.

Quebec history becomes a structuring absence in a film in which most of the characters are historians. In a reversal of gender stereotypes, the opening sequences show the women working out in a gym while the men prepare the meal that will bring them together in the second half of the film. Throughout, they engage in highly articulate conversations, mainly about sex, but also on the political thesis suggested by its title, without once addressing Quebec's past or future. The only allusion to this topic occurs when Mario (Gabriel Arcand), the working-class lover of Diane (Louise Portal), briefly interrupts the proceedings and gives her a book by the historian Michel Brunet, which he certainly has not read. While the film's appeal derives from their lively conversations and their evident enjoyment of each other's company, the inbred relationships within the group produce a constant state of tension and break down when Rémy's wife Louise (Dorothée Berryman) overhears Dominique (Dominique Michel), the head of the department, casually mentioning that she once slept with Rémy.

The film, like Arcand himself, is 'ambivalent' towards these characters who can 'express great insight into their own condition' and then 'prove incapable of seeing the

blatantly obvious' (Loiselle, 1995: 152). For Bill Marshall, 'the convenience of its irony' makes the film 'complicit with the very forces of cultural commodification' that it claims to denounce (2001: 293). Yet Arcand is very much aware of this tension between criticism and complicity. He makes this clear in *Gina*, in which a film crew tries to make a documentary critical of working conditions in the textile industry, as Arcand himself had done with *On est au coton*. Arcand finished his film, which was then banned by the NFB, but the fictional crew members are stopped even before they finish. They abandon their social conscience and are last seen working on a crime film rather like *La Maudite Galette*, which Arcand made after leaving the NFB. *Gina* itself is, of course, a commercial genre film in the same vein.

Arcand felt that his turn to genre did involve an element of 'complicity', but this was also true, in a different way, of his working conditions at the NFB. His approach to the crime film involved a strong 'critical' element, through the use of such strategies as long takes and a static camera that undermine the drive to resolution through action and violence. 'Instead of asking yourself what is happening to the hero,' he claimed 'you ask yourself why it is happening' and 'why this society produces this kind of individual' (Tadros, 1972a: 29).

Marshall also complains that *Le Déclin* is uncritical because it 'refuses to comment on its own construction through a severing of the realist illusion' (2001: 293). This is a rather odd argument to make about a film in which, as Denise Pérusse points out, 'the editing introduces a distance from the action and words of the characters' and, in general, 'the narrator . . . is far from effacing himself' (1987–8: 49). The cross-cutting between the male and female groups is highly self-conscious, and the credit sequence asserts a strong sense of a controlling narrator: the camera tracks along spacious university corridors to come to rest on Diane doing a radio interview with Dominique on her new book about 'the frantic drive for personal pleasure' in modern society caused by 'the decline of the American empire'.

Near the end, however, the authority of the narration is called into question by an argument about the nature and extent of a friend's self-proclaimed sexual exploits, raising doubts about the truth of the 'histoires' told, and often visualized, during the film. A similar puncturing of the realist illusion occurs at the end of *Gina* when, after a bloody sequence in which Gina takes revenge on the rapists in accordance with generic expectations, we see her at the airport leaving for Mexico, accompanied by Mexican music. The camera pans away from her to reveal musicians playing, and the next sequence begins with a woman shooting her husband on a city street. This time the camera pulls back to reveal that it is a scene from a film being shot by the former members of the documentary crew. The double exposure of the apparatus undercuts the illusion of the final marriage ceremony as a happy ending that will resolve the problems of Dolorès (Frédérique Collin), the worker whose situation has been compared with the stripper's throughout the film.

In a similar way, the opening of *Jésus de Montréal* plunges us into the heightened emotions of a man committing suicide, which is then revealed as a theatrical performance when the audience begins to applaud. This is an appropriate effect to introduce a film about 'maintaining one's integrity in a world where reality is a problematic concept'

(Harkness, 1989: 238). There is always, however, a bedrock of the real in Arcand's films that frames the artifice and complications of the social world: in *Québec: Duplessis et après*, recurring images of cars abandoned in the snow punctuate the account of the political campaign, and in *Le Déclin*, shots of the natural beauty of the lake act as a counterpoint to the sexual entanglements of the characters. The equivalent shots in *Jésus* are panoramic views of Montreal, whose beauty acts as a counterpoint to 'the commercial city' and 'the suffering city' that Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau) encounters when he takes on the role of Jesus in a new version of the Passion Play (Testa, 1995: 107).

The lake from *Le Déclin* appears again in *Les Invasions barbares*, and the new film picks up on an image from its predecessor that invokes death as a fact of nature and art as a human response to mortality. When Claude (Yves Jacques), who is gay and suffering from a serious illness that appears to be AIDS, lectures to his art history class on the association of dawn with death in painting, the slides are projected on his body, and there is an abrupt cut to the lake at dawn. In the sequel, Claude is alive and gleefully enjoying the generosity of the Canadian government as a cultural ambassador in Rome, and it is Rémy, the inveterate womanizer of the earlier film, whose terminal illness brings the old gang together in a crowded hospital, like the one to which Daniel was taken at the end of *Jésus*.

The film's title and central motif were anticipated in an article on Quebec cinema by Gilles Thérien. Alluding to *Le Déclin*, Thérien argued that, 'if one speaks of empire and decline, there is always at the gates of whatever empire a horde of Barbarians ready to invade the territory' so that 'to think of the empire is also to think of what undermines it, the thought of the Barbarian' (1990: 10). The idea is introduced into the later film when a shot of the second plane crashing into the World Trade Center abruptly fills the screen, before being identified as an image on television accompanying a commentary by Alain (Daniel Brière), a graduate student in *Le Déclin*, who compares the attack to earlier atrocities and suggests what makes it important is that this time the 'barbarians' struck at 'the heart of the empire'. Later, a policeman (Roy Dupuis) speaks of the impossibility of controlling the drug trade, which he also describes as an 'invasion'.

Arcand himself relates the film to a future in which nations will disappear and 'the notion of borders will be almost irrelevant', because 'there will be American citizens on one side' and everybody else will be considered as 'one and the same thing: barbarians' (Howell, 2003: 30). Yet it is American culture that is colonizing the world more like a virus working internally than a violent assault from the outside world. In the film's use of the metaphor, as Pierre Barrette suggests, 'the individual and the collective come together, reflect each other, interpenetrate' (2003: 5). Not only do barbarians also come from within, as with the disease that consumes Rémy's body, but Quebec is increasingly part of a new global economy.

The film opens in London with Sébastien (Stéphane Rousseau), Rémy's son, receiving a telephone call from his mother in the banking house where he works. Rémy considers his son a materialistic barbarian, but the son's wealth procures a comfortable room in a wing of the hospital that has been closed because of cutbacks and who pays for the heroin that eases his father's final days. The opening credits appear over a long

tracking shot behind a woman walking down a hospital corridor, filled with patients waiting for rooms. This shot is a perverse reminder of the one at the beginning of *Déclin*, and the woman (Johanne-Marie Tremblay), who administers communion to the patients, turns out to be Constance, one of the actors/disciples from *Jésus*.

The contrast between global wealth and the state of the health system in Quebec sets up the way in which, as Philip Kemp suggests, Arcand 'frequently . . . teases his audience by switching moods on us, from cynical to affirmative and back' (2004: 37). There are satiric caricatures of hospital administrators and union leaders and comic vignettes by Rémy's former girlfriends. After some of his students visit him in hospital, we discover that the moving scene has been arranged and paid for by Sébastien. Yet the tone can also encompass intensely emotional sequences like the farewell message that Rémy receives on a computer screen from his daughter Sylvaine (Isabelle Blais) from a yacht somewhere in the Pacific.

However, it remains essentially a comedy, and the shifts in tone enforce Arcand's characteristic double vision. When Gaëlle (Marina Hands), Sébastien's partner, who works for an art auction house in London, looks for religious artworks in Montreal, she visits a storage room with Father Raymond (Gilles Pelletier), the disillusioned priest from *Jésus*. The film clearly endorses her judgement that the art has little aesthetic and no market value, but it also raises questions about the shift from the domain of the sacred to that of commerce. Similarly, it supports Rémy's judgement of himself as a professional failure but celebrates the affection he receives from his friends, who all are complicit in his assisted suicide. It ends on a note of tentative hope when Nathalie (Marie-Josée Croze), Louise's daughter, who administers Rémy's dope and his final overdose, tries to overcome her addiction and moves into his apartment, looking with interest at the history books on his shelves.

Dark Mirrors: Reflections on Atom Egoyan

Critical response to *Ararat* (2002), Atom Egoyan's ninth feature film, was deeply divided. As a large-budget film (produced by Robert Lantos's Serendipity Point films) dealing with the Armenian genocide, it seemed a major departure from his earlier, more intimate and personal films. Yet, while *Ararat* does not explicitly refer back to the director's earlier work, as *Les Invasions barbares* does, it includes several of the 'family' of actors who recur from film to film, most notably his wife Arsinée Khanjian, who has appeared in all the features. It also draws on his personal background as the son of Armenian parents, born in Egypt but brought up in Canada.

Although the earlier films usually deal with characters seeking to come to terms with their past, they seem far removed from Arcand's historical sensibility. As well as being set in vaguely defined locations (see Chapter 3), these films unfold with a kind of dream logic, marked by repetitions and coincidences, with the result that, as Ron Burnett notes, 'history is absent' (1993: 10). Egoyan acknowledged that he was 'not particularly interested in giving details or being precise about a particular state of national isolation' but rather used his displaced Armenian Canadians (and others) as 'a metaphor for a certain attitude or a certain perception of existence' (Arroyo, 1987: 17).

That perception grows out of being an exile or simply not feeling at home. In *Next of Kin* (1984), Peter (Patrick Tierney) starts out, much like his namesake in *Nobody Waved Good-bye*, in his bedroom listening to his parents downstairs argue about his future; but this Peter leaves home and constructs an improbable alternative identity as the long-lost son of an Armenian family. Van (Aidan Tierney) in *Family Viewing* (1987) renews contact with his ethnic roots, and eventually rediscovers his Armenian mother, through the family videos his father Stan (David Hemblen) is systematically erasing. In *The Adjuster* (1991), Noah (Elias Koteas) lives in a show home amid the wasteland of an unfinished housing estate with Hera (Khanjian), who may or may not be his wife and who comes from an unspecified war-torn country.

The one partial exception to this rule of imprecision is *Calendar* (1993), a small-budget film shot on 16mm and video that depicts the breakup between a photographer (played by Egoyan himself) and his wife (Khanjian) during a visit to Armenia to photograph churches for a calendar. Their journey through Armenia is intercut with sequences that take place after the photographer returns alone. These are presumably set in Canada but are confined entirely to his apartment, where he entertains a succession of young 'ethnic' women who all perform the same ritual of making a telephone call in their own language. The visual absence of Canada contrasts with the rich presence of the historical sites that are, however, then frozen and fetishized in a calendar for exiles living elsewhere. In Armenia, the photographer tells his wife that 'we're both from here but being here has made me from somewhere else', and, at the end, we hear her voice on his answering machine asking, 'Were you there? Are you there?'

Geoff Pevere suggests that Egoyan's films are 'about the desperate search for something like home in an era when technology threatens to erase the idea altogether', but he also points to how technology seeks to fill the gap when 'media become environments' (1995: 10, 17). One of the distinguishing features in the earlier films is the presence of video cameras and their low-resolution images that contrast with film images that seem more stable and permanent. If *Family Viewing* offers home video as a kind of electronic memory, it is an erasable memory, and Van also discovers that Stan can only make love with Sandra (Gabrielle Rose) if he records the act over tapes of his former wife, and then only when listening to erotic phone calls from sex-worker Aline (Khanjian). This film also included sequences shot with television cameras to suggest that family life corresponds to the formulas of television sitcoms.

The films explore the cultural effects of video as a medium, including its domestic, voyeuristic, and surveillance possibilities, but Egoyan argues that the video images also serve to make the spectator 'conscious of the process of fabricating the image' (Grugeau, 1989: 8). In so doing, they draw attention to the film camera as the 'absent presence of the filmmaker' and thus help to fulfill Egoyan's concern to make the audience 'aware that I am photographing people and to be deeply suspicious of my reasons' (Taubin, 1989: 29). His films thus grow out of a resistance to 'films which have the ability to make people think that what they're seeing is real' (Porton, 1997: 14).

This does not mean that the events depicted in Egoyan's films, like the school bus accident in *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), are not real. We see the bus skid off the road and slide across the frozen lake from the point of view of Billy (Bruce Greenwood), whose

children are on board and who is helpless to intervene. Katherine Monk comments that, 'had this scene been directed by someone like Steven Spielberg or Michael Bay, we would have seen a close-up of the ice on the road intercut with the bus wheels speeding along the pavement' and other devices to create suspense, excitement, and involvement (2001: 94). The effect of Egoyan's approach is not the denial of emotion, of which he has often been accused, but rather his recognition of the traumatic fact of the event and its impact on people who must struggle to come to terms with it. As Egoyan himself puts it, his style is designed to 'elaborate experience over incident' (1997: 23).

His films certainly do not invite easy emotional responses, partly because of the shifting tone and dark humour that they share with Arcand but also because of the mannered acting style that reveals the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd (Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, in particular).³ Because of what he calls his ongoing 'suspicion about what it means to be natural' (Porton, 1997: 12), his films constantly draw attention to the role-playing in which his characters engage and by which they define themselves. They often talk in clichés and their words are often surrounded with 'invisible inverted commas' (Coates, 1997: 24). In *Speaking Parts* (1989), for example, the film producer (Hemblen) repeatedly calls people 'special' even as he exploits them, which makes it difficult to believe him when he tells Lance (Michael McManus), the star of his new film, that he is making 'three of these suckers' at the moment but this one is 'special'. It also undercuts the desperate effort made by Lisa (Khanjian) to express her love for Lance by telling him that he is 'special'.

Most disturbing from the point of view of conventional acting styles, however, is that there is no sense of something hidden beneath the surface that could explain the characters' behaviour. For Egoyan, 'the concept of surface proves to be the most complex and intriguing aspect of any rendering of personality' (1993: 25). Yet he also insists that it is not his films that are lacking in emotion but a society in which 'overt emotional expression is not rewarded' (Pevere and Wise, 2004b: 76), as well as 'all these technological playthings [that] hold us at a distance from one another, while giving us the illusion of communicating' (Racine, 1989: 10).

The desire to communicate and the satisfaction that resonant images provide coexist in Egoyan's films with his sense that the illusion of communication prevents real communication and that images can be used to manipulate. He describes himself as 'torn between these two tendencies: I love making images, yet I'm suspicious of them' (Pevere, 2002: 20). By interweaving different stories, his narratives often create the impression that the characters do communicate, but usually unknown to themselves. In *Exotica* (1994) and *The Sweet Hereafter*, for example, flashbacks that seem to be triggered by the memory of one character end with a return to another character. What also pulls against the apparent coldness of the films is that their central pre-occupation, with what Amy Taubin nicely calls 'the relationship between so-called family values and . . . sexual desire' (1992: 18), is the very stuff of melodrama.

Some critics welcomed *The Sweet Hereafter* as a more openly communicative film and suggested that this was because it is not based on an original screenplay but adapted from a novel by the US writer Russell Banks. Yet it works very much like his other

films. As well as the bus accident, it deals with the relationship between two fathers and their daughters. Sam (Tom McCamus) has an incestuous relationship with Nicole (Sarah Polley), while Mitchell (Ian Holm) is estranged from Zoe (Caerthan Banks). In the film's final image, light shines through the window on Nicole while she is babysitting Billy's children. This is apparently a flashback, but it seems to represent her feelings of release after lying at the inquest, against her father's wishes, and thus foiling Mitchell's attempt to initiate a lawsuit. The fluid time scheme emphasizes the linear succession of sequences rather than their chronological relations (plot time takes precedence over story time), implying that the preceding events are an expression of the tensions experienced by Nicole because of her too-close relations with her father (and perhaps equally by the lawyer's guilt at being too far from his daughter).⁴

The outcome of the tension between the strong materials at the core of Egoyan's films and an awareness of their intricate organizational principles is a moral ambiguity not unlike that in Arcand's work. Tom McSorley refers to how the films generate 'states of epistemological uncertainty for characters and the audience alike' (2002a: 10), while Eleanor Ty suggests that 'it is not easy to find the moral of his films' because 'everything depends upon images; thus, everything lurks in the realm of the ambiguous' (1999: 11). Egoyan indeed insists that 'ambiguity seems to me essential for the credibility of a film', adding that he is not a 'moralist' (Racine, 1989: 11).

His films do, however, set up moral dilemmas that implicate the spectator in the making of value judgements. In *Speaking Parts*, for example, Clara (Gabrielle Rose) feels that the producer has betrayed her screenplay, a personal account of the death of her brother when he donated a kidney to save her life. Since Clara is a fairly sympathetic character and the producer a smug manipulator, it seems that we should side with the artist, but it is hard not to admit that his idea of using the format of a television talk show enlivens an apparently rather conventional, if deeply felt, script.

In *The Adjuster*, Noah describes his job as an insurance adjuster as sorting out what has value from what has not, and Hera, a film censor, replies that hers is the same. The film deals with the relations between 'value' and 'desire' in a society in which both are defined in economic and legal terms. Noah sleeps with his clients to help them overcome their 'shock' but, apparently, without any desire of his own, just as Hera tapes pornographic films for her sister to see while, apparently, not experiencing the arousal to which the other censors admit.

The ambiguity and uncertainty that underlie Egoyan's vision raise some troubling moral questions when applied to a historical atrocity. However, the event with which *Ararat* deals is one that is real (it ends with a caption that adamantly affirms this point) but denied. The effect of this denial is noted in the film when Raffi (David Alpay) points out that Hitler insisted that his plans would work by asking, 'who remembers the extermination of the Armenians?' Even the much better-known events of the Jewish Holocaust have been denied, and Steven Spielberg made *Schindler's List* (1993) to overcome the fading memory of the slaughter of the Jewish people. Egoyan's response is an implicit critique of films like Spielberg's that generate emotional responses based on the power of the image to simulate (and thus substitute for) the real.

At the opposite extreme is an event such as the attack on the World Trade Center, which was rendered highly visible thanks to modern communications technology. Egoyan has said that he does not know if he would have been able to make his film after September 11 (Pevere, 2002: 18), and the frequent comparison of the televised images to Hollywood disaster movies must have reinforced his sense of the merging of reality and illusion in postmodern culture (see Chapter 12). His resistance to this process is reflected in his decision to relegate the spectacle and action to a film within the film, also called *Ararat*, whose production in Toronto is one of the narrative strands that Egoyan weaves together.

This film reconstructs the events that took place in Turkey in 1915 much as Spielberg represented the Holocaust in Poland—or as the persecution of Hungarian Jews was depicted in Robert Lantos's own historical epic, *Sunshine* (István Szabó, 1999). However, Egoyan is not completely contemptuous of this film, which is being made by Edouard Saroyan (Charles Aznavour), a veteran French director of Armenian descent, and which at least (unlike most such epics) uses subtitles rather than requiring all the characters to speak English.⁵ As we shall see, images from the film in production become entangled with the memory and imagination of several characters, and Saroyan's film becomes just one layer in a complex exploration of the problem of finding an adequate way of convincingly representing the real horror of the event.

For the American critic Roger Ebert, this way of telling the story produces 'a needlessly confusing film' (Melnyk, 2004: 161), but more sympathetic critics saw it as a film about 'the impossibility of "truth" in storytelling' (Pevere, 2002: 15). Egoyan's story involves not only what happened in Turkey in 1915, and during the making of the film about it, but also the experiences of two troubled families in Toronto whose lives are affected by the production. Ani (Khanjian), an art historian who becomes a consultant on the film, is an expert on Arshile Gorky, the Armenian painter who survived the massacre as a child; her son Raffi, whose father was killed attempting to assassinate a Turkish diplomat, is having an affair with his step-sister Celia (Marie-Josée Croze), who blames Ani for the death of her father. Philip (Brent Carver), an attendant at the art gallery where Celia slashes a Gorky painting, is living with his lover, Ali (Elias Koteas), a half-Turkish actor who plays the governor in Saroyan's film; his disapproving father David (Christopher Plummer) is a customs officer, who questions Saroyan when he arrives to make the film and then interrogates Raffi when he returns from Turkey with cans of undeveloped film that may contain drugs.

What links all these stories is a concern with what Egoyan called, referring to the treatment of incest in *The Sweet Hereafter*, 'the politics of denial' (1997: 23). The personal and public stories are thus interrelated, as are the different layers of storytelling. These include Saroyan's film, Gorky's painting, Ani's lectures, a digital video made by Raffi during his trip to Turkey, and a book by Clarence Ussher, an American doctor who is played in the film by a Hollywood star, Martin (Bruce Greenwood), and whose eyewitness account was a vital resource for Rouben (Eric Bogosian), Saroyan's screenwriter, and for Egoyan in writing his own screenplay.

Egoyan's organization of this complex material can be illustrated by two sequences. After Saroyan's arrival at the airport, a cut takes us to a painter at work, identified by a caption as Gorky (Simon Abkarian) in his New York studio in 1934. His off-screen look cues shots of the young Gorky (Garen Boyajian) and his mother (Lousnak Abdarian) that seem to represent his memory but will later be located in Saroyan's film (it is not clear whether the shots in the artist's studio also come from the film). An apparent voice-over commentary becomes Ani's lecture on the artist, which is attended by Saroyan and Rouben and disrupted by Celia. In a later sequence, Raffi reads David a passage from the script in which a German nurse reports to Ussher about the torture of women, cueing images of her making the report (in German) and then of the events she is describing. As the women are stripped and abused, the camera moves to reveal Saroyan and his crew, followed by a shot of Gorky as a boy watching these events and a cut back to his older self in the studio.

This sequence, and another in which a woman is raped on a cart while her daughter hides beneath, raises questions, not only about the kind of movie Saroyan is making but also about their inclusion in Egoyan's film that apparently critiques that approach. However, looking and visual representation are never simple or innocent acts in Egoyan's films. After Ani objects to the 'poetic licence' that Rouben claims for his screenplay, she tells him that 'it is difficult for me to imagine these things', and there is an immediate cut to a battle scene from the movie, a translation of imagination into vivid images that substitute for her imaginative incapacity. Later, when Ani bursts onto the set to protest a historical inaccuracy, Martin (as Ussher) passionately attacks her as if she were actually interrupting the doctor's efforts to save a wounded boy.

The actor's identification with his character foreshadows the shots of the faces of Saroyan, Rouben, and Martin at the premiere, where they seem genuinely shocked and moved by their own creation. Their response to the emotional power of the images contrasts with Raffi's conclusion, in his comments to his mother on the soundtrack of his video, that 'there is nothing here to prove that anything ever happened.' If Egoyan's films stress experience over incident, *Ararat* makes clear that, as Jonathan Romney points out, there is also a 'need to reshape experience through creative discourse' (2003: 6). A film that protests the denial of a real event thus confirms Pevere's observation that Egoyan's films show that 'the more we yearn for authenticity, the more we seek artifice' (Pevere and Wise, 2004b: 64).

By the time David discovers that Raffi's film cans do indeed contain drugs, the long interrogation has convinced him that, despite his lies about shooting footage for a film that is already finished, Raffi was not unaware of their contents. He does not disillusion him and lets him go. David's story about what he has done then leads to the beginnings of a reconciliation with his own son. Like *Les Invasions barbares*, *Ararat* thus ends on a note of tentative hope that is inevitably ambiguous but that affirms the importance of the 'personal', while fully acknowledging the way personal experience is shaped by public discourses and by the complex interweaving of images and fictions that we take for reality. Perhaps what makes these auteurs Canadian emerges in the tension between the public and the personal.

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