

# Faraway, So Close:

## Atom Egoyan Returns Home with *Ararat*

BY Tom McSorley

During a television interview with Robert Fulford about writers Joseph Conrad and James Joyce, noted Palestinian-born American literary critic Edward W. Said made an astonishing and telling observation about Canada. He stated that Canada is unique among modern nations because it has turned the idea of exile into an institution. Said was describing the process by which this country's official policy of multiculturalism took Exile's profound spiritual aches and metaphorical potentialities and domesticated them. Canada had put a roof over Exile's head, kept it from freezing to death, gave it a cup of coffee, and even created for it a specific government institution, the Department of Multiculturalism. That a new nation would encourage its multi-ethnic citizens to remember constantly their origins, to cherish and indeed actively perform traditional cultural practices while simultaneously being contemporary Canadians struck Said as intellectually untenable, seriously dislocating and uncomfortably alienating.

At one level Said is correct, based on the optimistic and dubious assumptions of American melting-pot social theory; at another, he is mistaken, for he assumes that forms of cultural remembrance will remain static and reactionary in the Canadian multicultural model and therefore the pain of exile will go unrelieved and unexpressed. Edward W. Said, meet Atom Egoyan.

Born in Cairo to Armenian parents who then moved to Victoria, B.C., where he grew up, Atom Egoyan both embodies and represents the complexity, difficulty and possibility of this restless multi-ethnic nation. Throughout his career, Egoyan has fashioned original, searching investigations into the implications of dislocation, alienation and a sense of internal Canuck exile upon individual identity, memory and consciousness. "Oh Canada, where art thou? Where, oh where is here?" Perhaps the experience and expression of Canada in his work, to paraphrase former Prime Minister Mackenzie King, can be seen as more a creative case of "exile if necessary but not necessarily exile." Egoyan has, in many of his films, examined the unbearable heaviness of being Canadian, that odd and surprisingly productive combination of being here and being from somewhere else. We may well be exiles, in Said's opinion, but we are also at home. Go figure.

In many ways, Egoyan's latest film and ninth theatrical feature, *Ararat*, is as much about Canada now as it is about the Armenian genocide of 1915. Among other things, the film insists that what happened there and then affects how people live and see themselves here and now. In multicultural—

Canada, as one character observes, this "young country"—we struggle to understand and communicate ourselves within those tenacious, historically dislocated, very real tensions of ethnic and cultural history, not in the seductive simplicity and barrenness of cultural and historical amnesia. (As in, say, the United States of America, or, as the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes calls it, the "United States of Amnesia.") This struggle is of course fraught with difficulty and ambiguity. *Ararat* is concerned with the processes by which such gnarled matters as identity, history and ethnicity are negotiated. It also explores the specific cultural context within which these negotiations occur: Canada.

As always in Egoyan's cinema, *Ararat's* story is constructed out of several interwoven, intersecting narrative strands. All of these strands, directly and indirectly, anchor themselves in the historical fact of the Armenian genocide at the hands of the Turks in 1915. A young production assistant, Raffi (David Alpy), has just returned from Armenia with five cans of unexposed film and is proceeding through Canada Customs. (Egoyan again uses an airport for its metaphorical suggestiveness as a space of transience, fugitive identities, intersection and transformation: remember *Next of Kin*? *Exotica*? *The Sweet Hereafter*?) He is stopped by an agent, David (given a dignified, superb rendering by Christopher Plummer), who suspects Raffi may be smuggling drugs. On his final shift before retirement and having drifted away from his own son, Philip (Brent Carver), David decides to listen to Raffi's story. He hears that there is a film being made in Toronto about the history of the Armenian genocide. As proof of his travels, Raffi plays digital-video cassettes containing images of the Armenian landscape, including fabled Mount Ararat itself.

Meanwhile, Raffi's mother Ani (Arsinée Khanjian) gives lectures on Armenian artist Arshile Gorky and his famous painting, "The Artist and his Mother," and its relationship to 1915. Ani is also engaged in a troubled relationship with her stepdaughter, Celia (Marie-Josée Croze), and the circumstances of her father's death. On top of this, there is underway the production of a film version of the events of 1915, specifically the siege of the city of Van by the Turkish army, by a distinguished Armenian filmmaker, Edward Saroyan, played by legendary singer/actor Charles Aznavour. Saroyan's fiction film is based on an actual book (*An American Physician in Turkey*, published in 1917) by an American doctor, Clarence Ussher, who witnessed the massacre at Van.

Charles Aznavour and  
Arsinée Khanjian



As the worlds of these characters overlap and intersect, versions of the event itself multiply, and the contexts within which we are placed as spectators of these constructed versions blur the framelines of history, memory and representation. In fact, the very gesture of narration, of telling and retelling, is invoked in many forms: Ani's lectures, Raffi's experiences, Saroyan's movie, Ussher's book and Gorky's painting. As often happens in Egoyan's cinema, fiction and fact spiral together into states of epistemological uncertainty for characters and the audience alike. Indeed, so densely layered is the prismatic *Ararat* that it sometimes groans under the weight of its formal and thematic aspirations. Egoyan himself offers that, "This film is wildly ambitious, inasmuch as it links, in some sense, genocide with the notion of individual needs."

Arguably the most crucial scene in the film is a seemingly minor one. It takes place between Raffi and Ali (Elias Koteas), two contemporary Canadians, one with Armenian roots, the other with Turkish. After shooting his scenes for the Saroyan film as the ruthless Turkish officer Jedvet, Ali is driven home from the set by Raffi. Asked how he feels about playing Jedvet and pushed to admit that the genocide happened—and told he's participating in a Nazi-like big lie if he does not—Ali delivers a succinct, obvious, infinitely complicated answer: he's not Turkish, he's Canadian; Canada is a young country and while we must remember our heritages, we also have to move beyond ancient enmities. In other words, in *Ararat* we encounter at a national level the complex individual predicament faced by many in Egoyan's films: how to remember and not be incapacitated by memory.

In addition to the substance of the film's narrative—which links past and present, exile and belonging, Armenia and Canada, Egoyan's own Armenian roots and his Canadianness—*Ararat* represents another homecoming of sorts for Egoyan. After the success of 1997's *The Sweet Hereafter*, Egoyan's career took a decidedly international turn, with mixed results. First, *Felicia's Journey* (1999), produced with Mel Gibson's company, Icon, and shot in Britain and Ireland; then in 2000, Egoyan contributed a film version of *Krapp's Last Tape* to Irish Television's Beckett on Film series.

Returning, with this production to writing an original screenplay after having done several adaptations, Egoyan produced *Ararat* with Robert Lantos' company, Serendipity Point Films. The film was made entirely in Canada, even recreating the siege of Van in a section of Toronto and the desert refugee sequences near Drumheller, Alberta. There is also the presence in the cast of what has become Egoyan's repertory company, with such stalwarts as Koteas (*The Adjuster*, *Exotica*), Bruce

Greenwood (*Exotica*, *The Sweet Hereafter*), and, of course, Arsinée Khanjian. The international component of Egoyan's career remains, however, represented by French star and Armenian, Charles Aznavour (born Chahnour Aznavourian), who says, "For me it was a duty to say yes to Atom to play this part." American writer/actor Eric Bogosian, also of Armenian origins, participated for similar reasons as film producer Rouben, "Like Rouben, I am Armenian and I wanted to embrace that by being part of this project." On one level, *Ararat* represents a unification of Egoyan's Canadian and Armenian worlds, his twin exile heritages.

As an Armenian-Canadian, Egoyan is well versed in the history of the genocide, both through the communal memory of the Armenian diaspora and through his own extensive reading. So, too, is Egoyan's partner Arsinée Khanjian, who plays Ani, the art historian who filters her interpretation of the event through her analyses of the life and works of Arshile Gorky.



Marie-Josée Croze and David Alpay.

(Gorky fled Armenia and lived the rest of his life in exile in the United States.) Although aspects of his Armenian identity have appeared in other films such as *Next of Kin*, *Family Viewing* and *Calendar*, why it has taken so long for the pre-eminent artist of Armenian origin in contemporary cinema to make a film of this singular moment in Armenian history is based on Egoyan's own awareness of the dangers inherent in fictionalizing a faraway historical event so close to his own heritage.

"I had to wait until I found a perspective on it," he says, "to find out why I needed to tell the story and why it needed to be told. I mean, the book is there if you wanted to make a classical historical epic film about the genocide, but who would direct such a film? Not me. Then I thought of structuring such an approach into my film with the film-within-a-film section; Edward Saroyan's film entitled *Ararat*. By incorporating this, I could avoid certain traps of representation. With my *Ararat*, I wanted more to examine the role and consequences of art making: how people make artifacts of their experience, and what those artifacts mean to them."

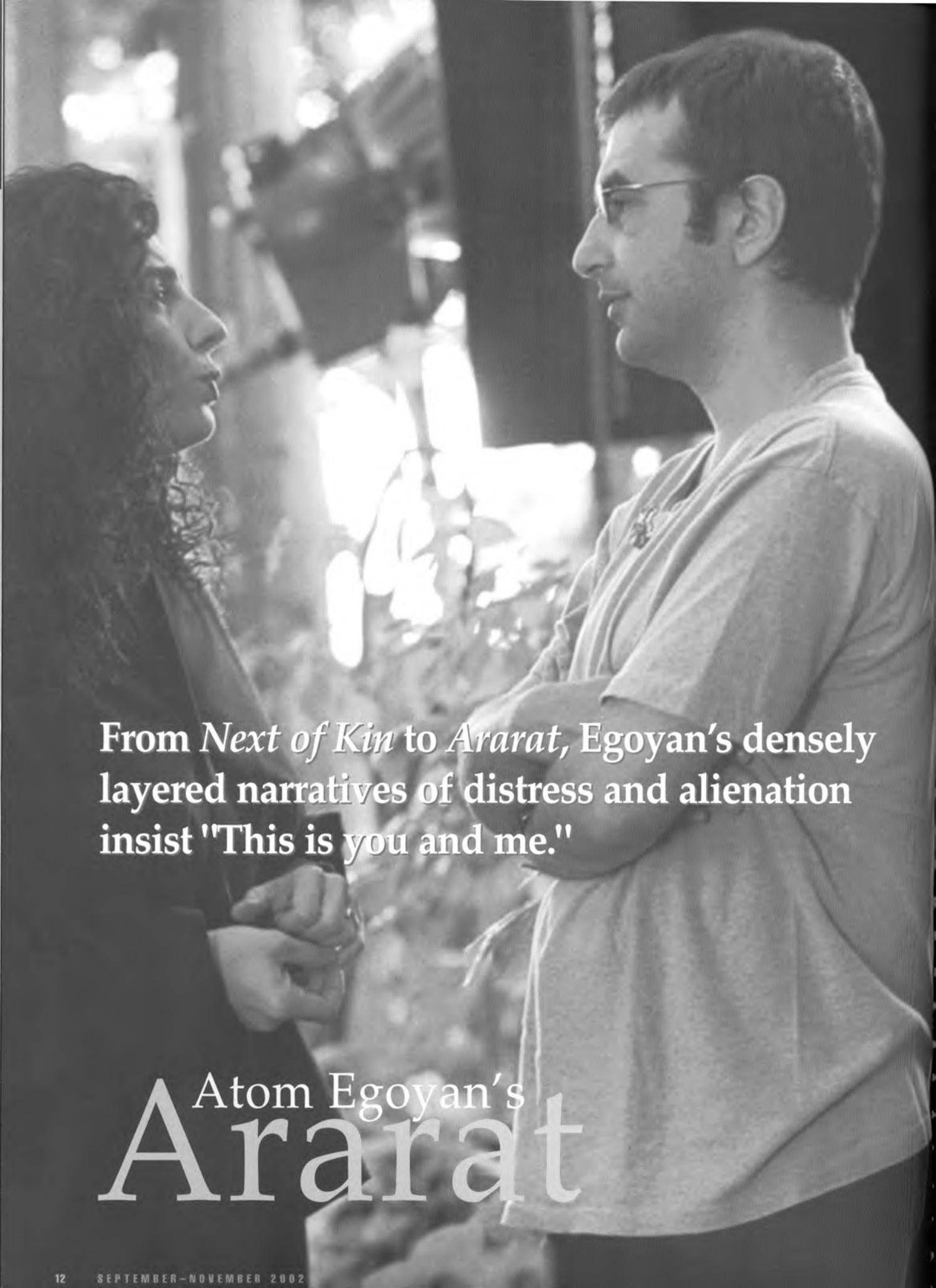


# Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*

*"Ararat* is as much about Canada now as it is about the Armenian genocide of 1915."

Atom Egoyan





From *Next of Kin* to *Ararat*, Egoyan's densely layered narratives of distress and alienation insist "This is you and me."

Atom Egoyan's  
**Ararat**

In making problematic Edward Saroyan's rather conventional, even sentimental movie, Egoyan suggests the problems inherent in cultural and historical memory being articulated through conventional narrative fiction film (a tradition his work studiously avoids). The fragments of the Saroyan version of *Ararat* that we are shown appear dated and simplistic. When someone in the Egoyan *Ararat* observes that Saroyan is a great filmmaker, another observes, "Yeah, 20 years ago."

The tonal and stylistic differences between Saroyan and Egoyan, and they are considerable, add still more layers of interrogation and uncertainty about the ability of cinema to represent and interpret experience and memory. It's risky, especially when you are dealing with a subject like genocide. As he points out, "The cinema is tricky, because people tend to want to believe in what they see." And yet, as Egoyan says about the film within his film, "I do not want to make those images ironic. I do, however, want to underline the limitations of that kind of representation."

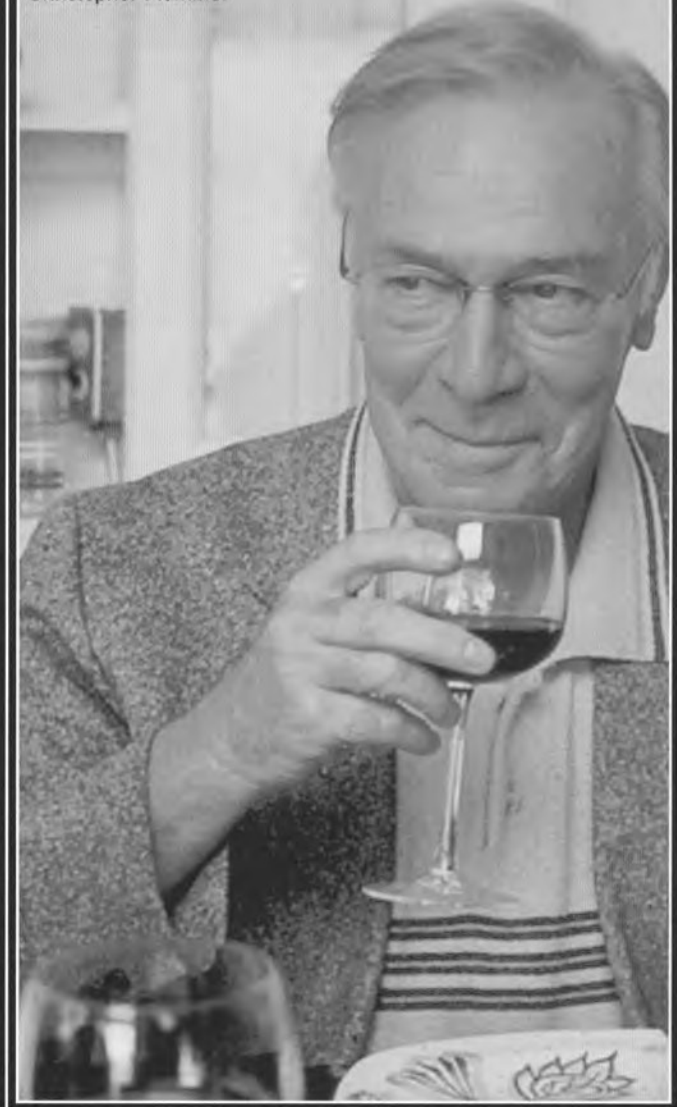
Throughout his career, Egoyan has created a cinema populated by characters burdened with memory, usually tragic personal memory. This film has those, and more specific larger cultural-historical burdens as well. Part of the challenge of *Ararat* was to build a structure that could contain and express the many tensions at play. One of the ways Egoyan chose to do this was through dialogue, exchanging his familiar Pinteresque silences for a more loquacious approach. "The characters speak much more easily in *Ararat* than in my other films. They are able to talk about their experiences much more readily. Nevertheless," he continues, "having the means to communicate does not solve the issues being dealt with: denial and suppression issues are being dealt with in other ways in the film, whether it's the acknowledgment of the genocide itself, or Ani's withholding family information from Celia, or David's struggle to come to terms with having a gay son and his incredible decision to allow a version of history to go forward, knowing it's not true at the end of his interrogation of Raffi."

While Egoyan's films are often regarded as detached—a misunderstanding of his work reminiscent of the misapprehension of the films of Bresson, Haneke, Kubrick and others—they are in general concerned with the opposite: how to connect. "Don't sound so detached," his films quietly exhort the characters who populate their tangled, often technologically mediated worlds. All his work can be seen as a warning against the dangers of detachment. From *Next of Kin* to *Felicia's Journey*, Egoyan's densely layered narratives of distress and alienation insist "this is you and me." This is especially the case in *Ararat*, a film about characters trying to connect personal experience with conflictive historical consciousness and modes of cultural memory in a country whose animating ethos encourages them to look back and go forward at the same time. *Ararat*, with its various intersections of the personal, political, aesthetic and cultural, is the most comprehensive cinematic formulation of this condition in Egoyan's career.

Fresh from its world premiere out of competition at Cannes, where it was greeted with a standing ovation, *Ararat* returns home to be the opening night gala film at the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival. "In Cannes, the film was hijacked by the political agenda between Armenia and Turkey," observes Egoyan. "I'm really excited about the Toronto screenings, because it is very much a film about living in that city, in

Canada. It's about how we, as Canadians, must fight and struggle to place ourselves in our country. It's not easy. You know, the folkloric, smiley-face aspect of multiculturalism is one thing. I was a part of it, in a way, with travelling around

Christopher Plummer



with *Next of Kin*. But it's hard work to create a tolerant, multicultural society like ours. It's an achievement. It's sacred."

A consequence of living in such a society, as all of Egoyan's films demonstrate, is, for better and for worse, a dynamic uncertainty. In Canada, in the peculiarities of our multicultural memory and our curiously affirmative recreation of a certain sense of exile as sustaining master narrative of nationhood, faraway is here and here is faraway. It should come as no surprise, then, that in exploring the persistent, paradoxical presence of the Armenian genocide, which happened far away and long ago, Atom Egoyan has charted the intimate psychological, social and cultural cartographies of his contemporary Canada.

TAKE ONE