



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

<http://muse.jhu.edu>

"Is This My Mother's Grave?": Genocide and Diaspora in Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing*¹

Lisa Siraganian
The Johns Hopkins University

Every minute those scenes are before my eyes—all bloody.... This is the story of the end of my life. The things that happened while I was very young, those things I will forget, and I have given them to "forgetting."

—Survivor of the Armenian genocide interviewed over 50 years later (Miller and Miller, *Survivors* 163)

Tracey: You think this is normal?

Francis: What?

Tracey: What we do?

Francis: What we do?

Tracey: That's just it. We don't speak about it.

—Atom Egoyan (*Exotica: The Screenplay* 110)

Discussing his feature film *Exotica* (1994), director, producer, and screenwriter Atom Egoyan alludes to a certain moment in film-making that is missing, "a scene that's so noticeable by its absence, it becomes concrete" (*Exotica: The Screenplay* 50). It is just such a scene that his art aims to produce in the mind of the viewer:

The big question with *Exotica* was, what can you afford not to make obvious? For me, one of the most powerful scenes in the script doesn't exist, which is the scene where Francis goes into the [Exotica dance] club for the first time and sees Christina, who used to be his deceased daughter's babysitter, and Francis has a choice to either run out of the club or introduce himself. How did that relationship get from there to where we see it? We don't know, but we have to be able to imagine it. Then there's the decision of whether to show that or not. (50)

Egoyan's focus here and in his earlier films is on just such an elided scene, which bears considerable resemblance to the psychoanalytic concept of a primal scene; Freud's examples of such a scene include "observing parental intercourse, of being seduced in childhood, and of being threatened with castration" ("Infantile Neurosis" 97). It is

a scene in which some shocking, frightening, or arousing event, or some combination of the above, was observed in the past but can neither be articulated nor forgotten in the present; its existence is only revealed symptomatically (as Francis obsessively returns to the Exotica club to watch Christina, dressed in a school uniform, strip for him). Egoyan often claims that he would have been a therapist if he had not become a director, and his films are structured like one of Freud's case studies in the sense that much confusing, out-of-sequence introductory material must be sorted through before the etiology of each character's neurosis can be fathomed.

What should be underscored, as the first major operating principle of both Freud's theories and Egoyan's films, is that a narrative of a certain kind does exist—one that treats events of the past timelessly, as if these events were still occurring. When Francis (like many other Egoyan characters) makes rational decisions—however perverse they may be—he does so based on his understanding of how his world functions, and one of the principles of this Egoyan fictional universe is that the past has not passed. To employ a term which has gained much currency recently, these characters are “traumatized.” The second major operating principle of most Egoyan films is that television, video, and film are key players in this world, just as much as the people who stand in front of or behind the cameras. As Egoyan says, “the idea that the camera is just not for literal showing but, rather, an active participant is very important to me” (Naficy 224). Egoyan concentrates on what happens when these two principles come into conflict with one another, that is, when a memory which was apparently indelibly “present” is altered by the existence of a film or video “recording” of that memory. It is a conflict which destabilizes the notion of an irrevocable primal scene of trauma, suggesting instead that trauma is relational between at least two scenes (as Freud specified), each of which lends meaning to the other.² Egoyan's work suggests that the inclusion of cameras in forming memories alters the content of primal scenes, making precarious any identity claims which rely on the truth-value of primal scene testimony.

Egoyan's popularity and recognition as one of the most talented and innovative of independent filmmakers is at an all-time high with his latest film, *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), which depicts a disastrous school bus accident and its psychological and legal aftereffects on a small Canadian town. His earlier films included *Next of Kin* (1984), *Family Viewing* (1987), *Speaking Parts* (1989), *The Adjuster* (1991), and *Calendar* (1993) (all but *The Adjuster* shot with budgets of under \$1,000,000 US); these became favorites at international film festivals, but mostly gathered art-house audiences. The Canadian reception of *Family Viewing* demonstrates this point:

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoyan

The same autumn [1987] that Toronto critics Jay Scott and John Harkness dismissed the 27-year-old's movie ("literal, intolerant and sentimental," wrote *The Globe and Mail's* Scott; "no action and no sex," wrote *Now's* Harkness), German director Wim Wenders handed the \$5,000 prize he'd been awarded for *Wings of Desire* at Montreal's Festival of New Cinema and Video to an effusively grateful and genuinely surprised Egoyan. "This is a great honour," said Wenders that November day. "But I ask you to put the name of my Canadian colleague Atom Egoyan on the prize." (*Exotica: The Screenplay* 11–2)

Shortly thereafter, Egoyan began receiving more traditional film accolades: *Exotica* (1994) won the *Prix de la Critique Internationale* at the 1994 Cannes International Film Festival and was more widely distributed (by Miramax in the United States) than his earlier films. Most recently, *The Sweet Hereafter* won the *Grand Prix du Palmarès*, the *Prix de la Critique Internationale*, and the *Prix du Jury Œcuménique* at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival, Best Picture at the Toronto Film Critics Association, and eight Genie Awards including Best Picture, and was nominated for two Academy Awards for Best Screenplay and Best Director.

Despite the critical acclaim, few critics have acknowledged that aspect of Egoyan's films which focuses on hyphenated Armenian identity in the North American diaspora.³ Films such as *Next of Kin* and *Calendar* explicitly foreground Armenianness; in others, the Armenian language and culture filter in as nearly inaudible background noise. In *Family Viewing*, the focus of this article, we hear a family speaking Armenian to one another, but no English subtitles are provided in explanation; in *The Adjustor*, the Armenian woman Seta figures prominently but never speaks. Most memorably, she burns photographs depicting her former Armenian diasporan community in Beirut (from which she was presumably displaced by the civil war in Lebanon). In still other films, only certain common concerns remain, such as the effect of catastrophes on individuals, the role of survivor testimony, and the impact of regularly evaded topics (as in *Exotica* and *The Sweet Hereafter*). While Jonathan Romney suggests that Egoyan's films both entice and frustrate, revealing "always more layers to the onion," Romney does not consider ethnicity to be one of these nested layers: "ethnic identity has been a constant enigma in Egoyan's films—the jigsaw piece that always refuses to fit" (7–8). If Egoyan deployed generic "ethnic identity," Romney might be correct, but Egoyan's careful use of "Armenianness" suggests instead that he is conducting a thoughtful dialogue with both Armenian diasporan and North American cultural politics.

In this article I plan to discuss Egoyan's deployment of ethnicity as it intersects with concerns about postmodern representation, technology, and, most recently, trauma. The Armenian diaspora, of which Egyptian-born Canadian-Armenian Egoyan is a member, has kept memories of the 1915–1922 genocide of Armenians by Turkey at the top of its agenda for the past eighty years. Furthermore, there is good reason why a diasporan Armenian could come to a conclusion that so closely resembles a postmodern one: in the effort to erase the genocide from history, the Turkish state consistently takes a multi-media approach to historical revisionism. Thus, as the media fail to record the genocide, diasporan Armenians are particularly preoccupied with “the media” as an entity in its own right, much as Egoyan's characters are, and specifically with the media's ability to alter representations of historical events. Furthermore, Egoyan explores the limits of an identity formation which follows the cultural “trauma” model (that is, of a group of people who define their relation to one another by a primal scene, in this case one of genocide).

The following section introduces the historical context of the current Armenian diaspora; the next section, “The Case of *Family Viewing*,” expands on a symbolic reading of the missing Armenian scenes implied, but never explicitly stated, in Egoyan's films and suggests that the psycho-dynamics of at least one Egoyan film are anchored in the figure of the genocide survivor. If, as Stuart Hall asserts, the claiming of ethnic identity is “not the rediscovery but the production of identity” (224), then, for Egoyan's diasporan characters, a technologically mediated romance with personal and cultural representations of history might be the most electrifying site of production.

The Armenian Genocide and Diaspora: Forgetting and Remembering in History

For the past seventy-five years, the Armenian diaspora has been inconsolably haunted by an event that occurred between 1915 and 1922. It is notoriously difficult to find a frame in which to discuss the Armenian genocide; one approach is to describe it as an atrocious, foreboding model for the Jewish Holocaust.⁴ Armenia, situated in eastern Anatolia, had for centuries been one of the conquered nations, the subject-peoples, of the Ottoman Empire. In the late nineteenth century, as that empire approached its own collapse and lost control over its Christian territories (Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia) one by one, Ottoman anxiety transformed into Turkish nationalism, and the State began a systematic persecution of its last major group of Christian subjects, the Armenians. Between 1894 and 1896, “tens of thousands of Armenians were massacred in

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoan

the Ottoman Empire ruled by Sultan Abdul Hamid II" (Melson 43). Then, between 1915 and 1922, "well over a million Armenians were killed by mass shootings, massacres, deportations, and induced starvation. Despite individual survivors, at the end of this period the Armenian community was destroyed as a viable collectivity in Anatolia" (Melson 142). By 1923, between one-third and one-half of the world's Armenian population had been destroyed in the genocide. Survivors crowded refugee camps around the Middle East and the rest of the world. For nearly seventy years (that is, until the foundation of the independent Republic of Armenia in September 1991), the diaspora was viewed as "the inheritor of the potential of the Armenian nation that was poised to enter a new and dynamic phase of national life. It [was] in a sense the repository of that consciousness" (Shirinian 23).

The post-genocide diaspora has contended with at least three linked issues. First of all, survivors were placed under an inordinate amount of pressure to bear witness to a genocide they inconceivably survived, often as the only remaining member of large extended families.⁵ This pressure is complicated by the genocide's status as a "floating signifier" (to appropriate Roland Barthes' term) for the additional "white genocide"—the assimilation that continues unabated in the diaspora—as well as for ongoing Turkish claims of exculpability for the 1915 genocide.⁶ Richard Hovannisian notes that "in contrast with the aftermath of the Holocaust, there was no redemption, no compensation, no contrition. Instead, the world seemed to succumb to prolonged amnesia, compounding the agony of the dispersed survivors" (*Genocide: History* xvi–xvii). Diasporan Armenians frequently cite Adolf Hitler's notorious statement on August 22, 1939, justifying his strategies for the ethnic cleansing of Poland: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"⁷

The language of genocide is so pervasive among Armenians that it has come to be applied to quite other events. For example, air pollution in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, caused by a chemical plant (now closed) was implicated in an increase not only of allergies, but also of birth defects; it has been labeled "ecological genocide" (Fischer and Grigorian 109). On December 7, 1988, an earthquake in northwestern Armenia killed 25,000 people and left 500,000 people homeless, instigating international relief efforts from the diaspora. Because newer, Soviet-built apartment buildings which collapsed were found to be shoddily built, while older buildings built by Armenians survived, the earthquake was viewed "as a form of Russian genocide" (104). Lastly, the most volatile political issue has been the struggle for Armenian self-determination in Karabakh, a mountainous enclave in Soviet Azerbaijan (Armenia's neighbor to the east) populated historically and presently by a majority of Armenians. A continuing Armenian effort to stave off

“cultural genocide” and renewed efforts to annex Karabakh to Armenia led to Azeri riots and mob violence against the Armenian minority living in the Azerbaijani city of Sumgait in February 1988, eventually leading to a full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Malkasian 51–8). One member of the Karabakh movement, Ashot Manucharyan, speculated that “Sumgait exacerbated everything ... the genocide of 1915 is always in front of our eyes, a reason for our seriousness. The road toward massacre is always a possibility” (qtd. in Malkasian 57).⁸

Since the 1920s, the Turkish state has spent exorbitant sums “on public relations firms to improve its image, lobby public officials, place advertisements in prominent newspapers, and subsidize publications favorable to its point of view” (Smith 5).⁹ Between 1985 and 1990, there were extensive US congressional debates on the commemoration of April 24 as a day of remembrance of “man’s inhumanity to man with particular reference to the Armenian genocide.”¹⁰ The Turkish government successfully deployed its strategic military leverage to keep this day of institutionalized remembrance from being placed on the calendar (Hovannisian, *Genocide: History* xix).

Crucially, few media have been spared in this revision of history. In the 1930s, the US State Department, “at the insistence of the Turkish government,” impeded Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer from producing a film about a group of Armenian resistance fighters who survived the genocide, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (Smith 11). More recently, in 1993, an “autoresponder” collectively named “Serdar Argic” repeatedly surfaced on Internet news groups, recasting three million Turks as the victims of “holy Armenian crooks.” According to Joel Furr,

“Serdar Argic” seems to be several people, anti-Armenian Turks, with software that scans bulletin boards for keywords and automatically generates responses out of a database of megabytes of messages ... he’s currently got access through a firm called UUNet in Virginia. There’s nothing we can do about him from a legal standpoint. (Wiener 826)

The conclusion is that historical rewriting of the Armenian genocide has become an automated (or nearly automated) act; Serdar Argic rewrites “truth” at the inhuman pace necessary for cultural battle in the high-flow information super-highway of the 1990s. The structures of denial within the very media which could and should have recorded the genocide have combined with the more generic dilemma of acculturation to make a certain “forgetting” of the genocide by others a normative part of Armenian life. Hence the conclusion that “to forget the genocide would be to repudiate one’s people and one’s self” (Smith 5). Furthermore, remembering the Armenian

genocide has an urgency for Armenian survivors and descendants of survivors, an urgency which actually *increases* as the original generation of survivors slowly and steadily diminishes.¹¹

Immediately after the genocide, Armenian literature (generally of the diasporan community) first consumed itself with trying to find an appropriate form and medium to give voice to at least the initial *aghed* (“catastrophe”). The scholar-poet Leonardo Alishan details the conundrum as follows: “Without art there was madness. But with this madness what art could there be? What genre could comprehend this catastrophe? What genre could possibly hope to give formal shape to this atavistic insanity?” (349). Many writers never found a suitable medium and consequently avoided the subject of “this atavistic insanity.” Certainly, confronting the genocide in art would have presented a task particularly formidable in unsympathetic or unknowing host cultures. The only response imaginable was Zapel Esayan’s almost solipsistic sublimation: “I feel that I should let out the scream of the nation suffering for centuries under the yoke of oppression and slavery. I ought to let out the scream of liberation with my personal talent and my intrinsic power” (qtd. in Peroomian 240). As Esayan’s conditional rhetoric indicates (“I should” and “I ought to”), the inexpressibility of the horrors, added to the denial of Turkish governments, paralyzed Armenian artists and writers, preventing them from attaining the necessary distance from which they “should have” approached the genocide:

The [Armenian] artist is caught between serving his art and convincing the world of his people’s collective catastrophe.... Our experience remains historically undigested. We are caught in a yesterday that devours our today and denounces our tomorrow. (Alishan 352)

I would like to linger on this final phrase, for it suggests the baffling, illogical situation of the unacknowledged yet unforgotten genocide and the subsequent diaspora experience. The *aghed* also manifests itself as intergenerational incomprehension. Jack Antreassian expresses this post-genocidal problem of transmission as generational inversion: “as a community, our roots, so to speak, are younger than our branches,” by which he means that the replacement of a pre-genocide “authentic sense” of Armenian tradition and culture developed much after the establishment of post-genocide communities of diasporan Armenians (252). Not only will hereditary, ethnic Armenianness require a certain finessing of the ordinary methods of filiation, but there is also the intimation that Armenian diasporan culture has become dependent on its own parochial need to cluster around the few survivors and their narratives.

Egoyan's particular diasporan experience can be usefully situated in this context. He was born in Cairo in 1960 to Armenian parents; the Yeghoyan (later Egoyan) family emigrated to Victoria, British Columbia, when Atom was three, in part because of the "tremendous amount of antagonism toward the Armenian population [in Egypt] at that time" (Naficy 222). In British Columbia, where Egoyan's teachers called him the "little Arab," his immediate family were the only Armenian-speakers (Naficy 186–9):

Armenian was my mother tongue but at a certain point it seemed absurd to me to continue speaking it. I didn't even want to speak it. I remember distinctly my parents speaking it to me, my grandmother in particular, and closing my ears and not wanting to speak it because for me it was part of being called an Arab boy, it was part of what excluded me. (Naficy 188)

It was when he attended the University of Toronto at the age of eighteen that Egoyan first became involved with a larger diasporan Armenian community and was exposed to "more political, almost militant Armenian nationalist activities through the student association" (Naficy 191).

Placing this Armenian nationalism in context, there was a burst of Armenian terrorist activity against Turkish civilians and diplomats in the 1970s by two diasporan terrorist organizations: the Beirut-based JCAG (Justice Commandos for the Armenian Genocide) and ASALA (the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia). Much debate in the diasporan community focused on the effectiveness, morality, and rationality of these acts, and in particular on ASALA's five step rationale for terrorism, based in part upon a series of metonymic exchanges and connotations compatible with the principles of trauma "logic"; these included the compression of historical time, the collapse of a distinction between personal and cultural memory, and the transference of past crimes onto the current Turkish government.¹² Egoyan's films also dramatize trauma and engage in lavish substitutions between personal and cultural memory. But it is worth underscoring that symbolic substitutions do not necessarily create terrorists. When I asked Egoyan how his work engages with the genocide, he responded: "I am never sure how to answer this. [As an Armenian] you are raised with the knowledge of the genocide, but you can't assume that [the host country] has even acknowledged it... Do I use my political platform? ... Or do I say we have to get over it?" (*Discussion*). Such statements make explicit the epistemological inquiry and ambivalence the genocide instigates and set the stage for the remembrance strategies mapped out in Egoyan's second feature film, *Family Viewing*.

The Case of *Family Viewing*

In *Family Viewing* (as notoriously difficult to summarize as any of Egoyan's tangled films), the Armenian genocide is *never* explicitly mentioned, and it can only be surmised through the various allegorical and symbolic clues Egoyan provides. In Egoyan's own words, "the film observes the breakdown and restoration of a dislocated family," a family composed of non-Armenians, Armenians, and the hybrid child Van: respectively, the non-Armenian father, Stan, his son, Van, Van's Armenian grandmother, Armen, and her Armenian daughter—Van's missing mother, who is never named in the film (*Exotica* 153). Because of the complicated chronology and palimpsest of narratives in the film, there is much pre-history that the film clarifies only retrospectively. The movie begins with seventeen-year-old Van living with Stan (a successful video dealer) and Stan's WASP lover Sandra in an ultramodern condominium in Toronto. From Stan's home videos we learn that Van, Stan, and Van's mother originally lived together in a house along with Armen, with whom Van spoke Armenian despite his father's attempts to teach him English. Stan also shot homemade S/M video-porn with Van's unhappy mother. Eventually, Stan sent Armen to a nursing home, Van learned more English, and Van's mother left the family without giving a forwarding address. Stan and Van moved to a condo, and Sandra moved in. During this time, Stan recorded homemade porn of himself and Sandra, but these new images are recorded over home videos of Van as a child with his mother and Armen. The porn videos are created with the help of Aline, an (Armenian) telephone sex worker, whose mother also happens to share a room with Armen in the nursing home.

The real time of the movie begins with Van meeting Aline while visiting Armen, then returning home to engage in an affair with his stepmother, Sandra. Van discovers his father's porn habits and *replaces* the old tapes with blank ones. At about the same time, Aline's mother dies while Aline is in Montreal with a client who "liked her voice"; Van *replaces* Aline's mother's identity tags with Armen's and pretends his own grandmother has died in order to carry out an Armenian funeral. He then presents Aline with the videotape of her mother's burial when she returns. Having convinced Stan that Armen is dead and buried, Van and Aline arrange to have Armen removed from the nursing home (without Stan knowing) so that Van can take care of her at Aline's apartment. However, in the meantime, Van's paranoid father notices Aline at "Armen's" grave and hires a private detective with expensive surveillance cameras to figure out who she is (Stan has never *seen* Aline because their sex acts have only ever been conducted via the non-visual medium of the telephone). Van's father eventually

surmises that Van has been stealing the old home videos and that Van seems to be hiding someone (although he does not know who), first at Aline's apartment, then at a hotel where Van and Aline work. The last section of the movie speeds through Armen's dislocations and resettlings in a variety of temporary sanctuaries (it is diaspora movement on an allegorical microscale). Finally, Van and Aline manage to camouflage Armen as a bag lady, smuggle her out of the hotel and into an ambulance, and reunite her with her daughter (Van's mother) in a women's hostel. Stan, meanwhile, ends his frustrated search for "the hidden person" in Armen's abandoned hotel room: exhausted, he lies on the floor, only to see his ex-wife's face momentarily appear on the hotel room television set, smiling knowingly.

For Stan, videotape—the ultimate, instantaneous recorder of family catastrophes—does not register reality but reconstructs it. The sting of the film stems from the problem that any reality is thus recorded over another; in this case, old family videos serve as this father's anything-but-blank canvases.¹³ Stan's video-erasure project is rendered pointless when his half-Armenian son switches the home videos with blank tapes; this is privileged knowledge for those with access to the imbedded cultural clues of Van's mother's language. Stan becomes enraged and, it is implied, impotent. The erotic power of Stan's pornography stems not from creating reality but from destroying Van's previous "screen memories," for Van's psychic life-memories are inextricably connected with his video-memories. Van rather glumly notes to Sandra, as they watch one of Stan's "films,"

Van: He's taping over everything.

Sandra: Is that you?

Van: Yes.

Sandra: I'm sorry Van, I had no idea. It's a thing he has....

He likes to record.

Van: And erase. He prefers to erase.

Throughout the film, Stan "stands" for the principle of deliberate attempted forgetting (albeit camouflaged as an act of recording new S/M pornography); erasure and forgetting are formally linked, and always viewed as violent.

Stan attempts to erase Van's memories of his Armenian mother, but this domestic erasure is conflated with Stan's attempted erasure of Van's Armenianness. Another central image of the film establishes Van's early resistance to his father's "erasing" and the process of acculturation through language change: in one of the "home videos" the toddler Van is shown outside, singing an Armenian song with his mother and grandmother. Stan's voice behind the

camera intones, “Van, can you sing Daddy an English song?” Van initially balks at this request, and his mother clutches him tighter. However, in the next video sequence, Van proudly sings “Baa-baa black sheep” to his father’s camera, while he and Stan (now inside the house) look down and outside at Van’s mother from behind a closed window. The seventeen-year-old Van is mesmerized by these videos, and employs them for his adolescent rebellion against his father (in a renewed Oedipal struggle) by watching himself resist his father as a child. Thus, Van’s present reality is also reconstructed through video viewing. As Egoyan says about the film: “the video is a means by which the boy sees his history and also a means by which he can activate his sense of history” (Naficy 209). It should be added that the need for diasporan Armenian speakers is one of the more volatile issues in the North American diaspora, with proponents of traditional Armenianness arguing that Armenian identity is contingent on knowledge of the Armenian language.¹⁴

A key moment in the film is the fantastical plot twist in which Van enacts a parallel rescue operation; not only does he retrieve his remaining childhood videotapes before his father can record over them, but he also hijacks his maternal grandmother, Armen, from the intolerable nursing home in which Stan keeps her incarcerated. The effort requires the creation of an elaborate scheme of mobile body switches and the help of Aline to keep both video and survivor protected: through rescuing their survivors, Egoyan suggests, diasporan Armenians can unite. This generational battle over videotape appears to parallel a larger fight over the integrity of the 1915 Armenian genocide “survivor” as symbol; certainly Egoyan also employs the loaded history in a name, in this case the city of Van, which endured for five weeks under Turkish siege during the genocide (Walker 206).¹⁵ Thus the fight for videotape as an expressive medium becomes inextricably tied up with wrestling over the “survivor” Armen (her name suggests an eponymous cultural icon), who apparently functions like film in a world of videotape: she is a living witness of the Armenian genocide and hence a site of memory and historical continuity. Unlike videotape, a “second-generation” medium which can be recorded over, its earlier language erased (as second-generation immigrant Van becomes assimilated and loses his Armenian language), “first-generation” film retains its image until it disintegrates or is destroyed. In other words, the first-generation genocide survivor Armen retains her Armenianness; her ability to testify becomes analogous with the immutability of film. Van must perform a parallel rescue operation of his grandmother as well as of the videotapes because, for diasporan Armenians, the representations of genocide (on video) are not permanent enough: the effectiveness of Turkish revisionism serves as a constant reminder of this point. Van must therefore control the means of producing Armenian

history with a “pure” source of Armenianness: the root or core identity which Armen maintains.¹⁶

Survivor, film, and videotape “remember” the graphic violence set in front of them: many genocide survivors describe their memories of the past in distinctly visual, often specifically cinematic, terms. One interviewed said, “Sometimes, like a movie, I see my past.” And another: “I think about my past all the time. It comes in front of my eyes like a dream. You don’t want to think of those incidents, but they come to your eyes” (Miller and Miller, *Survivors* 157). *Family Viewing* speculates that when future generations of Armenians “recall” this genocide history, it is with the survivor’s narratives and descriptive, cinematographic packaging still present. In other words, Egoyan’s film suggests that recent Armenian diaspora identity might elide the particular content of the genocide testimony, but retain a generalized sense of survivor trauma, as well as the memory’s formal structure “like a movie” (or, more accurately for second-generation, late-twentieth-century Armenians, “like a video”).

Family Viewing explores how Armenian diaspora identity may be constantly renegotiated in relationship to the concept of “survivor,” thereby positioning “survivors” to do an extraordinary amount of signifying work in diasporan society. They must be live witnesses to the 1915 genocide, but they must also represent a sense of Armenian ethnicity (especially with their knowledge of the old-world language and culture) for their extended community.¹⁷ In a diaspora atmosphere in which non-Armenians so repeatedly deny the genocide, either overtly or inadvertently, an inordinate amount of weight is given to these figures who ostensibly signify an essential Armenian identity while simultaneously guaranteeing the genocide’s immutability as a historical event, impervious to Turkish denial and collective amnesia. Survivors, or some similar authority, are relied upon to inscribe “Armenianness.” Egoyan himself contends that a key issue in his films is “the notion of a silent witness ... people who have secrets but cannot actually express them because they’ve been traumatized into silence” (Naficy 222).

Jenny Phillips observes that there is even a fetishism of genocide paraphernalia: “At a recent annual gathering to commemorate the Armenian genocide, an Armenian priest held up an old torn pair of trousers which had been removed from the body of a child, killed during the genocide. The priest said that when he handles the child’s trousers he feels as though he is touching the robe of the Lord” (2–3). Although Phillips considers the problems of contested symbols of Armenian collectivity, she does not dwell on the confusion arising from the objectification and fetishism of the survivor. The living witnesses essentially become artifacts which are “then transformed into symbols ... these symbols constitute in part the basis of a shared Armenian identity” (2). A signifier/signified

distinction might prove useful here: one problem with this paradigm of survivor as symbol is that in order for the signifier, a survivor, to display its power, it need not necessarily speak, but must only be present to stand in arbitrarily for the signified. As survivors become signifiers, they become detached from their ability to comment on, or gain observational distance from, their signification. Paradoxically, they may even accrue a certain power from silence. In the film, the two mother/survivors, Aline's mother and Van's grandmother, lie beside one another in the nursing home, but we have no reason to believe that they discern this common experience and the culture they share. They are so alone in their similar isolation that they cannot even speak to one another; we later learn that they are almost interchangeable, indistinguishable to Stan and to the nurses who dress them daily.

The irony is that this depiction of survivor fetishism as a silent signifier fulfills Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of the Other "which embodies ... horror or monstrosity" in order to solidify a society. *Family Viewing* exaggerates this depiction of survivor as Other: the two m/others cannot communicate because their function is to be different from and for everyone else, to signify anguish and anxiety. Moreover, Armenian women "from the old country" never express themselves to the viewer in "real time" diegesis.¹⁸ We can only hear Armen whisper in Armenian in the restructured, carefully replayed home videos. The implication might be that survivors cannot testify unencumbered by video because their presence as survivors has its own, almost overwhelming power as the embodiment of the genocide (the living witness). Bridging the next gap and in fact telling their stories would uncontrollably and distressingly replay the trauma. According to "Seta," a survivor at least one generation removed,

My generation often didn't want to hear about the genocide. My mother talks about a rape and it's a disgusting story that her mother told her. When she used to tell me some of these things she had such a vengeance in her voice that I didn't want her to talk about it. It was frightening. She hadn't witnessed it and yet she is carrying this hatred on down from yet another generation. (Phillips 249)

Alternatively, survivor silence in the film might signify the survivor's social role on the border between life and death: their function is both to be remembered and to remember the deaths of others. Consider the exchange between Van and Stan after Stan informs his son that Armen has died: "Stan: Your grandmother just passed away. Van: Let me look after her now." Van's words imply that Armen's memory is as important as her life: she now has passed into a shadowy zone where she is dead to some, alive to

others, and Egoyan's formal conceit turns this metaphor into the film's reality.

In *Family Viewing*, Egoyan posits a formal device to enact the ineffable emotional and ideological bondage to the (Armenian) past. Armen lies vegetating in a nursing-home bed, only moving her eyes to watch vicious "nature documentaries," perhaps a veiled reference to the terrors she presumably witnessed as a survivor: instead of watching predatory animals, she witnessed people acting like animals. From the *odar* ("foreign" or "non-Armenian") Stan's point of view, she is a silent, maternal monster. Her Otherness is exaggerated by her trans-sexual qualities, for the name *Armen* is uniquely masculine in Armenian; when Stan arrives at the nursing home to visit her, Armen stares at him, says nothing, and then swiftly digs her nails into his cheeks. Her immobility, combined with her viciously masculine swiftness, smothers the distinctions of genitalia, enveloping and negating the binarisms of gender constructs. This scene suggests that in her androgyny, Armen negates propagation of Armenianness according to conventional methods. It is remarkably fitting that she is placed in the stagnancy of a nursing home: she is both impossible to keep and impossible to abandon, sucking money and energy away from the young as she sits in her stasis. Perroomian dramatically writes of the Armenian literary responses to the genocide in much the same way that Armen is depicted in the film:

Is it possible to leave memories behind and look back to them peacefully and rationally as past experiences? Is it possible to render meaning to these experiences, create the masterpiece, the last echo of the literary responses to catastrophe? ... There is no answer. (246)

This conundrum is informed by all aspects of these survivor's lives, which must now include the production of the dominant host culture: Armen's "attack" on her son-in-law is crosscut with a "nature" documentary, ironically glossing the supposedly predatory nature of these familial relationships. With the film screen filled with the televised image of an owl with a mouse in its beak, the voice-over intones: "Although this attack occurred in daylight, owls can locate a mouse in light ten to twenty times less than that needed by the human eye."

Family Viewing also creates an explicit connection between the labyrinthine Armenian cultural bondage to the genocide and the daily, fairly routine, late-twentieth-century texts of S/M bondage. Early in the film, after a scene of S/M telephone sex, Egoyan cuts to a scene of Van and his father watching television and discussing the issue of commitment:

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoyan

Van: Dad, when you're not feeling connected, and someone ties you into something, that person is good for you, right?

Stan: I think it depends.

Van: On what?

Stan: What they tie you into.

Van: If they tie you into feeling good?

Stan: About what?

Van: Good about yourself.

Stan: [small gasp] What was the question?

At this point in the film, we have enough clues to assume Van is rather intrepidly alluding to his culturally forbidden affair with his stepmother Sandra; likewise, Stan is answering back in terms of his own bleakly dominating S/M activities, both with Sandra and with Van's mother. Stan appears shocked that his adolescent son would have insight into his own sexually "mature" fantasies. But then Van clarifies himself; he is in fact alluding to a very different sort of bondage, which is not by a thing but of a feeling: "Stan: [small gasp] What was the question? Van: Dad, I think that Armen is good for me." The "ties" of tradition (familial loyalties) and the "ties" of sexual bondage are delineated in the same terms, but, even more arresting, both men need the uniting medium of home video to complete the bondage feedback loop. Stan does not just need the service of telephone sex operators (inextricably "tied up" with Armenianness in the figure of Aline) as an aid to arousal, he needs to videotape the project *over* his old home videos. When Aline doesn't call and Stan fails to perform, Sandra suggests they "do it without her." Stan judges this remark to be demented and responds, "[Van] took the videos!" For, clearly, in this film the most erotic act is to organize and rework a traditional yet traumatic narrative, in this case as a depiction of a power interaction between a man and a woman.

On a more symbolic level, it is perhaps understandable that pleasure and power are, so to speak, tied up (for post-genocide Armenians like Egoyan) in what is essentially an act of historical revisionism, a rewriting by the "dominatrix" (Turkish and/or North American) culture on top of the suppressed "other" (Armenian) narratives. For Egoyan, the issues that are intertwined in his film are centrally concerned with domination and pleasure, suppression and forgetting. For Van to "bond" with his grandmother, he too must drag in home videos to the nursing home in place of the savage nature documentaries they watched earlier, and Armen's smile suggests that she is pleased with the replacement. Again, the empowering move is to replace one "documentary fiction" with another; home videos are substituted for nature documentaries. The images that initially represent Armen as the predatory owl become,

with merely a swap of the videocassette, images which represent her as the sad, human Armenian survivor/mother who still suffers.

As previously noted, because the other, “more natural” media of recording history have been tampered with or are simply not utilizable in post-genocide Armenian culture, the survivor’s body takes on something like the imprinting power of a film surface. But there is an untenable ramification of this conjunction between survivor and film-memory: in order to give the proper and necessary respect and remembrance to the Armenian genocide, as well as to write their own Armenian identity, future generations of Armenians have to break the Oedipal taboo and be smothered by the m/other. In Egoyan’s films, the forbidden desire is S/M/survivor sex, to be dominated by the mother/grandmother who wields the cultural leather whip. Van essentially risks this veiled metonymical substitution in his affair with his stepmother and Aline, the Armenian mother substitute (she is of an older generation than he).¹⁹

But being sexually dominated by this supposed monster-mother, Armen, does not advance a very sustainable paradigm. That Oedipal drive has been depicted by previous generations of Armenian writers, and the *aghed* remained unexorcised, as monstrous as ever; the Oedipal transgression is not likely to be any more successful now. Being dominated by Armen drowns post-genocide Armenians in silence, while the question remains: Is there any formal way to affirm and commemorate the body of the survivor/m/other and the testimony inscribed on her body without being consumed by its silence? Egoyan rather pointedly and dramatically implies, at the very beginning of *Family Viewing*, that there is one metonymical substitution that might work—videotape for survivor—and thus one strategy left that might flirt with the Oedipal taboo and still work through the genocide. In the scene in which we first learn that Van is having an affair with his stepmother, the screen warps and freezes. It is worth situating the scene and cinematography as well, for Egoyan underscores the fact that this is Stan’s world of television and video (which we continually watch Stan watching). Van and Sandra are in Stan’s condominium, and all of these condo scenes are shot on a live sound stage with videotape and a jarringly inappropriate television laugh track. Just before the crucial moment of consummation with a kiss, the televised film on which we are apparently watching this soap opera “rewinds” back to the beginning of the scene. By capturing betrayal on videotape as opposed to film, the director (or, by implication, the viewer of videotape) can flirt with, manipulate, and bring under control the orgasmic, absolutely prohibited sexual moment. Instead of acting out the oedipal desire, there may be some protection and sexual release in adoring, fetishizing, and “messing with” the next

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoyan

best thing, the videotape that records and, amazingly, rerecords reality. Thus, *Family Viewing* projects (back at us) our fantasy to rewind and re-tape history in order to erase those colossal catastrophes, whether personal or cultural, that were “not supposed to happen.” The logical extension of this fantasy might require survivors to say something entirely different from their survival testimony, but in a diaspora culture that depends on survivors as constitutive of Armenianness, this desire might be as culturally forbidden as incest.

Thus, video manipulation becomes the viable method to control memories and fetishes that threaten to escalate uncontrollably; playing with video becomes a means to miniaturize and thus control the symbolic universe, thereby mastering what it means to be a “survivor” or a survivor’s descendant in order to control both the trauma and the fantasy of its erasure.²⁰ After Aline’s mother saves up enough pills to kill herself, Van spectacularly and imperturbably orchestrates a switch of the bodies, burying Aline’s mother as his grandmother in order to fool his *odar*-father into “giving him” the survivor-body. Aline (removed from the scene through her willingness to stop flirting with S/M on the phone and actually perform for a client in Montreal) returns, and is shocked to find her mother dead and buried in an unmarked grave. In a scene somewhere between horror and absurdity, Aline and Van view the tape of her funeral as if previewing a commercial film in a video rental store, surrounded by film boxes of schmaltzy commercial horror films (Figures 1–3). Egoyan, never reticent with visual metaphors, coyly frames the screen with boxes of *Ghost Story*, *The Medusa Touch*, *The Thing*, and *Firestarter*.

[Aline stares transfixed at the television]

Van: I thought you’d like to see it, that’s why I recorded it....

You are wondering why I didn’t wait. I thought I was doing you a favor.

Aline: [flatly] A favor.

Van: Yes.

Aline: That was my mother.

Van: I left the stone blank, you can put down whatever you want.

Aline: You’re sick.

Van: I would have called you but you didn’t leave a number.

It was a good funeral, Aline, believe me. You wouldn’t have done it any differently.

Aline: I would have *been* there.

Van: But you weren’t. You were out of town. And now you’re watching it.



Figure 1: A video-store employee, Van, and Aline view Aline's mother's funeral at the video store.



Figure 2: The Armenian eulogy on videotape.



Figure 3: Van offers Aline the videotape of her portable trauma.

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoyan

Aline: On television.

Van: Yes. You're just not in the right mood. But when you are you can play it, [hands her the video] anytime you want.

Aline: [takes it from him, and immediately flings it violently to the ground]

Although Aline is too late to witness the actual catastrophe of her mother's death as memorialized in a funeral (complete with a fully regaled Armenian Orthodox priest), Van has "thoughtfully" recorded it for her so she can work through the experience whenever she is "in the right mood." For a survivor's descendant, the actual event of the genocide, that primal scene of cultural trauma, is repeatedly missed and secretly yearned for. Filming the funeral seems a way to escape this lateness, to control and manipulate the desired and despised moment. In Van's eyes, he has given Aline a gift ("I thought I was doing you a favor"); he assumes that every postmodern trauma victim's dream is to have caught the original catastrophe in a form that can be twisted and tamed. If Aline chooses to emulate Van's model and take the tape, she can play back her "trauma-tape," rewind it, and technically alter the images that haunt her, or at least these tokens of them, whenever she is emotionally prepared to. Crucially, those images are ultimately only emblematic of Aline's perceived trauma: every "screen memory" is "not the relevant experience itself" but another displaced image, a point that might help explain Aline's initial ambivalence towards the tape (Freud, "Screen Memories" 307). Additionally, banal technical mishaps are integrated into the catastrophe itself: Van explains that the "pretty simple eulogy" is now missing because he "couldn't get the sound to work." Despite these drawbacks, only a few scenes later it is suggested that Aline accepts Van's relationship to memory: she decides to leave the gravestone uncut and hence unmarked. Thus the symbol of her mother's death itself becomes a perpetual potential site to be engraved or marked up, like videotape. She is prepared for this new relationship to her mother's death despite the momentary vertigo it produces ("Is this my mother's grave?") for at least two reasons. First of all, keeping the videotaped version permits her catastrophe to remain as mobile as she is: to members of a frequently relocating diaspora, portable trauma might be eminently practical; the need for lengthy, alterable historical explanations of genocide can be replaced if the event is simply captured on a few minutes of videotape and instantly accessible. Secondly, the catastrophe caught on videotape offers Aline the greater mastery of "imprintability": besides watching her trauma, she could also choose to rerecord over it or to never watch it at all. The downside of this strategy is that the "unmarked grave" would

hypothetically defer the “moment of trauma” in a containable, cryogenic freeze-frame, perpetually unconsummated in memory.

What is perhaps implicit in this argument is Mary Ann Doane’s conception of televisual catastrophe. According to Doane, “Television deals not with the weight of the dead past but with the potential trauma and explosiveness of the present” (222). The temporal model of “information, crisis, catastrophe” is not what television depicts but the model on which television is built: because television emphasizes the disruption of information flow in depicting events, “it often seems that television itself is formed on the model of catastrophe” (229). Although Doane does not suggest that television “catastrophe” and “trauma” are necessarily one and the same, *Family Viewing* posits a situation in which these two terms *are* interchangeable. In other words, if the dominant medium of information production and dissemination (television) perpetuates a certain thinking about catastrophe as the discontinuity and rupture of information continuity and flow, one contemporary method to manage “trauma” might be to assign it the status of a “catastrophe” on television. Eventually, this catastrophe could be controlled and transformed into the mundane by turning what was once “live footage” into the most predictably banal “file footage.”²¹

Thus, Aline is willing to give “earlier” catastrophes video space in the present because, at least to some small extent, it is a space she can assign and thus control. Her S/M telephone operator job also suggests that she is entrenched in these technically “clean” exploitations of trauma: she can pick up the phone and enter into this disturbing S/M relationship as the dominatrix, mostly on her own terms:

Get on your knees... Bite your shoulder. Alright, your arm then! Are you biting hard? Harder! Now, nose to the floor. The floor! Rub it into the carpet. The wood then! Of course it hurts! I want it to hurt. You deserve it! Harder! Then let it bleed!

In this fantasy, the power dynamic is therapeutically reversed, but only for as long as she can disassociate from the “original site” of trauma and place this current crisis in its own space, her flow of S/M narrative.²² Appropriately, Aline fails to complete a porn call (to Stan) made from home because she is “distracted” by, we assume, her grief, her past, her cultural taboos, and a connection to her Armenian identity that does not tolerate a space in which to dominate the *aghed*. She hangs up the phone, disrupting Stan and Sandra’s information flow, and weeps uncontrollably: Doane’s space of catastrophe is revisited. Similarly, in the “reality” world of her trip to Montreal as a prostitute, we watch her (from the fuzzy voyeuristic gaze of a surveillance camera) “act” surprisingly passive.

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoyan

Evidently, working through the medium of the telephone offers her a way to battle sexual crises on the advantageous, miniaturized terrain of technology.

By the end of the film, if not before, we gradually learn that Stan's motivation is also one of working through; "tired of complications," he too is trying to erase old memories, constructing an alternative history in which his current wife, Sandra, will replace the haunting image of his first, Armenian wife. Sandra is not only a replacement image; in her inability to remember or to even consider the Oedipal taboos she breaks, she represents or perhaps even becomes that frightening act of historical revisionism, perpetually un-ironically humming "Greensleeves" ("Alas, my love, you do me wrong / to cast me out discourteously ..."). She coyly offers to help Van on his World War II history homework, revealing that her "dad fought in that war ... he used to tell us stories." Van, always intrigued with history, presses her to tell them, but she can only shrug and laugh: "Can't remember!" The Holocaust, too, is elided from Sandra's historiography.

Stan, however, remains the most menacing character in the film. To underscore this point, it might be worthwhile to explain the extra layers of meaning in the character's names. Nearly all Armenian last names end in *-an* (*-yan* or *-ian*, meaning "from the family of"), and each of the named characters in the film has some version of this Armenian patronymic label: **Sandra**, **Stan**, **Van**, and **Aline** (the last, admittedly, is jumbled). The explanation for "Armen" is slightly more complicated. Armenians do not actually call themselves Armenians, but *Hye* (pronounced "hi"). Thus for Egoyan to name Van's grandmother the masculine name "Armen" invokes a codified label of Armenian Otherness to English speakers, and an inappropriate, mis-gendered name in Armenian. The silent grandmother might be the essence of Armenianness, but such iconic density excludes her from English or Armenian. Even more ominous is Egoyan's naming of "Stan." In Armenian, the homeland is not "Armenia" but *Hayastan*. Quite literally, Stan illustrates the perils of ethnic cleansing; he is the living embodiment of *Hayastan* without the *Hyes*. His postmodern version of memory and culture (revisionist and antiseptic) depicts a new Armenian nation: a diaspora disoriented and disconnected from its homeland, but also obsessed with a past betrayal.

Stan's version of allegorical nationhood is not without its problems: by means of the climactic game of hide-and-seek at the end of the film, Stan must obsessively search for this elusive past he believes his son is hiding from him. His aim is literally to "pin down" these video images of his first wife with his own, constructed life narratives. Attempting to escape the subordinating posture of being overtaken in the present (of being rewritten by ghosts), he

dramatically slips into the very obsessions he is trying to dominate. “Memories!” he explains while bribing a hotel clerk; “These things possess you at the strangest of times!” As he ransacks Armen’s now vacated hotel room, the object of his obsessed surveillance becomes more and more remote; it is unclear whether he desires the body of his wife, his mother-in-law, or the videotaped images (or whether he can distinguish among them anymore). Collapsing on the floor, he looks up at the blank, inanimate screen of the hotel room television and finds both the ultimate horror and, perhaps, the ultimate fantasy: the smiling image of his wife on screen, presumably freed from the bounds of videotape and caught “live” on television.

On the other hand, Aline and Van’s version of diasporan culture aims to integrate the personal, collective, and technological. In their frantic oscillations between presence and absence, the very attempts to chase after images in video give a different form to both personal and cultural memory. For Aline and Van, these relocations, reminiscent of the measures taken to stave off genocide and exile, would propel Armen into a better place than “she started”:

Van: I could report that I found someone sleeping ... they’d think she was a bag lady, they’d take her away.

Aline: But she needs care.

Van: They’d see that; she’d be put somewhere.

Aline: A home.

Van: Of some sort.

Aline: So she wouldn’t end up where she started.

Van: But we’d find her, track her down, look at every possible place they could put her.

Aline: Do you know how much time that would take?

Van: We have time.

By creating, on film (as opposed to videotape), all these unfinished loops of wild-goose chases, Egoyan’s film provisionally gives genocide memory the body it lacks: the final image of *Family Viewing* depicts a fantastical scene with the same haunting background music employed in scenes of Van’s videotaped childhood. An oscillating, ominous surveillance camera leads our gaze to Armen, Aline, Van, and *Van’s mother* together in a women’s hostel. Van and Aline’s willingness to lose Armen repeatedly, then to seek her out, “find her, [and] track her down,” evokes the diasporan experience of exile, dispersion, immigration, and return and proposes that this experience can itself be re-framed to constitute Armenianness.²³ *Family Viewing* suggests that the survivor in the diaspora may now be released from what has become her single most important charge: holding open generational space and time in which Armenianness can be propagated, for it is the descendants of sur-

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoyan

vivors, such as Aline and Van, who possess time in the future to reinvent an Armenian identity.

However, can a diasporan identity, reliant upon survivors and trauma in order to maintain its current position, be sustained in the future without these key concepts? *Family Viewing* leaves this question unanswered. *Calendar* (1993), Egoyan's most recent film to engage with Armenia, asks a similar question, while more explicitly rejecting the "trauma" model of Armenian identity. In that film, the diasporan Armenian sent to photograph a calendar of Armenian churches, played by Egoyan himself, offers one view of Armenia and the situation the post-genocide Armenian is trapped in:

A church and a fortress. A fortress in ruins. All that's meant to protect us, is bound to fall apart, bound to become contrived, useless and absurd. All that's meant to protect is bound to isolate, and all that is meant to isolate is bound to hurt.

The photographer's ex-wife foregoes this traumatic relationship with Armenia, but she also remains in the Armenian homeland with the native tour guide. In other words, unlike her photographer ex-husband, she evades the problem of diaspora identity altogether by "going native." Once again, the question remains: How sufficient is this diasporan identity based on a model of exile, dispersion, and regrouping? Finally, to complicate this question further, both *Family Viewing* and *Calendar* insist that film, cameras, and video technology are now enmeshed in this diasporan space and will contribute to new myths, while displacing others. Thus, in *Family Viewing*, the last scene of the reunited family is crosscut with Van's video flashback (figure 4): with his mother and Armen in the distance, the toddler Van clutches a stuffed Mickey Mouse, confronts his father's video camera, and shields his eyes from its blinding, incisive lens.



Figure 4: Toddler Van gazing into his father's video camera.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Atom Egoyan for enthusiastically providing assistance and permission to quote and reproduce images from his films. I am also very grateful to Professors Ruth Leys, Walter Benn Michaels, and Khachig Tölölyan for their astute comments and timely suggestions; to Shawn Rosenheim I owe a special debt for introducing me to Egoyan's films and deftly guiding this essay through multiple versions. Michael Davitt Bell's comments and encouragement constantly reminded me that remembering is rarely simple, and this essay is dedicated to his memory.
2. For a summary of the relational aspect of primal scenes in Freud's work, see the entry on "deferred action" in Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*.
3. Understandably, Egoyan criticism is at an early stage. Some influential film critics such as Paul Virilio have dealt admirably with Egoyan's postmodern playfulness and with some issues the films raise (such as the fraught relationship between mimetic recording versus reconstructed reality and the binarism of self/Other) without considering the decisive role that Egoyan's ethnic background plays in his formal decisions (Desbarats et al.). For example, Danièle Rivière provides a lengthy exegesis on the naming of protagonists Hera and Noah in *The Adjuster*, but leaves out Noah's landing on Mount Ararat in the biblical story and the iconic significance of Ararat to Armenians (Rivière 83–4). As Egoyan himself points out, it is "the most fetishized symbol" of Armenia (Naficy 219). Peter Harcourt thoughtfully considers questions of colonialism and acculturation in *Family Viewing*, but neglects the specific role of the genocide in Armenian diasporan culture (Harcourt 6–7). Jack H. Aslanian attempts to rescue Egoyan for Armenians (and, in so doing, neglects the contemporary Canadian aspects of Egoyan's films) (Aslanian 16–22). The most comprehensive and considered examination of Egoyan's ethnicity is in a detailed interview conducted by Hamid Naficy (Naficy 179–231).
4. Robert Melson's comprehensive *Revolution and Genocide* explores this relationship fully. See also William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies" and Richard Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*.
5. Rubina Perroomian writes: "The secret of [Armenians'] survival lies, perhaps, in their collective effort to overcome catastrophe by investing it with meaning. The Armenian creative mind strove to find a way to understand the calamity by formulating a response to it" (3). Holocaust theologian Emil Fackenheim more specifically details the profanity of any response, as quoted by Jacqueline Rose: "The Holocaust is a 'more than poetic truth,' a truth that can be measured only by its failure to represent itself: 'each and every explanation is false, if not downright obscene, unless it is accompanied by a sense of utter inadequacy'" (214).
6. "White genocide" describes assimilation in catastrophic terms, claiming that Armenian language and tradition are being irretrievably forgotten in the host countries, especially because Armenians throughout North America remain such a negligible ethnic minority (less than a million in both the United States and Canada) and remain so dispersed (except for a few key communities such as those in Los Angeles, Boston, and New York).
7. For a succinct contextual analysis of this quotation see Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide* 401–09.
8. The Karabakh conflict is complicated by the fact that another Armenian ethnic enclave, Nakhichevan, which was ceded to Azerbaijan after the genocide, experienced a demographic decline in Armenians from 15% in the 1920s to 1.4% in 1979; the Karabakh Armenians feared that they too would lose their demographic dominance (Suny 188).
9. See also Suny: "Allied with the [US], present-day Turkey refuses to acknowledge the historical experience on which its own territorial hegemony is based. Armenians must be purged from memory, not only in Turkey but internationally as well, and Kurds must be forcibly transformed into 'Mountain Turks'" (115). For an analysis of specific, recent instances of Turkish revisionism, see Smith, Markusen, and Lifton, "Professional Ethics" 1–22.
10. April 24, 1915, evokes the Turkish state's Interior Ministry order, given on that day, "authorizing the arrest of all Armenian political and community leaders suspected of anti-Ittihad

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoian

or nationalistic sentiments,” which led to the arrest and incarceration of 2,345 people, most of whom were subsequently executed (Dadrian 221).

11. In *Survivors*, Miller and Miller note that “after approximately 50 years of relatively low-level political demands for recognition of the genocide, the pursuit of justice by survivors” in the 1970s and 1980s suddenly became increasingly violent; a number of *grandchildren* of Armenian genocide survivors took retribution into their own hands, assassinating diplomats and political officials (167). For a comprehensive examination of the cultural factors working here, see Tölölyan, “Cultural Narrative,” and Miller and Miller, “Memory and Identity.”

12. Miller and Miller describe the five-step rationale for terrorism. Paraphrased, it suggests that genocide is an incontrovertible crime (without a statute of limitations) that has never been resolved; since the Republic of Turkey is now the “logical” extension of the Ottoman Empire, ASALA concludes that contemporary representatives of the present-day government are culpable for the Genocide of 1915 (“Memory” 24–5).

13. The paintings on the wall of the condominium serve as a constant visual and aesthetic reminder of Stan’s project. They are abstract expressionist works under the sign of erasure, to borrow Jacques Derrida’s phrase: large canvases mostly covered with a scrubbed whitewash. The under-painting’s color remains visible only at the edges of the frame.

14. While the first generation overwhelmingly speaks Armenian (78%), only 19.1% of the second generation do (Bakalian 257). According to Bakalian, the debate over language can be summarized in two polar positions: “the proponents of traditional Armenianness argue that fluency in Armenian qualifies a person to be a legitimate member of the Armenian community. That is, Armenian identity is contingent on knowledge of language, hence culture.” On the other hand, a greater number of Armenian-Americans view themselves as symbolic Armenians, who “contend that under ideal conditions it is of course desirable to retain language use, but not if it is at the cost of their ability to make a comfortable living and achieve mobility in the dominant society” (Bakalian 253).

15. The story of Van has taken on legendary status in Armenian history; it resembles the Jewish Warsaw ghetto uprising, but this uprising succeeded. In mid-April 1915, the Turkish governor of Van, Djvedet Bey, ordered 4,000 Armenians to report to be drafted in the Ottoman Army; following the pattern of genocide extermination since 1914, these men were certain to be massacred. Armenian draftees declined to report as ordered, and by April 19 Djvedet issued a general order that “the Armenians must be exterminated. If any Muslim protect a Christian, first, his house shall be burnt; then the Christian killed before his eyes, then his [the Muslim’s] family and himself.” (qtd. in Walker 206–7). However, during that week the Van Armenians prepared for a Turkish onslaught, building extra walls to protect the old city of Van and the new suburb of Aikesdan. From April 20 to May 16, 1915, Van held up under siege by the Turkish army, until the Turks retreated in defeat and “the advance guard of the Russian army, consisting of Armenian volunteers, arrived” (Walker 205–9). In keeping with this historical account of Van, in *Family Viewing* the door of Van’s room is covered with a vintage movie poster displaying the prominent (and apropos) title “THE TANKS ARE COMING.”

16. Bakalian describes the role of grandparents in the diaspora: “The grandmother is a symbol of the Genocide, of survival, of love. She is a link to the past, to one’s roots, to one’s identity” (373).

17. According to Jenny Phillips, “One shared symbol drawn from [the era of the genocide] is that of *the survivor*. It is felt that those Armenians who witnessed and survived the genocide provide a vital link with the pre-diaspora Armenian past” (2).

18. Bordwell and Thompson define diegesis as, “in a narrative film, the world of the film’s story. The diegesis includes events that are presumed to have occurred and actions and spaces not shown onscreen” (492).

19. The fact that Aline and Van are of different generations is alluded to in one of the first scenes of the film: when Van introduces himself to Aline, he asks if Aline is visiting her grandmother. Her response that she is visiting her mother surprises Van, and suggests that Van and Aline are a generation apart, although visually this is not immediately apparent.

Diaspora 6:2 1997

20. Margaret Morse connects the act of watching and taping the world via television with the process of miniaturization, "An attempt to master and control the world, which one can then enter in one's imagination by making oneself very small . . . miniaturization is a process of interiorization, enclosure, and perfection, one in which the temporal dimensions of narrative or history are transformed into spatial ones, a plenitude of description of seemingly endless details" (211).

21. Doane suggests that "file footage" serves as filler because television cannot sustain the idea of "stored information": "re-used images, unless carefully orchestrated in the construction of nostalgia, undermine the appeal to the 'live' and the instantaneous which buttresses the news" (226).

22. In *The Adjustor*, Hera, another diasporan Armenian (played by the same actress, Arsinée Khanjian), works for the censor board for motives similar to Aline's choice of job as a telephone sex worker. Both are preoccupied with the need to control the combinations and representations of graphic violence and sex. Working as a censor, where she is constantly bombarded with disturbing images, provides Hera with at least a temporary sanctuary, because she is the one to control and classify an image's acceptability and social worth.

23. Shirinian schematizes the process of becoming a diasporan Armenian as a cycle of metaphorization consisting of destruction, exile, dispersion, immigration, and return (63).

Works Cited

Alishan, Leonardo P. "An Exercise on a Genre for Genocide and Exorcism." Hovannisian, *Genocide: History* 340–54.

Aslanian, Jack H. "Atom Egoyan's *Calendar*." *Ararat* (Spring 1994): 16–22.

Antreassian, Jack. "The Armenian in America: A Personal Viewpoint." Hovannisian, *Image* 251–6.

Bakalian, Anny. *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993.

Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson, eds. *An Introduction to Film Art*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993.

Dadrian, Vahakn N. *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*. Providence: Berghahn, 1995.

Desbarats, Carole, Danièle Rivière, Jacinto Lageira, and Paul Virilio. *Atom Egoyan*. Trans. Brian Holmes. Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1993.

Doane, Mary Ann. "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe." *Mellencamp* 222–39.

Egoyan, Atom, dir. *The Sweet Hereafter*. Ego Film Arts, 1997.

———. *Exotica: The Screenplay*. Interview and essay by Geoff Pevere. Toronto: Coach House, 1995.

———. Discussion. Oxford University Film Society. Magdalen College, Oxford. 13 November 1995.

———, dir. *Exotica*. Ego Film Arts, 1994.

———. *Speaking Parts: The Screenplay*. Toronto: Coach House, 1993.

———, dir. *Calendar*. Ego Film Arts, 1993.

———, dir. *The Adjustor*. Ego Film Arts, 1991.

———, dir. *Family Viewing*. Ego Film Arts, 1987.

Genocide and Diaspora in Egoyan

———, dir. *Next of Kin*. Ego Film Arts, 1984.

Fischer, Michael M.J. and Stella Grigorian. "Six to Eight Characters in Search of Armenian Civil Society amidst the Carnivalization of History." *Perilous States: Conversations on Culture, Politics and Nation*. Ed. George Marcus. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993. 81–130.

———. "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis." 1918 [1914]. *Complete Works*. Ed. James Strachey. Vol. 17. 3–122. London: Hogarth, 1953–1974.

———. "Screen Memories." 1903. *Complete Works*. Ed. James Strachey. Vol. 3. 301–22. London: Hogarth, 1953–1974.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. 222–37.

Harcourt, Peter. "Imaginary Images: The Films of Atom Egoyan." *Film Quarterly* 48:3 (1995): 2–14.

Hovannisian, Richard G., ed. *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.

———, ed. *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1986.

———, ed. *The Armenian Image in History and Literature*. Malibu: Urdena, 1981.

Laplanche, Jean and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Hogarth, 1973.

Malkasian, Mark. "*Gha-Ra-Bagh!*": *The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996.

Mellencamp, Patricia, ed. *The Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990.

Melson, Robert F. *Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.

Miller, Donald E. and Lorna Touryan Miller. "Memory and Identity Across the Generations: A Case Study of Armenian Survivors and their Progeny." *Qualitative Sociology* 14 (1991): 13–38.

———. *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

Morse, Margaret. "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television." Mellencamp 193–221.

Naficy, Hamid. "The Accented Style of the Independent Transnational Cinema: A Conversation with Atom Egoyan." *Cultural Producers in Perilous States: Editing Events, Documenting Change*. Ed. George Marcus. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997. 179–231.

Peroomian, Rubina. "Armenian Literary Responses to Genocide: The Artistic Struggle to Comprehend and Survive." Hovannisian, *Genocide: History* 222–49.

Phillips, Jenny. *Symbol, Myth, and Rhetoric: The Politics of Culture in an Armenian-American Population*. Series on Immigrant Communities and Ethnic Minorities in the United States and Canada 23. New York: AMS, 1989.

Rivière, Danièle. "The Place of the Spectator." Desbarats et al. 83–104.

Romney, Jonathan. "Exploitations." *Sight and Sound* 5:5 (May 1995): 6–8.

Rose, Jacqueline. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.

Diaspora 6:2 1997

Safran, William. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 83-99.

Shirinian, Lorne. *The Republic of Armenia and the Rethinking of the North-American Diaspora in Literature*. Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1992.

Smith, Roger. "The Armenian Genocide: Memory, Politics, and the Future." Hovannisian, *Genocide: History* 1-20.

Smith, Roger, Eric Markusen, and Robert Jay Lifton. "Professional Ethics and the Denial of the Armenian Genocide." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9 (Spring 1995): 1-22.

Suny, Ronald Grigor. *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.

Tölölyan, Khachig. "Cultural Narrative and the Motivation of the Terrorist." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (1987): 217-33.

Walker, Christopher J. *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation*. London: Croom Helm, 1980.

Wiener, Jon. "Static in Cyberspace: Free Speech on the Internet." *The Nation* 258 (13 Jun. 1994): 825-8.