

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH ATOM EGOYAN

In Canadian director Atom Egoyan's early films, such as *Family Viewing* and *Speaking Parts*, technology—in the form of home video and surveillance cameras—played a key role in complex, multilayered storylines. In addition to his fascination with technology, Egoyan is interested in the tangled nature of familial and personal relationships in the modern world. In 1995, Egoyan spoke at the Museum after the release of his breakthrough film *Exotica*, and discussed the formal themes as well as the deeply personal concerns of his films, including voyeurism, memory, obsession, and intimacy.

A Pinewood Dialogue following screenings of *Speaking Parts* and *Exotica*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (March 12, 1995):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Atom Egoyan.
(Applause)

We have a few minutes for questions, and then we're going to have to clear out the theater, so bring up the house lights.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: In your movies, music plays a large part in the overall effect. How much of your Armenian background is an influence?

EGOYAN: I think—the question is about music and how much of my Armenian background is sort of presented through the music and what does it mean. And for me the music that I heard as a child is really important because [it was] one of the few connections I actually had to my culture, because my family had moved to a small city on the west coast of Canada, and there wasn't a community to speak of. So the connections through music were really, really important.

I studied music, and my sister is a professional musician. So it's something that I feel very fluent in, and to the point where I think, especially in *Exotica*, a lot of the music was even composed before the film was made. So it's important for me to be listening to the rhythms while I'm shooting or designing shots. But it's just—I think very often in the films, the emotions are so suppressed and are so held back, and it's the music that suggests that

there is an emotional life when the actors or when the screen images might suggest the opposite.

And it's the music, especially in this film—in the first twenty minutes, it's only the music, really, that is able to create a sense of unity. But it's thought without mind. It's not something that's applied later on. And this film is using a very clear fugal sort of structure and use of counterpoint. And that's something that I think I feel very comfortable with. Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I've noticed that in most of your films—unusually, it seems to me—there's no reference to the place, the city where things are happening. I know that *Speaking Parts* is in Toronto only because I recognize the little signs in the subway. Is that deliberate? Are you wanting to leave out a sense of place? *Calendar* is the only film I remember that ever suggested that the film was in Canada.

EGOYAN: Well, yes. And I can't—it's really interesting as to why I've always felt uncomfortable with naming place. But for me it somehow was—it would root the film too much in a particular reality, when I always viewed landscape and geography as representing the character's state of mind, and in that sense I try to create a heightened sense of realism. So I think I've been cautious about being specific about the city because I thought that too much would then be placed on that city as being the reason why these people are in that particular state, as opposed to it being something more abstract. But *Calendar* was a breakthrough for me because it was the first time I was able to actually

identify Armenia, and I don't even know if I identified Canada, but I think I did, yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: One of the characters talked about it.

EGOYAN: Yes. So it was a breakthrough. But for me, something like *The Adjuster*, where you have that house that's sort of in the middle of nowhere—I mean, I think that that could be anywhere in North America. And that's been something that I think has been part of the project of the films—that sense of placelessness.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you think you need a certain life experience to create a work of depth?

EGOYAN: Well. (Laughs) Trick question! Boy. I think it's the other way around. Do you need a certain—I think creating works somehow contributes to a life experience somehow, and I'm not quite sure how to respond to that in anything but—I think my background is obvious in the film. But there comes a certain point where you overestimate the influences that certain aspects of your upbringing have had...but ultimately it's the only thing you're going to draw from. [To audience member] You obviously have a story you are just dying to tell.

But I think that in this case...I mean, let's say *Speaking Parts*. I worked in a hotel for five years in a laundry room not unlike that one. And as a matter of fact, it was very interesting: when we were actually building the set, it wasn't meant to be a set, it was meant to be location with the budget we had for this film. But the hotels in Toronto had a very peculiar bylaw, which didn't allow a laundry chute to connect floors because it was a fire hazard. But where I worked, that was such an important part of that job—was having to be stuck in the basement of this place and sorting through other people's dirty laundry, and then going up in this cart and collecting, you know, the laundry from these floors, putting it down a chute, and then descending again and going through it. So that was a very vivid experience for me.

I must say, the whole other professional world explored here, the film world. Well, when I was doing my TV work with the Hitchcock films, the absolute nadir of my professional life, which is not in this retrospective, I did the pilot of the *Friday the*

13th TV series. (Laughter) And in that case, none of the producers were ever actually in Toronto and we had to sort of communicate by phone. And they'd be watching rushes, and they'd be talking to me and giving notes over the phone, and that's how I got the idea of this movie [*Speaking Parts*] with the idea of a production coming to town. So yes, there are explicit ways you use your experience and ultimately it is the only thing you can draw from, I think.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I noticed there's a "thank you" to Wim Wenders in the credits. I was wondering if he was an influence.

EGOYAN: Yeah. This is about the "thank you" to Wim Wenders. Well, this was the film I made right after he had done this incredible gesture at the Montreal Festival of New Cinema and Video, where he'd won the prize for *Wings of Desire* and I'd won an honorable mention for *Family Viewing*—and on stage he gave me his prize. So it was a really amazing gesture. And that had a lasting effect on me, certainly. It's still the thing that people keep mentioning as though it happened yesterday, though in my mind it sort of did, but it was just a very magical experience. So yeah, there was a reference in the thanks to him for that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was going to say the situation there was interesting. The idea that a writer, even though he wrote the story about what happened to him or her—at the last minute they change it totally around. Does it happen a lot?

EGOYAN: Oh, yeah. Panic is one of the operating principles of any film production. Like people suddenly have ideas that they have to change or suddenly something is going to fix the situation. And I think a lot of it is people sort of manipulating and being able to assert their own power, and so it happens all the time. And actually there [are] so many odd stories associated with the making of this particular film, including one person who is convinced that I based this film on a particular experience that she had. And it's very, very odd, given what the film was about and given the ongoing effect that this person has had on my life, because now she thinks that every film I've made is based on something in her life and that I have direct access to her subconscious somehow. And it's very bizarre.

This past week, the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police], which is our national police, came into my studio and said, "Look, there's a claim against *Exotica* now," and they're actually investigating it. And I thought—given what this movie is about, and notions of ownership and appropriation—just thought it was very, very strange that that particular experience is [inaudible]. And actually the only thing she is accusing me of is the scene where you see the brother in the hospital with tubes coming out of his body—that that happened to her father. So it's quite funny. And given what the movie is about, it's also sort of sad. She actually—when *Exotica* was being presented at the Cannes Film Festival, she sent off a letter to Cannes asking them to stop the screening of the film. And it's just funny how these things sort of invade your life. But, sorry, I had to get that off my mind! (Laughter) Sort of an ongoing thing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, I was wondering, it seems a common theme in this film and in *Exotica*, there seems to be a connection between eroticism and loss.

EGOYAN: Well, I think that our sexual life is one of the ways that we transcend our experience, and it's so vital. And when you're looking at characters who have been damaged or who are suffering from a sense of grief or mourning, that's going to affect their sexuality. It's either going to infuse it with a sense of despair, or it's going to twist it in some way. I don't believe that you can remove someone's sexual identity from the other aspects of their personality. It's one of the most—the clearest windows we have into where that person is situated. So it's not as though one starts for the other. The two go hand in hand.

I don't know how this is affecting him [referring to his young son Arshile]. (Laughter) I mean, I'm sure at some point—it's just bizarre. We are at a point now where we can't sort of leave him with other people, and so he's, like, on stage, and—talk about *Family Viewing*! I've no idea what you're privy to. This is years of therapy!

SCHWARTZ: Well, we'll stop right now before we...(Laughs) Anyhow, thanks for coming.

Introduction to a screening of *Exotica* and the short film *For Arshile*:

SCHWARTZ: And it's really thrilling for us to have Atom here at this moment in his career, because this was kind of anticipated as being a breakthrough film for him, and the dream is becoming a reality. It broke the box-office records at the Angelika last week, where it took in \$57,000 in its first week. Not to dwell on money here, but \$25,000 is considered good for an opening, so this is really opening terrifically, and it's opened wide this weekend in a lot of theaters around the country. So it's really exciting to see this happening for Atom, and we're really thrilled to have him here. Tomorrow he's going to Brussels, where he's getting the best-film-of-the-year award. He won an award from the French film critics for the best foreign film, so it's really an exciting moment. He's here to introduce the short film and *Exotica*. Please welcome Atom Egoyan. (Applause)

EGOYAN: Thank you. The really exciting news is that we're sharing the \$57,000 that it grossed at the Angelika after the screening. (Laughter) We're just going to just suspend it on the ceiling, and it's just going to float down! (Laughter) I'd like to introduce my partner in life and art, Arsinée Khanjian, at the back.

The short film was a really interesting project. I was asked—six directors were asked to make a four-minute film [that] was a contemplation on a work of art that really had left an impression on them. And I think the other directors include Jonathan Demme, and Krzysztof Zanussi, and a fellow Canadian, Guy Maddin. I'm not sure who the other ones are—Raul Ruiz, I think.

Anyway—but I thought about this, and actually our son is called Arshile, and he's named after Arshile Gorky. And I thought that would be—so I decided to do a film based on *Portrait of the Artist and His Mother* by Arshile Gorky. And I did it in the form of a letter to Arshile describing his name and why he has his name. So it's very, very personal, and we just really literally saw it, got the print at the end of last week. So you're the first people to see it. And probably the only people who'll see it on film, because it's intended for broadcast on BBC. So we will be here after the screening, and please enjoy. Thanks. (Applause)

Discussion following screening of *Exotica*:

SCHWARTZ: (Sound of baby talking) Arshile might have to come up here. And I just want to introduce again Arsinée Khanjian (Applause), who I think has appeared in all of your features starting with *Next of Kin*. And they were legally married in '93. What I want to start with, in terms of *Exotica*: In some ways it's such a different film from anything you've made because it's relatively straightforward for you in terms of narrative style. And it's obviously got commercial appeal and has been doing very well. So I just want to ask you, kind of basically, what you feel about the success and reception of the film. And what's your reaction to that?

EGOYAN: Well, it's interesting because I'm a bit overwhelmed by the commercial response to it. I think that I wasn't aware, or I didn't consciously set up to make the film more accessible or to alter my style, but I think there are a couple of factors at play. The film is set in a strip club, the film is called *Exotica*, and there are a number of images that that creates in people's minds. Now, I wasn't aware of that. I know it sounds naïve, perhaps, but I wasn't thinking of that as I made the film. But there's also a sense of spectacle in the movie. And the whole use of music and the creation of that club, I think, really grounds the film in a place where the central location where people want to go back to, as opposed to let's say, in the other films, where the central locations or the central sites were very disturbing but in a way that was a bit more visceral. This one—the stories that connect these people in that place [are] certainly very disturbing, but I think the club itself is just so exciting to be in. And I think we were aware of that when we were shooting as well. As we started shooting the film, and I actually saw this club evolve, it was just very, very exciting to transform this warehouse into this place. And then you populate it with people. And it's funny, because you are creating that club, in effect.

SCHWARTZ: In terms of the conception of this film, you had done some interesting, really varied projects immediately before this. You did *En Passant*, which was a short film, [and] *Gross Misconduct*, which we are showing next week, but people here haven't seen because it was a made for TV, a CBC kind of experimental bio film. And then *Calendar*, which is completely

uncategorizable, a kind of personal film with narrative elements. So can you kind of talk about how *Exotica* evolved?

EGOYAN: Well, it was a really interesting time after *The Adjuster*. Because in a way, *The Adjuster* was positioned to be the breakthrough film. When that was taken by Orion Classics, it was supposed to have the type of release that *Exotica* is enjoying now. But what happened was that Orion went into bankruptcy, and it was an awful period of my life. And I must sort of preface this by saying—because there was an article that appeared in *New York Magazine*, which actually chronicled this very funny sort of period when I came to New York to do press for that. And I was in the Orion offices, and in the background, as I was talking to a journalist, there was a glass wall, and I could see boxes being moved out. (Laughter) It was just so demoralizing. And anyway, this piece was printed in *New York Magazine*, and some of the people who were involved with Orion Classics at the time took offense because they thought I was criticizing them, and I wasn't. Because they made the decision to buy the film, and they were very excited about it, but they just obviously were caught in this terrible, terrible situation.

And so it really came out in a very haphazard way. And I thought that was, like, my big shot. I thought that that was going to be it—if I didn't cross over with that movie, I never would. So the period right after the release of *The Adjuster* was an interesting one for me because I didn't quite know what I was going to do next. And we took *The Adjuster* to the Moscow Film Festival, and it won this prize for—you know, a special jury prize, and attached to this award was a million rubles to make a film in the Soviet Union. (Laughter) And at the time, that was really a considerable amount of money, because the average feature film in the Soviet Union was 800,000 rubles. And I got very excited because I thought, "Well, here's a chance to make a film in Armenia," which was then part of the Soviet Union.

But in the course of the next year, not only did the ruble devalue to the point where it ended up being worth—well, I think now it's worth three hundred dollars, a million rubles...and also the Soviet Union split up. So Soviet Armenia became an independent country, and the prize wasn't there anymore. And I thought, "Oh, God, great, another

opportunity blown.” But then this German TV station said, “Okay, if you can make this for, like, \$80,000 you have total freedom.” And I thought, “Well, this is it.” So I just dove into that project.

And at the same time, I was doing this television project which was proposed to me, which is one of the greatest Canadian gothic stories, about this boy. You’ll see it next week, and I’m really curious. I wish I could be here. It’s the story that all Canadians know about, about this boy called Brian Spencer who is from a small town in northern Canada and whose father was possessed that his kid should become a hockey player and trained this kid and transformed him into this NHL star. Brian was invited into the NHL.

And the night he was playing his first game that was being broadcast nationally on the CBC, the father went out and bought a new antenna so that he could watch his son in this remote village in northern Canada. And what happened, though, was that night the CBC, the national broadcasting corporation, decided not to broadcast the game in that part of the country. And the father flipped out, and got a rifle, got into his car, and drove a hundred miles to the local television station and held it hostage, demanding that they broadcast his son’s game. And at the very moment—and this is just the most amazing bit of synchronicity—at the very moment that Brian Spencer, his son, was being interviewed between periods, on air in the Eastern part of the country—at that precise moment the national guard, the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police], ambushed the television station and shot the father dead.

So it’s just like this epic tale. And the material was irresistible. So it just came up at that time. So you really have very little control over when projects are proposed to you. You think you do, and you think that these are things that you can sort of steer, but I think after *The Adjuster* it was just this period where I was just floating a bit. And then *Exotica* came up as a response to those two different types of projects. Everything is in response to what you’ve done before. And I find if I could keep that approach to my filmmaking, I’d be really happy. It gets more and more difficult, though, because you are invited to go in a certain path, and you have to really make certain choices and decide what it is you are actually getting into.

I think the rules are always pretty obvious, so it’s always shocking to me how filmmakers sort of stumble into a project and later on sort of say, “I lost control over it,” or, “I wasn’t able to make the film I wanted.” And if you look at the origin of those projects, I think the ground rules are always pretty clear. And very often just rushing into something without thinking, what is the possible worst-case scenario? Just try to—with the exception of the American television shows that I did, I’ve always had a lot of control over the films.

SCHWARTZ: It also seems that you pick projects where you kind of get into them but then are exploring along the way. You talk about rejecting scripts because you can kind of see everything, and there’s nothing left to explore cinematically.

EGOYAN: Well, that’s the other really difficult decision. Sometimes you’re given a script or a project which you would love to watch, you would love to spend two hours of your life watching, but then you have to make the decision as to whether or not you want to spend two years of your life making it. And you also have to think, “Well, is this something that I would be interested in for about four months or three months, and what happens then?”

My worst nightmare is to throw myself into something and then right before the shooting begins realize that you’ve exhausted all your own ideas about it, or you’ve just become bored with it. Because that shows up on screen. And it’s always so obvious when that happens. And to me the most exciting projects are the ones where there’s an alchemy involved, and you don’t quite know what the final product is going to be, but you just try to combine those elements and just see how it works out. And in an industry which is so governed by panic, where people are so unsure of whether or not something is going to work, and especially now with test screenings and market screenings, where people are so prone to kind of want to change things and to fiddle with things, you just have to really guard yourself from that.

SCHWARTZ: Now, is this different in Canada, where there is more of a tradition of non-narrative films or documentaries, experimental films, and government-supported feature filmmaking?

EGOYAN: Yeah. I think that one of the advantages of working in Canada is that you are working in a situation where, when a film is finished you can certainly—if it gets invited to be presented within the American system, it's there as a final product [that] is ready to be exploited. But the actual making of the film is at a remove from the industry. You just don't have the same types of pressures. It's interesting, because even if—I remember I was talking to David Cronenberg about this—even when you do studio films in Canada you do still have that sort of slight buffer. And it's a psychological effect more than anything else, because of course the notion that Canada in terms of distance is not—there's no physical distance. It's not like Australia. If you talked to an Australian filmmaker they will actually talk about the psychological effect of having the physical distance away from the industry, but that's not the case in Canada. It's just, you don't have the type of—you're not under the magnifying glass as much. That's in the process of changing, I think.

SCHWARTZ: *Family Viewing* was noted for its interest in technology and surveillance cameras, and its use of video footage versus film footage. It seemed with your earlier films that you were really interested in that aspect. And in a way you've moved away from that. We don't see those kinds of issues explored so much in *Exotica*. What's interesting to me is that that's happening at a time when we're so infiltrated by media now and the kind of media frenzy, and the importance of talk shows in our culture has grown so much. That's really exploded since you made *Speaking Parts*.

EGOYAN: Yeah. It's funny watching the last reels of *Speaking Parts* now in terms of what's happening with television talk shows and the sort of urgency of these shows—the fact that those very mundane sorts of events are somehow conflated into these monumental occurrences. I think what happened is just that I felt when you become very identified with a certain style and certain technique that you feel very close to, you also run the risk of self-parody. And it seems especially so in film. And I think that a visual artist is able to go a lot further to identify a certain style to work within, but a filmmaker always has to be aware of the point at which an audience is becoming too comfortable with a certain technique and they're not really being positioned

psychologically in the way that you might intend them to be. Because a lot of my films almost invite a sense of displacement on the part of the viewer. But if the texture of the video becomes too comforting because they know how it's been used and they know what it means in terms of the works, then it defeats its purpose.

So I think that I was really aware in *Exotica*—the themes and the ideas are very similar, but I'm trying to use a different way of showing how people slip into a world of image, and that those images don't have to necessarily be technologically oriented, they can also be more sort of theatrical in a sense. So instead of a video screen, you have a schoolgirl's uniform. And you have to wonder, why is she wearing that uniform, what does that uniform signify? You know, how does it work as a filter or a buffer to the different levels of psychological pain that these people are trying to deal with? So it's just a different device, but the themes, I think, are similar.

SCHWARTZ: The situation with the father bringing home the babysitter—there was a story that this was an idea that helped spark the film for you, just thinking about—

EGOYAN: Oh, babysitters are fascinating. It's, like, the first time that an adolescent woman is usually alone with an older man. And when you think about the responsibility that you are placing on a relative stranger to look after your child and all of the things that—the notion of home, the notion of caring, the notion of a domestic sort of life and someone guarding that while you are away from the hearth; there's something almost mythological about it. But it all gets reduced at the end of the evening to a drive home.

And what do people talk about during a drive home? You can't afford to be silent because that becomes really uncomfortable. So you talk about what? You talk about school, you talk about—I'm always fascinated by situations where people have to talk. And there's something very—even this. (Laughter) It's interesting. The words that just sort of come out are an attempt to sort of deal with other tensions that are at play. And I find that there is a level of absurdity that I find really appealing in those types of situations. Because things come out that are unexpected.

And it's kind of funny—I guess now it's public knowledge, but I remember, "What is the origin of *Exotica*?" And there is a very specific origin in terms of my own private mythology, but I just didn't want to talk about it, really. And then it was very interesting with *The New York Times Arts & Leisure* piece: Janet Maslin had called and talked to Arsinée and Arsinée said, "Well, it's based on this discovery of a former girlfriend [of Atom's] having had this incestuous relationship." And it was something I would never have said. It was just so funny that suddenly it's in *The New York Times*. And it's kind of trumpeted out. So then I get a call from Miramax saying, "Well, why didn't you tell us that before? It's great material!" (Laughter) And the cat gets out of the bag in very strange ways.

SCHWARTZ: One thing that is also consistent with *Exotica* and your other films is this kind of counterpoint storytelling style. I called it a straightforward film, but there are always—even with *Gross Misconduct*, which is a TV movie—these parallel story lines. We follow the Brian Spencer story, then the father on a separate track. And you've said this kind of fugal style, as you've called it, comes from the combination of your background in music and also channel-hopping, just switching channels on TV.

EGOYAN: Yeah. I think that channel-hopping has sort of rendered surrealism as a device rather redundant, because we're constantly, from a very early point as children, just aware of totally incongruous montage. And things being put together in ways that make absolutely no sense, but which we have to absorb as some sort of a continuity. And so I think that affects certain ways that we perceive image. So I really do find that when I'm structuring films, I'm always aware of the notion of attention span; of when I need to switch off a scene.

I find this idea of moving through different stories at the same time very natural. It's not as though I have a linear story and then I break it up. To me it's just the way I think and they say I tend to structure, and it comes out very naturally. It's interesting to me how some people are able to absorb it and other people really resist it. It's just something that is very difficult, because a lot of people need to have some sort of reference—because when is the flashback

signaled, and how is that signaled? As opposed to taking advantage of what film does best. To me, one of the most inspiring books I read, I remember, was [Andrey] Tarkovsky's *Sculpting in Time*, which is what film is. Film is just a recording of real time, and the ability to put a film together is how you arrange those small fragments of time into this other entity.

And to me it's very natural in that process to be using time in a very fluid way, especially when you are dealing with issues of memory and where we situate ourselves in terms of our own relationship to experience. In this film, it's called *Exotica* and there are all these sort of exotic locations, exotic flesh colors, exotic sexualities, and exotic music. But ultimately what's most exotic is the people's own relationship to their own memory and to their own family, to the things that should be closest to them, but somehow become exoticized, if that's a word. They become somehow held at a remove, and they become something else. You have this father who's mourning the loss of his daughter, but the way he's chosen to do that only situates him further away, and in fact exaggerates his process of grieving to the point where it becomes ridiculous for them. And he's now tormenting himself over incestuous fantasies that he never even had, but which have been triggered by the source of therapy that he's chosen.

SCHWARTZ: There seems to be a real ambivalence expressed in your films about the power of images that characters are always trying to grasp images and hold onto them and look at videotapes to deal with their memories, which in one sense is powerful. But you also question what's really there, like what can you really grasp?

EGOYAN: Yeah, I think it's very interesting. Before we had *Arshile*, I was very, very suspicious about why people videotape their families. I used to think that, well, it was to create some sort of emotional barrier, but now it's so obvious that it's to do with the fear of the passage of time. A child grows up so quickly and goes through all these different stages, and you just don't feel you can absorb it all.

So the need to document is just so comforting somehow. It's like this sense that you can suspend time, and that it's there to review, and that it's true that our memory works in a sort of fluid, organic

way so we don't quite remember what a child was like at six months or at three months. And yet the idea that we have these personal archives that we can access becomes very comforting. Even if we never look at them. It's like that idea of people who have VCRs, and they miss a show on television, but they set their VCR so it tapes it. And it's so interesting how rarely, actually, people go back and look at those shows, but still they have the sense that they have it, that it's there. So it's like this technology is there, is an extension of their own memory process. And that's only going to become more and more accentuated with the new technologies that are being introduced every day. And at what point do these technologies actually serve as metaphors for our own relationship to our consciousness? The things that we don't understand about the way we feel somehow become either reduced or enhanced by these symbols.

SCHWARTZ: Do you think that video has really changed the way we experience things? One thing that you've said in one interview is that if you do an action that you think of as being documentable, that somehow makes the experience more real.

EGOYAN: Actually, I was probably clumsily paraphrasing that from an Italo Calvino short story called *The Photographer*, where this character comes to the realization that photographs somehow make his life seem more full. And then at that point you have to make a decision that either you live every moment of your life as though it was being photographed, or you determine your actions as though they were worthy of photographic representation—one route leads to stupidity and the other to madness, but I don't remember which is which. (Laughter) One of those things that you always think you should remember in situations like this but never do.

SCHWARTZ: I do have to ask you what got you into film because you talked about having a background in music and also theater, and film just seems like such a perfect medium for you.

EGOYAN: It's funny, because my fantasy was always to be a playwright, and I started writing plays when I was really young. And I always really loved the idea of creating these worlds where people could behave exactly as I wanted them to, as opposed to

the world around me, which never quite seemed to work that way. I wanted to be a playwright, but I never really found a voice as a playwright. I never felt that my plays—they always seemed to derive from other works that influenced me.

And then when I made my first film, I immediately felt that the camera was this personality, was a person who's watching this action, as opposed to just being a device that would record action; it was actually something that defined someone's gaze. And I thought that was just so elegant as a device. So this notion of—in the earlier films that becomes quite literal, where there are people who are missing, like in *Next of Kin*—the device never really worked in that film. There's one moment where there is a therapy session, there's a video camera watching this family who has a missing child, and the therapist says at one point, "Okay, let's pretend that I'm your missing son." And at that point, magically, the video camera sort of drifts off its tripod and begins to hover around the scene as though it was someone watching it.

That point just never really came across. It seemed more like a docudrama device. But the idea that somehow there are all these people that we miss or these people that are absent from our lives that we need, and somehow this idea that they are watching us, which is something that many of us sort of entertain and carry as a very sort of calming attitude... But the idea that we actually have an instrument that can show that and can participate in the drama that way is really exciting. So now in filming *Exotica*, yes, there is the missing daughter and all these people are grieving her absence, and even if it's not literal, I'm aware of that notion going into the design of the film—that there is this missing person who is watching these people deal with the consequences of her loss. And I find it very—it just roots me, and it positions me as a filmmaker in a very solid way.

SCHWARTZ: I want to give time for questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you have any advice for budding filmmakers?

EGOYAN: It's advice for making first films. It's so great now to be able to have this small little camera that records sound and image so inexpensively. It's

something that ten years ago, fifteen years ago, required so much capital and manpower—to be able to just record synchronous sound—and now it's very contained. So I really do believe—and I know that there's a school that is against any filmmaker saying this, but I'm of the feeling that if you shoot anything on 8mm video, if it's really good, it will find its way. And I'm always surprised, given the quality of transfers now that more films aren't being shot in 8mm.

People still they feel they have to get together the type of budget you need to shoot in 16[mm], and 16 is such an antiquated form now. I was aware of that when I was making *Calendar*, not so much in terms of film but, let's say, sound. It's ridiculous trying to work with 16 mag, which [is] what I was trying to go back to after ten years. The technology is just disappearing. So I think that the important thing is just to make images and not to wait until...

Let's say if you want to direct films, you don't want to be on the set of a big film. It's just confusing. It has absolutely nothing to do with how you're going to make your first film. And I've been in situations where there have been apprentice directors who have been on one of the bigger shoots, like, let's say, *Exotica*, and it's just daunting to them because it actually takes them further away from what they have to do. So I don't agree with that idea of hanging around a film set. I think it's just finding your own way of making images.

SCHWARTZ: How hard was it to get [your first feature film] *Next of Kin* made? One thing you did in that was a lot of long takes. You did some very long shots in that.

EGOYAN: Yeah. Well, I think that was the key. We'd shoot these very, very long master shots. Because when we start getting into coverage, you just start going through film stock, and it's very scary. And I was aware of that, and I just wanted to...and that was about the time that *Stranger Than Paradise* came out, and they used long takes, and it was really inspiring as well. I hadn't seen that film, I guess, at the time, but it just seemed so logical to make the film that way. It was difficult to get the funding together because it was really just pieced together on arts council grants and money that friends and I had saved and stuff like that...But

again, that movie, now, I would not have hesitated shooting in 8mm video.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How do you find acting in your own films, and how do you decide whether or not to do it? You had a big part in *Calendar*—

EGOYAN: Well, I really didn't want to be in *Calendar*. I don't identify myself as an actor, and technically I had no choice, because we shot this stuff in Armenia, and I was behind the camera, and the idea was to come back to Canada and have another actor dub over my voice in the Armenian scenes, and have that person play the date scenes. But what happens is that there is so much overlapping dialogue in the stuff we did in Armenia that I had—we couldn't clean it up, we couldn't separate the tracks, so I had to be in it.

And it was really, really difficult because, at first, I didn't take it seriously until an actor I had worked with who happened to be there fortunately said, "Look, you know, you have to take this more seriously. You have to do all the things that you would do with us. You have to take on the responsibility." And at that point I realized that I don't identify myself—I have too much respect for what an actor does to be able to say, "Oh, I can do that." I think it works in the movie, but someone was coaching me and was directing me. It's a real craft, and I have just a lot of respect for what an actor does. I don't think I'd rush into doing another film. But if there are any offers...

SCHWARTZ: How has working with actors changed over the years?

EGOYAN: I think that in the early films I was really interested in stylizing the performance, having these people—it's interesting. Because I really find that even though people might look at the early films as being very stilted and wooden in their acting, that's actually what I wanted. In *Family Viewing*, I wanted those people to be reduced to that, to speaking in this very stiff, uncomfortable way. And the problem is, when you're starting in films, that people don't know how far to go in trusting the filmmaker. They don't quite know whether or not these are the intended effects, or whether or not it's just the result of the budget of the film, or [that] you can't get a more naturalistic performance. But that film is exactly as I intended.

And I wouldn't have made it any differently. Right down to the way the stuff in the condominium that's shot like a really bad low-budget soap opera—all of that was shot in video with live switching and the transfer to film. And I just find it's—I like the tone of those films. But *Calendar* was a breakthrough, because it was the first time I was sort of improvising. So it was a lot looser.

I think a lot of that was brought to *Exotica*. Just letting people sort of go with their own stories. Because, on the other hand, I adore the films of Mike Leigh and the effects that he is able to get through an intense, intense period of rehearsal and living with the actors for months and being able to shape material in a sort of collective way. That's so satisfying and so rich. But it's very difficult to do here with the situation with unions, and you just can't afford to do that to an extent. Unless, again, it's your first film, and you can sort of avoid all that stuff. You can just actually take advantage of what freedoms you're given as a result of not having a budget.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How did you get your budget?

EGOYAN: Arts councils, which are dying of course here, as they are in Canada...but the equivalent of an NEA grant, and stuff like that. That system is not really what it was.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: When you started making your first film, you were given money. Was it hard for you to keep control? Did you have people produce?

EGOYAN: No, no. I was the sole producer of those films. And I still—even [with] *Exotica*, the way the film is made is structured around having control over the final product.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Seems like [in] a lot of the films you've made, you don't intend to have any laughs per se, yet there is nervous laughter in the audience sometimes. I'm just wondering, do you put any thought into making the audience feel awkward at certain times or uncomfortable?

EGOYAN: Oh, yeah! (Laughter) To me there's something really mischievous about all that. And especially—you don't make a film like *Exotica* with that sort of title and the images one associates with that... On the other hand, I want you to enjoy that

process of feeling self-conscious. I think it's part of the dialogue that the film proposes. What are you expecting to see? And how far do you think this is going to go? When this stripper comes out of the dressing room as a schoolgirl, you're supposed to squirm. You're supposed to wonder, "What is this filmmaker up to? Where is this going?" When the guy is driving home a young woman and gives her money—and of course you're supposed to squirm, because, "Oh, my God, he can't touch her in the club, so he hires this young hooker," and at the end of the conversation it's like, "Say hi to your dad." And it's like, "Oh, my God! How sick is this?" And those are the images, those are the times in cinema that I find really exciting, when you just don't know how far this is going to go. You can't believe what you think you're about to see. I think that there is humor to that. I think that there is a lot of humor in the films, but it's not where you'd expect it.

I think that I expect that—when I make these films I have the highest expectation of my viewers' curiosity. Otherwise I couldn't really make these movies this way. So I have to assume that people trust me, trust the fact that it's all going to come together in some way, that there is an emotional logic to it, but also are prepared to have a bit of play with it. Because for all the seriousness of the subject matter, as I said, there is a lot of mischief in the filmmaking. I think we're prepared for that. You can't make films anymore and think that the process of filmmaking is somehow mysterious. It's not. I think that's what's really changed in our generation—that we all know what goes into the making of a film. Here you have a whole museum dedicated to it; it's to deconstruct what it takes to make an image. That's part of our vocabulary going into the movie. Let's take advantage of that.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Was *Calendar* ever released in Armenia or distributed? Did you ever get a feeling of what people there thought?

EGOYAN: Yeah, it's difficult. One of the odd decisions I made, and I kind of regret now, is that that film was never blown up to 35, and it's difficult to show a film in 16 in Soviet Armenia, or Armenia now. And you know, from the times I have screened it to Armenians from Armenia, it doesn't make a lot of sense. Because it's very much about being outside of Armenia, and it's very much about the diaspora experience of Armenia, and the whole

dramatics or logic of it doesn't make a lot of sense if you are from there. It just doesn't.

So on the one hand I want to show it, but—oh, I'll give you a funny story: One of the co-producers from Armenia who did see it never really told me what he thought. And then he saw *Exotica* in Greece, and he was just relieved because he loved *Exotica*, and he said, "I just really didn't get *Calendar* at all." And it's interesting. I think *Exotica* would go over much better in Armenia than *Calendar* would. I mean, one of the things I learned about being there was that the amount of energy and time and emotional projection that the diaspora sort of projects into Armenia is not reciprocated. They are just not as curious about what Armenians are doing outside as Armenians outside are curious about what goes on there. And in a way that makes sense, right? They think that if you really felt passionately about this country you'd be there. So there are a lot of really strange sort of forces at play when you sort of begin to look at that dynamic.

SCHWARTZ: How ambivalent are you about that, or how interested—the character you play in *Calendar* is kind of very self-involved and diffident.

EGOYAN: I guess it's my own worst nightmare of myself. I was not that threatened about being there. As a matter of fact, it was the other way, around. In a way Arsinée was a lot more scared about being there because she was raised within the Armenian community, and she had all these images of Armenia being this complete utopia. And she was so frightened of having those images crushed, that for her it was quite painful to be there. And I just didn't have any of that baggage going into the country. So I think in some ways I was really open while I was there, and not the character I was playing at all.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Whatever the initial inspirations might have been for *Exotica*, whether it was babysitting or personal history, I wondered if you could speak for a moment about the writing and development of the film before you began production.

EGOYAN: Well, the writing of *Exotica* was something that—there [were] a number of different scripts or attempts at scripts I had made before that were abandoned or just didn't seem to come together.

And as *Exotica* formed, I was able to pull different ideas that I'd explored—for instance, this idea of a relationship being formed during the search for a body. That was a very, very compelling backdrop for me, and it was something that I had intended to make a whole feature film on before. These people looking for a body—and over the course of this search or the course of the day, they had formed a relationship and had almost forgotten what they were looking for, and it had become very pastoral. And it was very real time. Almost like *Before Sunrise*, the [Richard] Linklater film, that sort of idea. It was just left at that. And then I had written this whole script about this babysitter, about this suburban community that was going through this very embarrassing collective crisis.

Basically, there was this amateur porn ring that was about to be discovered, and these people were terrified about what this was going to mean. But they couldn't even talk to each other about it because they were all so embarrassed. But they shared this babysitter that they drove home, and she became sort of [the] repository of all of their neuroses, and I got to the point where, even if they didn't need her services, they needed to drive her home because they had to talk. And she couldn't deal with that, and she began to farm out the services to other people at the school she was at, and it became a sort of therapy club.

Anyway, it was sort of a broad, almost farcical structure, which I wasn't really comfortable with, either. So things just sort of begin to evolve and cook. And it's also the most exciting part for me, when you're in the middle of the screenplay. And let's say the ending of the film, which I'm really proud of, didn't really come to me until the final draft. It's so mysterious, the process of writing where you can sort of make allusions to things without having to figure out what they mean. There was always that part where Christina said, "I do things for him. He does things for me." And I never quite knew what that meant. And then when I suddenly—the last scene was sort of given to me. I do believe these things are given to you. I don't know where they come from, but suddenly you have them. It was so emotional for me. And all I had to do was just go back to that statement and change it to the past tense. "He's done things for me." And so much of the film just clicked into place.

I think as a writer you only really solve these problems when you're actually in the process of writing. I think too often you kind of think you can just sort of go out and have a drink, but it always comes to me as I'm actually writing. To me the best part of making a film is writing and editing. Because you don't have the pressures of having to make your day or having to satisfy all these different sort of people around you and you're just alone with [the] material, and it's so, so exquisite.

SCHWARTZ: We actually have time for just one more question, and then we're going to join you outside. I have to ask a traditional closing question at this sort of thing, which is about your next film, which was announced already in *The New York Times*.

EGOYAN: Yeah, well, I have optioned this book by Russell Banks, who's an extraordinary novelist, and I'm so proud to have the rights to this great book called *The Sweet Hereafter*. Now, as to whether—I

don't know if it will be my next film, but it's certainly what I'm writing now. Russell himself told me you have to get over your awe over the book before you can write the script, and it's true. I'm just in such awe of what he's done with the form of the novel and how he's used that to tell the story, and I just have to try and work with it. But it's a great story. And I'm working on that now, and I've just never received as many scripts as last weekend. It's incredible. It's quite funny. People who haven't even seen the film—all of a sudden you become packageable. So it's an interesting time. I'm kind of exhausted because I've been reading all of these scripts. And, as I say, it's to me a huge issue because, would I ever have control over any of these projects? I don't know. And it's very important to me.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. Well, if anybody wants to have Atom sign a book, or you want to give him scripts—

EGOYAN: No, please don't! No scripts! (Applause)

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