Framing the Ancestry: Performing Postmemory in Atom Egoyan’s Post-Exilic Cinema

The works of Atom Egoyan, a Canadian film and theater-maker of Armenian descent, serve this study as an example of a post-exilic performative, which capitalizes on the second generation exilic artists’ longing to learn the past of their parents, to understand the reasons for their family’s flight, and to come close, to “authentically feel” the trauma of their exilic banishment and ordeal. Unlike Wajdi Mouawad’s exilic journey (the subject of the previous chapter) that has been physically and emotionally lived through, Atom Egoyan’s post-exilic experience has never been marked by the artist’s own memory of leaving home. Born in Cairo on July 19, 1960 into an Armenian family that had resided in Egypt for three decades before its relocation to Canada, Egoyan grew up in Victoria, British Columbia.

Considered to be a first-generation exile, someone born outside his/her country of residence as an adult, Egoyan behaves, feels, and creates his art as a second-generation exile, the child of refugees and survivors, who experiences the trauma of his/her parents’ suffering as the phenomenon of postmemory (Hirsch, “Past Lives”, 420). To the second-generation exiles postmemory functions as a reservoir of emptiness to be filled with one’s desire to reach the experience of the past: an experience that can only be transmitted through the mediating and thus soothing nature of the familial, verbal, and visual narratives. In his films, Egoyan explores this phenomenon of postmemory and investigates the potentials of everyday and artistic mediation: something that can deform, estrange, and mythologize not only the abstract historical events and figures of the past but also the concrete experience of one’s family. The narratives and the experiences of his own family and their exile first from Turkey, then from Egypt serve as the trigger of Egoyan’s artistic imagination and sometime inspire the themes of his films.

The Egoyan’s original family name was spelled “Yeghoyan.” Atom’s grandparents on his father’s side were the survivors of the 1915 Armenian genocide, the sole survivors from their own families. Egoyan’s parents were both artists, they met at the art college in Cairo. They named their son “Atom” in celebration of the development of nuclear science and industry both in Egypt and
worldwide. As Egoyan recollects, however, his father’s relationships with the Armenian diaspora in Egypt were rather controversial. Trained as a painter, he had his first personal exhibition within the Armenian community in Cairo at the age of sixteen. “He received a scholarship to study at the Art Institute of Chicago when he was eighteen, so he went to America, studied there, went back to Egypt, and just found that . . . he wasn’t necessarily able to be welcomed back into that community. He wasn’t able to take all those notions of abstract expressionism which he had learned in Chicago, bring them back to that community, and be successful” (Egoyan in Naficy, “The Accented Style”, 188). Thus, the family found itself caught between the misapprehensions of their own community (Egoyan’s father decided that “he wanted nothing to do with the community. . . . He saw the parochialism as being something very oppressive to him” [Egoyan in Naficy, “The Accented Style”, 188]) and the rise of Egyptian nationalism, during which many non-Arab communities experienced hostility.1 As the result, the family moved to Canada. They arrived in North America when the young filmmaker was only three years old, but the family did not want to join the “Armenian ghetto,” the Armenian community, in either Montreal or Toronto, and thus settled in Victoria, British Columbia (Egoyan in Naficy, “The Accented Style”, 187). As Egoyan recollects, his father “went to Vancouver because he liked it there, the moderate climate, and an opportunity came up in Victoria: there was someone who was selling a furniture design business and he was able to get into that business” (Egoyan in Naficy, “The Accented Style”, 188). The young Atom Egoyan soon started his Canadian education, he went to the English-language based school in Victoria and quickly assimilated into a white middle-class environment of English Canadian culture and values.

As Egoyan puts it, the experience of a child emigrant in Canada (the only country, according to Edward Said, which institutionalized exilic experience [Reflections on Exile, 159–72]) triggers the mechanisms of everyday and professional performativity. “When you come into a culture from outside, like any kid, you’re very aware of the things you need to do to become normal, to fit in. And I still feel that. When I’m meeting someone, I have to almost exhibit to them that I’m like them, that I’m not as exotic as my name might suggest” (Egoyan in Abrahamian, “Face to Face”, 65). Although Egoyan was actively rejecting exposure to the culture or the language of his parents, he was still considered by his teachers and neighbors as the first-generation expatriate. As he recollects, “even though I came here at a very young age, and have a mother tongue (Armenian) without having any conscious cultural reference in that language besides my immediate family, who were the only Armenian-speaking people in Victoria, B.C., it was very difficult to have a sense of my culture having a social framework. I associated with the marginality . . . I went to a very English school where my teachers were quite graphic in what they called me. I was called ‘little Arab’ all the time and I was always aware of the fact that I was quite different” (Egoyan in Naficy, “The Accented Style”, 186–8).2