

then there was Oedipus, and then there was pre-Oedipus; once children were excluded from all the facts of life as long as possible and now we know that those things hidden are not necessarily unknown. Now children go to funerals and birthing centres and adoptees are informed before their second birthday etc. This is a good thing. But it carries with it the danger of imposing on the child ideas and language

pre-empting their own manner of explaining, of understanding or misunderstanding. I'm not suggesting we return to the days of the flying storks but that while we are talking about children moving on after death, decathecting or reattaching we remember that the poem of the thing, the child's own poem, will tell us how much denial, how little denial, what is a good way or bad way to meet calamity.

Anne Roiphe  
285 Riverside Drive  
New York  
NY 10025

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## FILM REVIEW ESSAY EGOYAN'S *EXOTICA*: WHERE DOES THE REAL HORROR RESIDE?<sup>1</sup>

RONIT MATALON AND EMANUEL BERMAN, ISRAEL

*Director:* Atom Egoyan

*Distributor:* Buena Vista Home Video

To me, the highest aim of any film is to enter so completely into the subconscious of the viewer that there are moments and scenes and gestures which can be generated by the spectator's imagination. That becomes part of the film they're playing in their mind, and I hope the film has enough space to allow that type of room, that type of exchange (Egoyan, 1995, p. 50).

'What have we really seen?'

This question unites *Exotica*'s protagonists and *Exotica*'s viewers, who are at first mystified by the discontinuity and gaps between scenes. Visibility, and the impact of the visual image, are central themes of this film. Voyeurism, Egoyan implies, is not only a humiliating position of someone who cannot achieve more, cannot have 'the real thing': it also forms a relationship, and allows a unique position of power. By watching attentively one can influence the story, transform its sequence.

Is that why Francis's wife attempts to cover his camcorder lens with her hand, when he videotapes her and their daughter?

The film opens at the airport, where customs inspectors watch the passengers through a one-way mirror; their gaze could determine a passenger's fate. We soon move to the 'Exotica' nightclub, where men watch the strippers, at times through a one-way mirror too. Francis (Bruce Greenwood) repeatedly watches a

young stripper, Christina (Mia Kirshner), but their interaction appears highly ceremonial, built on set rules and steady mantras, which form a story co-constructed by the two of them. 'What would happen if someone ever hurt you?', he repeats; 'You'll always be there to protect me', she replies.

An additional central image is supplied by the pet shop owned by Thomas (Don McKellar), specialising in exotic animals. Seemingly, here we find the film's central motif: human beings as strange exotic animals, torn out of their natural habitat, forced to survive in an artificial aquarium-like reality, imitating their original milieu. 'Just because they are exotic doesn't mean they can't endure extremes. It is, after all, a jungle out there, isn't it?' says Francis, who comes as a tax inspector to check Thomas's books (once more, a penetrating fateful gaze). The Rousseau-styled artificial tropical vegetation of the 'Exotica' club portrays another such aquarium.

Yet, there is something deceptive in this too visible motive of exotic scopophilia directed at exotic fish-bowl visibility. If this were indeed the film's world view, we would be watching a slick commercial product, taking advantage of the linguistic cliché of the exotic, of the journalistic fascination with marginality and perversion. But the genuine emotional power of this film signifies Egoyan's capacity to critically deconstruct that popular image, and to allow

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Susan Zuckerman Memorial Program on 'Psychoanalysis and cinema', San Francisco, 22 April 2000. Ronit Matalon is a novelist; Emanuel Berman is a psychoanalyst.



the discovery of a moving human dimension behind it.

What Egoyan is fascinated by is not what people show and watch, but what people hide, or attempt to hide. 'You have to convince yourself that this person has something hidden that you have to find. You check his bags, but it's his face, his gestures, that you are really watching ...', explains the customs officer.

This dialogue between the images of visibility and what they disguise, between façade and tormented secrecy, between nudity and 'the privacy of the self', conveys also a dialectic Egoyan holds between postmodernist and modernist beliefs. He abundantly utilises the postmodernist fascination with visibility, facades, masks; with the arbitrary construction of roles. Imposture is a major theme in Egoyan's films: 'identity itself is malleable, to be borrowed, customized or invented' (Pevere, 1995, p. 18). And yet his protagonists painfully strive towards authentic meaning, and eventually appear to possess more of an inner core and of powerful, genuine emotions than we could initially know. ('What I find really fascinating is why emotions are repressed, why they are restrained, why they are held back. And people who were hurt by giving away too much emotion'; Egoyan, in *Current Biography*, 1994, p. 158). In this respect, this quintessential postmodernist film turns out to offer an antidote to any postmodernistic nihilism.

*Exotica* can also be seen as a critique of post-capitalist society. Buying emotional needs through money and possessions is a repetitive theme. The film outlines a complex network of exploitation, betrayal and blackmail. When we finally understand the fatal prehistory of the plot (hinted at through the flashbacks to Francis's joyful wife and daughter in a photograph and in the video scene, and to the search in a sunny field), we realise that at its core lies Francis's experience of being betrayed by his wife, through her affair with his brother Harold (Victor Garber). The subsequent deaths of their daughter Lisa, and of the wife herself, lead Francis to exploit both Christina and his niece Tracey (Sara Poley) in his attempt to re-

create the yearned-for past. Harold—out of guilt—appears to sacrifice his daughter Tracey, allowing her to go to Francis for make-believe babysitting (a variation on the Dora theme). When Eric (Elias Koteas) jealously attempts to free Christina of her bond with Francis, he deceives Francis by luring him to touch Christina, so he can brutally throw him out of the club. In his attempted revenge, Francis blackmails Thomas—threatening to expose his illegal operations—into extracting the truth from Christina, and then wants to blackmail Thomas to help him murder Eric.

The manipulation of the other is more than exploitation here: the protagonists recreate each other, each becoming a construct in the other's inner reality. In the airport scene, Thomas closely observes his own image in the mirror, but behind his reflection in that one-way mirror hides Ian (Calvin Green), who is drawn to him. As the plot thickens, Christina becomes Lisa, the murdered girl (when performing, she wears a tartan skirt and a white blouse like Lisa, the film's ghostly apparition—Borden, 2000); Tracey takes the place of ex-babysitter Christina; Eric becomes the new murderer of the daughter (by destroying the bond between Francis and Christina); Thomas turns into Eric by finding the murdered daughter once more (as Eric found Lisa). The relationships between the figures are transference, often projective, creating a complex chain of fantasy strings that eventually are all tied together masterfully.

But once more, on a deeper level, this world of fluid interchangeable identities, of deception and manipulation, ultimately ends up being radically reversed, allowing 'something that feels vaguely like redemption' (Pevere, 1995, p. 36).

A crucial transformation takes place towards the end of the film. Francis's threat of turning Thomas in as a tax-evader was enough to send Thomas to tape Christina secretly and expose Eric; but when Francis wants his help to kill Eric, Thomas refuses. 'Not even to save a few years in prison?', Francis asks. 'No!', Thomas answers. 'Well, to help me then?'

Once we understand that Thomas agreed because he was moved by Francis's agony, a cynical view of human reality as based on power, exploitation and cold interests is no longer tenable. Help, caring, friendship, turn out—after all—to be a real possibility. The agreement between Tracey and Francis to stop the pseudo-babysitting, and Christina's tears when Thomas wants to talk with her, also indicate that sincere expression makes a difference, that a talking cure is possible.

*Exotica* follows an opposite path to that of the conventional detective film. Instead of moving from seeming innocence towards a discovery of guilt, it moves from a dark cloud of guilt (epitomised in the police's suspicion that Francis murdered Lisa, because he thought she was his brother's child) towards a discovery of total innocence. The film exonerates Francis more fully than the police ever could, because it allows him a chance to be eventually liberated from his inner guilt and self-doubt.

This reversal reaches its moving peak in the embrace between Eric and Francis. When Francis realises it was Eric who had discovered the body of his murdered daughter, he also understands that Eric has known and understood everything about him all along. Now, the manipulations both of them have used become trivial. They see each other, discover the deep bond uniting them: their partnership in the same tragedy, which had changed the lives of both. Instead of killing Eric, Francis finds himself hugging him. Treason and rage are transformed into compassion and mercy.

This breakthrough forces us to reconsider what we initially experienced as the perverse content of the film. We understand now that *Exotica* is at its core a film about unbearable catastrophic trauma, and about the convoluted but creative ways people find to deal with trauma, in order not to be petrified having watched Medusa's head. It is about the heavy baggage people carry, and about trying not to let it annihilate relationships and life, as Francis explains to Tracey when she brings up the tension between him and her father. 'How can

people touch each other?', the film asks; 'what do they have to undergo in order to touch each other?' In spite of its story, and in spite of the nudity, *Exotica* is overall not a sexually stimulating film, but it ends up being emotionally stimulating in an unforeseen way.

We come to realise that neo-sexuality (McDougall, 1986) here is a way of handling traumatic baggage: inventing oneself anew in a way that will allow emotion and passion to survive in hiding, in spite of unbearable pain. Francis and Christina invent their ritual for that purpose. Now Francis is the omnipotent rescuer, which he failed to be for his actual daughter. Christina—who witnessed the discovery of Lisa's body, though Eric embraced her and so stopped her from watching the horror directly—invents herself as the innocent/sexy schoolgirl for Francis's sake. She is trying to cure him, and the club owner Zoe (Arsinée Khanjian) is alarmed: 'we are here to entertain, not to heal'.

What appeared as perverse sexual exploitation was actually a mutually constructed therapeutic mission. Eric diabolically destroyed this therapy by enticing Francis into a forbidden touch, a 'boundary violation'; but irrespective of his conscious motive, he was actually helping Francis and Christina to transcend a relationship that became ritualistically ossified. ('The problem with creating your own therapeutic exercises is that there's not someone there to monitor it ... to tell you if it's going too far ... Eric actually becomes a monitor for Francis'; Egoyan, 1995, p. 55).

Egoyan's fascination with psychotherapy ('if I wasn't making films, maybe I'd be a therapist, because it's incredible to me that people go and spend an hour every week or day trying to work out something'; Egoyan, 1995, p. 55) goes hand in hand with sharp intuitive insights. Discussing his inspiration for *Exotica*, he says:

During my adolescence I was very involved with somebody whom I later found out was being abused while I was involved with her ... There was a tremendous loneliness in the process of sexual communion ... That con-



fusion has left a very deep impression on me ... somebody who is abused makes a parody of their own sexual identity as a means of trying to convince themselves that that part of themselves that has been destroyed is somehow not as vital as it is ... otherwise it becomes too painful (Egoyan, 1995, p. 48).

How reminiscent this is of Ferenczi's thinking about the aftermath of traumatic abuse (e.g. *Posttraumatic effect: identifications ... instead of one's own life*, 1932, p. 171). The ritual was needed by Christina too: 'I need him for certain things, and he needs me for certain things'. Egoyan sees the artificiality involved; his protagonists direct their own films. But he does not judge their imaginative dramatisation. In fact, he is also intrigued by its ultimate force: 'there's something fascinating about the fact that we do engineer sexual situations that we do lose ourselves in. Like a fetishist or sado-masochist or transvestite does—these are people I'm in awe of' (Egoyan, 1995, p. 54).

Here, as elsewhere, Egoyan casts doubt upon any conventional boundary between normal and abnormal, between the despicable and the admirable.

In pointing, in its final scene, towards an earlier period in which Francis had been a benign father-figure for Christina, before his world collapsed, the film adds depth to its exploration of the role of sexuality in parental feelings. The intimacy between Francis and

teenage Christina, when he drives her home after babysitting, has erotic undertones, but also a warm, caring, non-exploitative quality. Francis speaks admiringly of Lisa; Christina is moved. He says he is sure her parents talk about her that way too. 'I don't think so', she answers laconically. Francis mentions that Lisa says Christina really listens to her, but thinks she is not very happy. Christina appears to be on the verge of tears. He encourages her to talk to him about what might be going on at home. She doesn't, but says she enjoys the rides with him. She sadly goes out of his car, and walks slowly towards a big suburban house, into which she disappears.

This is an ominous, scary scene, more than any other part of *Exotica*. The film's protagonists are often eccentrics and outsiders (Zoe and Thomas appear to be immigrants in Canada, Francis's wife was black, Lisa mulatto—facts that are never mentioned, but play a role).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, their exotic 'otherness' is by now deconstructed; we understand them, we can empathise with their complex humanity. Christina's unseen (and unseeing?) parents now appear as the potential source of evil.

The real exotic horror does not reside in seedy nightclubs; it resides in the apparent respectability of the impenetrable suburban family home.

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<sup>2</sup> Egoyan's Armenian immigrant background, and his complex attitude towards it (forgetting the Armenian language as a child, intense reconnection from college on), are central in his life and work (*Current Biography*, 1994; Pever, 1995). Donovan (2000) discusses the outsider's point of view in *Exotica* (which was made in Canada in 1994) and the unique perspective it allows. Otherness and marginality here are not only ethnic but also sexual: fertility belongs to pregnant Zoe, who appears to be bisexual, and to the smuggled exotic eggs connecting two homosexuals, Thomas and Ian (Borden, 2000).

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Ronit Matalon and Emanuel Berman  
Dr Berman  
Department of Psychology  
University of Haifa  
Haifa 31905  
Israel  
Emanuel@psy.haifa.ac.il

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