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Jonathan Romney: Atom Egoyan

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Jonathan Romney has written a comprehensive study on the work of director Atom Egoyan, the Egyptian born Armenian who grew up and lives in Canada. Egoyan came to prominence at the beginning of the 90s with such films as *The Adjuster* (1991), and *Exotica* (1994) which won the International Critic's Prize at *Cannes Film Festival*. His enigmatic films revolve around issues of identity and ways of looking. He uses video within his films as a tool to embody consciousness. Up to *Calendar* (1993) characters primarily channel their investigation of the self through an analysis of video which "functions as a figure for psychic processes" (p.53). Characters often attempt to transform their own fate by narrating it. However, the emotional coldness shown between them and the ambiguous endings do not always make for simple viewing and trite analysis. Romney's task has to take the fact into consideration that the director himself has spoken frequently and perceptively about his own work. For Egoyan "dismantling its mystique and revealing the workings" (p.14) is integral to such self-reflexive film-making. It is another debate whether an artist is the best person to critique his own work but many of Romney's conclusions are similar to those of Egoyan himself and there is the doubt that the author has been unable to make a totally independent assessment of the director's work.

Having said that, Romney is a competent and enthusiastic guide through Egoyan's films. He writes that Egoyan "wants us to be active viewers, to play detective and look beneath images . . . to be prepared to unpack his images. . . . (p.1)", "to be absorbed into his dramas and to remain critically detached from them" (p.2). Romney plays the detective and leads us through the directors fixations.

The book concentrates on Egoyan's film work for TV and cinema, in chronological order, mostly ignoring his art in other media (directing operas, creating museum installations). After the introduction which gives us an overview of Egoyan's thematic concerns and a very short biographical summary, the book is divided into ten chapters, each of which predominantly deals with one of the director's feature films: *Next of Kin* (1984), *Family Viewing* (1987), *Speaking Parts* (1989), *The Adjuster* (1991), *Calendar* (1993), *Exotica* (1994), *The Sweet*

Hereafter (1997), *Felicia's Journey* (1999), *The Beckett Cycle* (2000) and *Ararat* (2002). Each chapter ends with a variety of reviews. These chapters are packed with detail and analysis – in fact, overloaded with analysis – however, this is a forgivable sin as the films themselves operate on many different levels: personal, social and political. And although Egoyan's films have been accused of being cold they work on an emotional level, too. Egoyan himself says, "There's nothing more vulnerable than showing people who are obviously trying to hold back an emotional agenda ." (p.2)

Clearly, many of the incidents in the films relate to real life occurrences in the director's life. For example, *The Adjuster* was inspired by an arson attack on his parents' furniture shop, but the one overriding thematic concern of Egoyan is "identity is . . . a construct, shaped by both the internal and external pressures brought to bear on consciousness" (p.2). This is particularly pertinent to him as he had denied his Armenian origins as a child and re-embraced them at university. In fact, "much of Egoyan's work can be read as dealing with the scars left by the disappearance or dispersion of people" (p.171). Unfortunately, details of Egoyan's upbringing and the influence of various family members and the wider Armenian community are fairly sketchy. His parents were painters and his sister became a concert pianist, so his reference points are unashamedly high-cultural, pop culture is seen in a malign light. One of Romney's few criticisms is that Egoyan's attitude to television is "highly moralistic, inflected with high-culture's traditional suspicion of the form" (p.55).

Egoyan usually collaborates with the same talent pool, including composer Mychael Danna, director of photography Paul Sarossy and editor Susan Shipton. An analysis which is conspicuous by its absence is a detailed examination of Egoyan's working relationship with his wife and leading lady Arsinée Khanjian, an Armenian born in Lebanon but brought up in Canada. She has appeared in all of his films, even playing the wife of a photographer played by Egoyan in *Calendar*. The photographer is never seen as he films his wife, "the viewer identifies with a character who is perpetually left out" (p.100). She tends to represent the more authentic 'Armenian' against which Egoyan measures himself.

I agree with Romney's conclusion that Egoyan's films are "genuinely inexhaustible in their richness and complexity . . . and . . . extremely satisfying for any viewer willing to engage with the contradictions of watching (p.14)", but in Egoyan's films "people rarely get what they want, the viewer least of all" (p.117) which can make them frustrating and inaccessible. This book can help you access the meaning of Egoyan's cinema.

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