

Speaking a/part: Modalities of Translation in Atom Egoyan's Work

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“I loved the feeling of being surrounded in a foreign conversation to which I had access. It made me feel both exhilaratingly outside and inside at the same time.” (Egoyan, 2004, pg 36)

The Canadian artist Atom Egoyan (b. 1960) is perhaps best known for his sustained inquiry into the nature of the image and the technology of the screen. From early films such as *Open House* (1982), which features a man projecting slides onto bed sheets in his own home, to features such as *Family Viewing* (1987) and *Speaking Parts* (1989) in which television and home video screens begin to proliferate as they are at once framed by and engulfing the cinematic image, to films such as *The Adjustor* (1991) and *Calendar* (1993) in which photographs take on fetishistic qualities, to a project he is working on at the time of this writing (2007) in which two characters in different movie theatres send images of what they are watching to each other over their cell phones, Egoyan has consistently set out to explore our relationships to the dominant image-making technologies of our time. The complexity with which he treats the image and image-making has been amply treated in the critical literature about his work.¹ However, I wish to make the case that Egoyan has also offered a sustained inquiry into the workings of languages and translation, work which is all the more important because at this time, much of the critical literature on globalization, transnationalism, migrancy, and diaspora is surprisingly silent on these questions, as indeed is much of the literature on Anglophone Canadian cinema.²

Egoyan is what Laura Marks has called an “intercultural” filmmaker and artist, by which she means he emerges from “a context that cannot be confined to a single culture” (Marks, 2000, pg 6). As the Egyptian-born son of Armenian immigrants to Victoria BC, brought up in a community that was the “last bastion of British Empire” yet feeling somewhat anomalous by being “born somewhere else with a difficult last name” (Egoyan, 2006, xiii), Egoyan occupies,

along with filmmakers such as Deepa Mehta, a central position in Canadian cinema but a position on the periphery of Canada's founding settler cultures of English and French.³ Beyond the borders of Canada, Egoyan's work equally reaches out to European and American highbrow audiences, accustomed to art-house and avant-garde cinema (witness the plethora of books on him in French, German, and Italian), and to audiences in the Armenian and other diasporas scattered throughout the world, accustomed to hybrid, more personal practices of filmmaking. He thus works simultaneously from and speaks to several centres and peripheries, remaining highly conscious of all modalities of translation—as transfer, transport, and travel—required to bridge the two.

Within a body of work is characterized by incessant movement across linguistic and cultural barriers as well as across the borders between media, Egoyan uses the idea of translation to probe epistemological issues around forms of knowing and truth, ontological issues around self and other, as well as socio-political issues around agency and authority. He does so in a way that lays out and critiques a range of models of both visual and verbal communication. Translation, Anne-Marie Wheeler remarks, “involves straddling the borders between two languages, two ways of organizing reality, offering a unique vantage point on the shape of the language systems that contain us” (Wheeler, 2003, pg 425). By touching upon some of the dimensions of Egoyan's implicit and explicit theorizing of the borders made visible by translation, I hope to uncover some aspects of his work that further confirm his importance as a thinker.

Originary Traumas: On Being Untranslatable

Beginning with translation as it is generally understood, as a movement across languages and cultures, it is important to note the paradox that Egoyan typically has refused to translate other languages when they appear in his work. Since the beginning of his career over twenty-five years ago, Egoyan's work has been powerfully polyglot, featuring large segments of untranslated dialogue—that is, neither subtitled nor paraphrased—in languages other than English.⁴ Much of this dialogue is in Armenian, which he has said functioned in his early films almost as a metalanguage because it was so foreign to viewers. But he also includes spoken French, Armenian, Arabic, Greek, and other languages without subtitling them. In Canadian cinema, the few films that are polyglot are generally verbose, multiplying dialects in order to create polyphonic soundtracks awash in a swirl of voices. But many of Egoyan's non-English speaking characters immersed in English environments, such as Van's mother (Rose Sarkisyan) and grandmother Armen (Selma Keliklian)

in *Family Viewing* (1987) and Seta, Hera's sister in *The Adjustor* (1991), are radically isolated by their foreignness, and remain essentially mute during their time on screen. Others such as Aline, the phone-sex worker (Arsinée Khanjian), in *Family Viewing*, and Celia (Marie-Josée Croze) in *Ararat* (2003) seem stunned—"in a state of shock," to quote from his *Adjustor*—as do many of his English-speaking characters when they are immersed in non-English environments such as Maury Chakin's character in French-speaking Montreal in *En Passant* (1992), and the assimilated photographer (Atom Egoyan) when he returns to his homeland of Armenia in *Calendar* (1993). By refusing to subordinate other languages to the increasingly global hegemony of English, Egoyan is also able to preserve the irreducible otherness of languages and cultures, and grant them a voice when they might otherwise be silenced. More importantly, by leaving other languages untranslated in his films, Egoyan reproduces in the viewer who does not understand them a sensation of alienation and disorientation that mimics the experience of his exiles onscreen.⁵ This sensation is a crucial part of the Egoyan aesthetic, and possibly one of the reasons audiences have accused his films of "coldness," because it allows him to take viewer and character to a crisis of meaningfulness from which new meanings, and new cognitive, sensory and ethical orientations can be generated.

It is in the handwritten manuscript of a play Egoyan wrote in 1975 (at the age of fifteen), called *The School*⁶ that Egoyan first attempts to sketch out the failures of communication as interchange, mutuality, and reciprocity (Peters, 1999, pg 8) that are at stake for individuals who find themselves immersed in communities where nobody speaks or understands their language.⁷ In this bit of juvenilia, a girl named Miss Magoo who speaks another language tantalizingly called "Marzipan" appears in a school causing havoc among those who only speak English. A Miss Griffin claims to have some ability to translate, but in one direction only, proclaiming "I can't speak Marzipan. I only understand it"

Miss Magoo: Lamewa

Miss Griffin: What did she say?

Miss Jiggins: I thought you understood the language.

Miss Griffin: Of course I do, I forgot, that's all. People forget things you know. ((Egoyan, 1975, pg 17)

Later, Miss Griffin's understanding is called into further question by a boorish authority-figure.

Miss Mitchell: You know I'm beginning to have doubts about you. I don't even think that you can understand what that girl is saying (pointing to Miss Magoo.)

Miss Griffin: Of course I can.

Miss Mitchell: Then what did she say she wanted to be?
(Pause)

Miss Griffin: A herring.

Miss Mitchell: A herring. We'll see if you're right.

Miss Griffin: How can you? She can't speak English. (Egoyan, 1975, pg 21–22)

As a first-generation immigrant thrust in an environment that has neither knowledge of nor interest in her origins, her culture, or her past, Miss Magoo's mother-tongue Marzipan further severs her from all forms of social exchange with English culture. Miss Griffin, who presents herself as the second-generation immigrant from the same culture as Miss Magoo, can understand the language (though she seems to be forgetting even that much) but can't speak it. She is able to conduct exchanges with the English-speakers around her, but she is unable to address and be understood by Miss Magoo. More importantly, she is also unable to confirm or deny whether what she thinks she understands from Miss Magoo is true, and since the two share a common heritage, it means that she is presumably disconnected from her parents and from her origins. Translation as communication—as something which permits an exchange or communion and ultimately, an intimate connection between human subjects—hovers just on the edge of impossible here in his earliest work, because of simple, yet vitally important logistical factors involving second-language acquisition and forgetting of the mother-tongue.

Egoyan echoes many of the core elements of this scene from “The School” in his 1993 film *Calendar* but in this mature work, he takes them further, developing not only the practical but also the psychological and epistemological dimensions of translation across languages in order to perform cognitive, sensory, and ethical reorientations for both character and viewer. The film traces the journey a diasporic couple (referred in the film's titles as the photographer and the translator) takes to their homeland of Armenia to take photographs for a calendar. He has forgotten his mother tongue, while she has retained it and is fluent in two languages. He remains disengaged from the landscape and its oral history recounted by their guide, while her relationship to this place of her birth is increasingly sensual. At the end of their journey, she remains in Armenia with the guide, while he returns home to obsess over her loss.

For the photographer, the journey functions like a photo negative—or untranslated mirror image—that recapitulates his childhood migration from Armenia to North America, leaving him outside of conversations, incapable of grasping the insights they yield, unintelligible to others, and marked as an outsider. Towards the end of the film, the photographer discusses with an escort (from Egypt, Egoyan's own birthplace) the strangeness of our habit of maintaining one's ancestors' ethnic identities even after being assimilated into a new culture. In the process, he recalls his childhood experiences encountering the English language for the first time. Like the earlier character of Miss Magoo, the photographer is cut off from his peers:

Photographer: No, it was really difficult, I mean, at the beginning, because I actually didn't speak any English at all, and ah, like I can remember this one time where I was on the beach and there were all these kids and they were all singing like "Yellow Submarine," and I didn't know the words and all I could hear was like "yalla submarine," like "yalla submarine." So I started singing with them and I was going like "yalla submarine, yalla submarine." It was completely ridiculous. I mean you're so vulnerable to that right when you're a kid, I mean you just sort of like, you just sort of imitate like what you think other people would want to hear but it doesn't really have anything to do with what you are feeling or, you know, what's going through your mind or anything like that.

Although the difference between "yellow" and "yalla" is so minute as to indeed seem ridiculous, there are at least two sources of anxiety for their speaker in this scene recollected from childhood. The first concerns his lack of comprehension of what the other kids are singing. Instead of meaningful words, he hears and repeats only phonemes, detached from their signification; language in his mouth becomes babble, and words merely empty shapes. Whatever poststructuralists say about meaning as "an effect of relations and differences along a potentially endless chain of signifiers... always differential and deferred, never present as an original unity, always already a site of proliferating possibilities that can be activated in diverse ways by the receivers of an utterance" (Venuti, 2003, pg 238), the lesson the photographer learns as a child is that acute social pressures are constantly at work to contain these possibilities, and to contain those who would activate them. The second source of anxiety has to do with his accent. An accent, says Hamid Naficy, "is one of the most intimate and powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as well of individual difference and personality" (Naficy, 2001, pg 23), but it can also be a powerful marker of estrangement. From the inflection of two mere

vowel sounds, one can become illegible, and be marked irrevocably as an outsider. Thus, the childhood scene provides some insight into why this man must have constructed his life around the suppression of his accent and ethnic identification.

Anahid Kassabian and David Kazanjian highlight the “yalla submarine” story in their essay on diasporic nationalism in Egoyan’s work because it marks the originary and foundational trauma of diasporic assimilation which, in the film, is consolidated and repeated as an obsessive practice:

As an immigrant child in Canada, he was alienated from a social scene in which he wanted to be included because he did not speak English. Speech was severed from “what you are feeling” and “what’s going on through your mind,” becoming instead an impoverished response to “what you think other people would want to hear.” In effect, signs become attached to an unstable fantasy of the desire of the other, producing both imitations of the other that seem “ridiculous” because of that instability and a subjectivity constantly “vulnerable” to the return of that instability. (Kassabian and Kazanjian, 2005, pg 135)

In his compulsive reviewing, rewinding and fast-forwarding of the footage of his trip for some evidence of his betrayal, and in his scripted dates with hired foreign women, they argue, what the adult photographer is really doing is defending himself against the unresolved feelings aroused by this earlier scene of vulnerability.

His absurd behaviors can thus be understood as the symptoms of a kind of trauma (not yet translated into language) from having experienced the limits of speech and meaningfulness, and the threatened dissolution of his self this experience brought. And when one considers that his reliance on image-making technologies, and his need to fully control the escort’s dialogue permit him to remain as functionally cut off from language’s expressiveness as the mute Seta and Armen characters seem to be in *The Adjuster* and *Family Viewing*, one can appreciate the urgency of his own existential need for translation.

It is significant that through the film, each time the photographer obsessively plays with his footage and goes through another scripted date with an escort, he takes up pen and paper. The practice of epistolary writing in the film is initiated by a message from the translator on the photographer’s answering machine. She complains that he sent her the calendar with the pictures they

took during their fateful journey to Armenia without explaining what is going on in his mind or what he was feeling. She requests that he send her a letter:

Translator: I finally received the calendar. I was upset you sent it without a letter. What's going on in your mind? We've known each other too long to play these games. We've loved each other too long. You are mean to send me without letting me know how you feel about it. . . . Just share with me whatever there is to share. Please, please write to me. I do miss you.

The translator's is a call for him to re-enter language, and through the kinds of intimacies language makes possible—transporting “experiences, such as opinions and wishes” “from the interior of one subject to the interior of another” (Peters, 1999, pg 16)—to reconnect to their history together. For the photographer, however, whether he holds a pen, a still or video camera, or a remote control matters little, since all mediating technologies serve him as weapons, warding off his own thoughts and feelings, and preserving his distance from the incomprehensible dynamic flux of experience around him.

Talking is finally what heals him of his obsessive behaviours, when he lowers his pen, turns to the Egyptian woman in whose company the memory of his childhood muteness was brought to the fore, and continues with an unscripted dialogue. Though this is in fact a “talking cure,” it is not strictly speaking Freudian or psychoanalytic. Instead, it seems to be modeled upon a Heideggerian model of communication in that it “does not involve transmitting information about one's intentionality” or interiority; rather, “it entails bearing oneself in such a way that one is open to hearing the other's otherness. . . . [it] is about the constitution of relationships, the revelation of otherness, or the breaking of the shells that encase the self, not about the sharing of private mental property” (Peters, 1999, pg 17). In the final scene of the dialogic encounter between the photographer and the Egyptian escort, Egoyan thus offers as an antidote to cross-linguistic misunderstanding a model of translation as an opening up that, because it exceeds the verbal and linguistic realms, has the capacity to bridge the very rifts—private and social—that these realms can create in the first place.

From *la belle infidèle* to Translation as Erotics

Against the unintelligible and traumatized photographer, Egoyan introduces the figure of the translator. Throughout *Calendar*, the soundtrack is characterized by the co-presence of two languages: English and Armenian, English and

Arabic, English and Macedonian. One term in the binary remains constant while the other language is fluid and interchangeable. Language in *Calendar* is thus not dialogic in the way that Bakhtin uses the term. Although the soundtrack represents a “living mix of varied and opposing voices,” these voices do not develop and renew themselves, interanimate, or interilluminate (Bakhtin, 1981, pg 49). Instead, they slip by each other intact and untouched. The exotic language remains impenetrable and mysterious, while English remains flat and halting. The language of the translator is the exception. The translator’s voice resonates in both distinct linguistic spheres and brings to each articulation traces of the other. Accented speech for her is not linked to estrangement as it is for the photographer, but rather constitutes her as a powerfully liminal figure able to access multiple realms of knowledge and experience.

Not only does her accented speech and her ability to translate between two languages allow her freedom of movement through multiple geopolitical spaces, but it also enables her to access multiple temporalities. Since a word is “essentially a cultural memory in which the historical experience of the society is embedded” (Trivedi, 1971, pg 3), the translator’s task as they travel through a contemporary Armenia’s ruins learning about their history is doubly meaningful. Each word she utters anchors her to her origins and roots at the same time as it connects her to her present, leaving her future open-ended, and rich with possibilities (in contrast to the photographer who for most of the film is stuck in a circular rut, cut off from both past and future).

The film offers two antithetical perspectives on her activities as a translator. The first is captured in the Italian dictum “traduttore traditore” (or translator is traitor) as well as the French dictum of “les belle infidèles.”⁸ Like Miss Mitchell in “The School,” the photographer in *Calendar* is not able to confirm whether or not his wife is accurately translating, or translating all of what the guide is saying. In many instances, for example, after the guide issues a lengthy discourse in Armenian, the translation she conveys to her husband is startlingly brief; one has the feeling that she might be editing out the private parts of their exchange. The question of fidelity in her translation is thus posed at two levels in the narrative; from the uncertainty whether or not she is faithfully rendering everything that the guide is saying grows the suspicion that in her private exchange with him in her mother tongue, she is implicitly or explicitly kindling a romantic relationship and negotiating to leave her marriage.

But ultimately, the film rejects this fidelity model and its patriarchal overtones, offering a second understanding of the translator which resembles that

theorized by feminist and postcolonial writers as an erotics. In this model, translation is a most intimate act. As Anne Malena puts it, “translation, like desire... operates in a fluid zone of intermingling shadows, furtive touches and multiple influences” (Malena, 2004, pg 128). It generates, moreover, a kind of “love” between the original and its other, “a love,” as Gayatri Spivak writes, “that permits fraying” (Spivak, 2000, pg 399–400).⁹ For the translator in *Calendar*, then, her highly sensual immersion in and out of her mother tongue can be seen as an activity that gives her embodied pleasures, even *jouissance* (to use the Lacanian term, redeemed by French feminists, that according to them, can’t be translated into English).¹⁰ The film gives some indications that this pleasure, rather than being contained by the circumstances of her exchange between two men, is self-generating, self-sustaining, and, insofar as it is erotic, it is largely auto-erotic. Visually, the translator’s autoeroticism is registered most powerfully in a scene shot on video that the photographer reviews a number of times in which the translator moving through a highly kinetic and fluid herd of sheep approaches the camera. She is smiling, happy, and free, and when she is close enough to the camera that she is framed in a middle shot, she opens her arms and hugs herself warmly.¹¹

If an accent for the photographer is an indice of estrangement, for the translator, it is generative. As Taghi Modaresi explains, an accent can work to build a bridge between what is familiar and what is strange, generating through its juxtapositions “new and revealing paradoxes” (qtd. in Naficy, 2001, pg 23). The translator’s diction is often confused and confusing (which vexes the photographer to no end). In a scene where she is trying to translate a conversation in which the two men are making explicit their desire for her, the words she chooses initially seem odd. To the photographer, she asks: “He wants to know if you wish to exactly know how he feels about me, if he has any desire towards me or not. Is that what you want to know?” The photographer answers: “Yes, I want to know where this is going to lead. I’ve obviously lost something very close to me and I want to know how he feels about that.” She translates: “He feels that you are a too adventurous.” The photographer interrupts: “That I’m too adventurous?” She answers: “No, that the two of you are adventurous men.” Explaining why the guide feels this, she offers: “He says because we know that we’re talking about something and within it you can find many other things such as evil and the divine.” Though this last comment seems cryptic, as a bridge between the familiar and the new, it is very powerful. Through her translations, the exchange between two men is being reframed and opened up; what might simply be patriarchal and possessive gives way to hidden yet profound metaphysical dimensions. Her paradoxical and awkward qualification “too/two adventurous,” moving from the narrow and judgemental to the

open-endedly shared implies that through her voice, their linguistic exchange can lead to new places. Offering an example of what the French feminists call “parler femme,” then, the translator in Egoyan’s *Calendar* embodies a model of translation as pleasure and as love, both without ever being limited by economies of possession. Like woman as theorized in Cixous’ writings, “her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible” (Cixous, 1980, pg. 259–60).

What is so radical about Egoyan’s formulation of translation in *Calendar* is that even though it is presented in a context where the inability to be understood by others is traumatic, translation never takes on the functions we might expect it to. In Egoyan’s refusal to postulate even the possibility of articulating equivalences that would permit, as John Durham Peters would say, the “transporting [of] experiences ... from the interior of one subject to the interior of another,” he risks constructing a world where individuals are condemned to solipsism and loneliness. And yet, by refusing the most predictable notions of translation and recasting them in terms that are nearly Heideggerian, he ably avoids this risk (Peters, 1999, pg. 16). In *Calendar*, translation is world-disclosing rather than communicative; through the most delicate breaking of the shells that encase the self comes an opening to hearing the other’s otherness which constitutes its very own pleasure and end in itself.

Proliferations: Translation as Transformation and Regeneration

Egoyan does not simply restrict himself to linguistic translation; much of his work delves into what happens when ideas, experiences, and stories are translated into other systems.¹² Just as he is critical of the fidelity model in linguistic translation, Egoyan has shown the strongest resistance to any system that claims pure equivalences. His critique extends to the system of money in *Calendar* (1993)¹³ to the system of insurance in *The Adjuster* (1991),¹⁴ to the legal system’s restitutions for accidents in *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), and to fetishization’s substitutions in *Speaking Parts* (1989) and *Exotica* (1994). As through to counter the strictures of these and similar systems, Egoyan has set out to recycle, reframe, and revitalize his work by translating it into other media systems, offering a creative and regenerative vision of translation in the place of sterile ones. Through this work across different representational systems, he reveals how fluency in multiple modes of expressiveness (even if accented) can function as bridge.

In a number of installations, for example, he translates earlier filmic material into spatial configurations that draw new attention to the role of the viewer

and the nature of the medium.¹⁵ The 1997 installation *Early Development* at Le Fresnoy in Tourcoing, France, consisted of a film of his short *Portrait of Arshile* (1995) projected onto itself through a system of rollers to address the way the images of our childhood in our memory are mediated through archiving technologies such as home video and photographs. The installation *Steenbeckett* (2002) at the former Museum of Mankind in London, England, was even more elaborate, featuring in different rooms a DVD and a film projection of Egoyan's film of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (a theatrical play about an audiotape recorder) alongside the final twenty-one minutes of the film unspooled onto a giant Steenbeck editing table, to speak to the different ways analogue and digital media function to archive our memories and our history.¹⁶ In both of these cases, our desire to identify an "original"—medium, narrative, or experience—is called into question, as Egoyan's translations position themselves in a nearly infinite regress.¹⁷

In a fascinating project with Russell Banks, the author of the novel *The Sweet Hereafter* that Egoyan adapted to film, Egoyan offers translations of translations of translations, even further blurring the boundaries between original and translation. In close dialogue with the author, Egoyan constructed a visual essay intended for consumption through the medium of print that provides "subtitles" to an "alternate" version of the film (Egoyan and Banks, 2004, pg 37). Starting with photo stills from his film *The Sweet Hereafter* that could not be used for publicity purposes because the actors are looking directly at the camera and so break with the fictional space of the film, Egoyan sent these "uncanny" portraits to Banks. Banks provided passages lifted directly from his novel with which to caption the images. Egoyan then added parts of these captions to the photo stills in the publication as subtitles. As Egoyan writes of the experiment, "I was intrigued by the alchemy that might occur when the source writer is able to use his original words" (albeit originals framed as translations when positioned as subtitles in the frame) "to respond to performances and images interpreted by others" (Egoyan and Banks, 2004, pg 37). In this ongoing exchange of the same matter between two artists whose roles as creator and translator are continually exchanged, Egoyan reveals the way practices of translation can function as a dialogue and gift.

Even when he has translated his own work into the same medium, his purpose is not to be faithful to the original—he would see this as a strategy of containment—but rather to make it speak in new ways. Like Walter Benjamin, who conceived of translation as a mode of production that works against stasis not to serve the original but rather to liberate and release its potential (Bal 2007 pg 5), Egoyan exploits translation's polysemy. As an example, remarkable video

footage of a flock of sheep Egoyan initially shot for *Calendar* has reappeared in a number of works. In *Calendar*, its grainy texture and pixelated quality announces it as a mediation; presented as a memory of things lost, tinged with desire and longing, its referential status in the film is productively ambiguous. Depicting in a single shot a seemingly endless parade of sheep's bodies, moving together so close to each other that they create the impression of one giant, mobile, articulating body, the scene presents a pastoral present-day Armenia as organic, fluid, vital, and utterly hypnotic. In the film, the image of the sheep is strongly associated with the translator, used to connote her freedom of movement against the photographer's stasis, and, through pastoral iconography, to link her to land, homeland, and the collective body against the solitary photographer's connections to cameras and screens. At the same time, through its associations with Christian mythology of the sacrificial lamb, the footage is used to allude to how the translator's body is resurrected as image through the photographer's technologies.

Egoyan used the same footage in a 1996 installation in Dublin at the Irish Museum of Modern Art called *Return to the Flock*, where it was projected on twelve video monitors as one continuous image with a time delay, and juxtaposed with twelve stills from *Calendar*; in order to contrast the static with the fluid. In a short film to commemorate Philip Glass called *Diaspora* (2001), Egoyan reworked this footage of the flock of sheep a third time. The image was multiplied into four and then sixteen frames, colorized red and blue, and juxtaposed with images from Elia Kazan's *America America*. Here, this same material is more overtly linked to Armenia but now, rather than alluding to the fantasy of homeland in the present-day, it connotes the tragedy of genocide, "representing the thousands of Armenians who were forced on death marches or drowned in the Black Sea" and the dispersal of those in the diaspora which followed (Baronian, 2006, pg 166). Decomposed, fragmented, and colorized, the image bleeds and freezes, breaks up and multiplies. This consistent disruption of the frame of the image and its flow mimics the destabilization of those in exile and comments on the way systems of representation distort and contain history, but also endlessly and productively proliferate versions of it. In its passage from a private kind of symbolism to one more overtly anchored in a communities' shared history, the videoed material of the sheep moving from one film to another speaks in important new ways.

Referring to *Diaspora*, Marie-Aude Baronian has theorized Egoyan's practice of recycling material as "auto-citation," and relates it to Egoyan's obsession with representing the history and memory of Armenian genocide as a trans-gressional trauma, in which the denied violent past keeps returning (Baronian,

2006, pg 166).¹⁸ I in no way disagree with her argument about the return of the repressed but do wish to signal some important differences between the designations of “citation” and “translation” to describe what he is doing as he resurrects his own material. Egoyan is not participating in the kind of citation John Barth attributes to the “used-upness” of postmodern culture (Barth, 1967, pg 27). Instead, as though following the definition of translation meaning to “bear, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another; to transfer, transport” (OED), Egoyan reveals himself to be practicing translation as a setting-into-motion. His “cited” fragments are not *contained* in the new text but rather are propelled into new contexts. Egoyan resembles Jorge Luis Borges in this regard, who understood translation “as an intrinsically performative textual activity,” that is, “as a form of rewriting which is not in any sense neutral or secondary to the original” (Arrojo, 2006, pg 31). To refer to his auto-intertextual practices as translations is not to ignore the socio-political dimensions of this work, for the designation highlights their self-reflexive functions. Each time Egoyan translates, that is transports ideas and textual matter from one place to another, he is conjuring the geographical and social displacements of the Armenian diaspora.

It should be clear by this point in my argument that translation, in Egoyan’s hands, works against all iterations of stasis—for the both the subject and the text—by opening up, setting into motion, and animating. Presenting it as an analogue of the creative act itself, Egoyan shows how translation can be productive rather than merely reproductive. A discussion of one more example of cross-media translation from his work will help situate Egoyan’s practice within a genealogy of other artists’ practices and further explore the broader significance of his approach.

Egoyan has referred to one particular painting by the Armenian/American artist Arshile Gorky in two of his films. In *Portrait of Arshile*, Egoyan sets out to tell his son Arshile how he was named after an artist who changed his name after his mother, a casualty of the genocide, died of starvation in his arms. The short film offers a tale of filial devotion as well as of the power of naming. Egoyan returns to the Gorky material in *Ararat*, providing a much lengthier exegesis of the painting through the lectures of Ani, an art historian. What we learn about Gorky in *Ararat* is that he based his painting on a photograph taken when he was just a child, and that the composition of the photograph echoed the iconography of the Madonna and child represented in the architecture of his homeland. We also learn that that Gorky worked on the painting over 10 years, and we see the various sketches and drawings of the image he generated through this time. (What the film does not say, but those familiar with

Gorky's work would know, is that Gorky in fact made two paintings from the photograph, which differ from each other in color and tone.¹⁹ "The Artist and his Mother," then, is a work that so occupied its creator that it exists in several versions of itself rather than in originals and copies. The work likewise so occupied Egoyan that he also returned to it in a number of media.

Raffi's epiphany at the end of *Ararat* is initiated as he traces the multiple translations that led to Gorky's famous portrait. In a voice-over accompanying a video-image of the Madonna and child in the architectural ruins, Raffi intones: "From the memory of this place to the photograph to the painting...." (to which we might add "to Egoyan's short film to the feature film...." and so on). What Raffi realizes through Gorky is that a kind of life passes between things as they are translated one into another, which causes something of them to survive even amidst destruction and desecration. This is a model of translation as resuscitation, presented as a response and possible antidote to the violence of genocide and the resounding silence of its forgetting. As Egoyan puts it in an essay on *Ararat*, commenting on the many forms translated matter can assume, "from the stories of survivors passed onto children and grandchildren, to the industrial needs of commercial entertainment, to the private and sacred mythologies of art, the collective human linkage of experience is both the wonder and tragedy of our condition" (Egoyan, 2004, pg 903). What Egoyan is laying out here through his vision of translation as linkage rather than equivalence very strongly resembles the economy of the gift, which as Pierre Bourdieu points out, can likewise be "considered as an act of communication" (Peristiany, 1966, pg 210) forming what Anne Carson describes as "a kind of connective tissue between giver and receiver" (Carson, 1999, pg 18).

Conclusion

Through his sustained inquiry into the workings of exchanges across languages and media, Egoyan has demanded that we rethink what goes on within any communication act. We're all familiar with that fantasy of a symmetrical model of communication wherein a sender and a receiver exchange a message mediated by context, contact, and code. Translation, under this model, involves a seeking of equivalences, leaving everything intact but the code. Egoyan takes up and complicates the fantasy. He disrupts translation's connection to intimate linguistic communication between sender and receiver without rendering it solipsistic, revealing its asymmetries and limitations at the same time as its potentials. And by proliferating intermedial translations in nearly fractal ways, he challenges the ontology of original and derivation, resuscitating material within an economy of exchange shaped by the gift. His work

thus demonstrates the personal ontological, epistemological, and ideological stakes of communication. He shows how exchanges might become sterile, as in when individuals unmoored from their culture and language are rendered unintelligible in new environments, as well as showing how exchanges across communications systems might become creative and regenerative, as when the gaps in understanding—the fraying or *frayage*—proliferate new, unintended yet powerful meanings. He uncovers the libidinal desire that underwrites communication acts and teases out the hidden pleasures—erotic and autoerotic—in all human reaching for the other.

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Endnotes

- ¹ See especially Desbarats, Riviere, Lageira and Virilio (1993); Hibon (1993); Wall (1993); del Rio (1998, 2006); Mookerjea (2001, 2002); Shary (1995); Gruben (2006).
- ² Because minority language rights have so informed cultural production in Quebec, language and translation issues are almost *a priori* in the literature on québécois and francophone cinema in Canada.
- ³ Indeed, in the preface to Jerry White's recent edited volume *Canadian Cinema* (2006), Atom Egoyan elaborates on how his approach to Canadian identity goes beyond the binary (to represent Canada's "founding" cultures of English-French) and tri-partite (English, French and either native or other-ethnic, depending on the author) models generally used to configure Canadian culture. "I do believe that the idea of a 'triangular reality' (English, French and Aboriginal) used as an assumption of Canadian identity is problematic," Egoyan writes; "The country is clearly moving away from John Ralston Saul's idea of Canada as an Anglophone-francophone Siamese twin" (Egoyan, 2006, pg xiv). He offers up Tom McSorley's image of "the Hydra, a fabled creature with multiple and rapidly multiplying heads" to add to White's evocation of both Charles Taylor's discussion of "deep diversity" and George Melynk's use of the "Metis model" as competing visions for Canadian identity, explaining "that our filmmakers are currently 'engaged in the search for this newly forming, constantly shifting Canadian-ness in an open-ended set of narrative possibilities and cinematic expressions'" (pg xiv).
- ⁴ There are a few exceptions. In *Ararat* (2002), he uses subtitles in the film within the film in scenes where Turks are attacking Armenians, during Ani's dialogues with Raffi and her party guests in Armenian, and Celia and Ani's dialogues in French.
- ⁵ See Tschofen and Burwell (2006) for a discussion of the exilic effects of Egoyan film and installation.

- ⁶ *The School* was performed at Norfolk House School, in Victoria, BC, on Thursday, March 11, 1976.
- ⁷ It would seem from this and other similar scenarios throughout Egoyan's oeuvre that he is working out the issues related to his own experience of immigration to Canada. However, because the point is so obvious, I do not wish to overstress biographical elements of his work in this essay.
- ⁸ The expression "les belles infidèles" can be "traced back to seventeenth-century French rhetorician Ménage and a school of French translators called les *belles infidèles* (some of whom were members of the Académie française) who systematically made 'improvements' to the texts they translated and were notorious for their policy of infidelity" (Wheeler, 2003, pg 433).
- ⁹ Spivak's use of the term "fraying" develops an analogy between language and textiles on the one hand; "we feel the selvages of the language-textile give way, fray into *frayages* or facilitations" (Spivak, 2000, pg 378), and on the other hand, an allusion to a Freudian notion concerning the passage of excitation from one neurone to another.
- ¹⁰ See Michèle Richamn 1980, pg 80 n13; Jardine 1981, pg16 n6; and Adams 1978, pg101 n1, as well as Jane Gallop's analysis of the translatability of the notion of jouissance in "Beyond the Jouissance Principle" (1984 pg 110)
- ¹¹ Luce Irigaray's description of the diffuse geography and autoerotic nature of women's pleasure nearly perfectly describes the character of the translator: "'She' is infinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible...capricious—not to mention her language in which 'she' goes off in all directions and in which 'he' is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning.... In her statements...woman retouches herself constantly" (Irigaray, 1987, pg 103)
- ¹² Egoyan's three film adaptations from novels, Russell Banks' *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey* (1999), and Rupert Holmes' *Where the Truth Lies* (2005), can be understood as translations across media, and many writers have noted the ways Egoyan has transformed the source material to make it more properly "Egoyanesque." See Boyd (2006) and Gruben (2001).
- ¹³ The practical, for the photographer in *Calendar*, is bound with an economy where labour is exchanged for money. He quips that a pagan temple "looks like a bank." He accuses the guide of sharing the history of the place in order to get more money at the end. Even in his conversations with the escorts which are unequivocally framed in a situation where money is exchanged for services rendered, the photographer shocks the women with his

- insistence on the presence of capital at the heart of intimate transactions, telling one woman who claims to be an oriental dancer of his early erotic experience putting money in a dancer's dress. He even brings the issue of money to the question of reproduction and children, countering an escort's questions about the cost of his foster-child plan with a question about how much her children cost her.
- ¹⁴ In *The Adjuster*, Noah Render's work of seeking to turn items of loss into approximate value in dollars—including a beloved pet—is constructed as pathological. (See Beard, 2006, pg 70.)
- ¹⁵ See Egoyan's discussion of the differences between film and installation in his interview with Jacinto Lageira and Steven Wright (Egoyan 2001).
- ¹⁶ See David L. Pike (2006) for an analysis of this idea about the archive in *Steenbeckett*.
- ¹⁷ In other words, before the DVD came before the video which came before the audio tape which came before the film which came before the photograph, or alternately, before the childhood memory and the fantasy came the home movie, and so on.
- ¹⁸ Elsewhere, I have argued that Egoyan's work moves from a "repetition compulsion" toward "commemoration." See Tschofen (2002).
- ¹⁹ For "The Artist and His Mother," 1926–1942, National Gallery of Art see <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?56671+0+0> and for "The Artist and His Mother," 1926–36, the Whitney Museum of American Art, see http://www.whitney.org/www/research/gorky/21_gorkymom.html.]