

by Kass Banning

EXO



“it’s a man’s, man’s, man’s world, bu

lookin' in all the wrong places: the pleasures and dangers of

atic a



it it wouldn't be nothin' without a woman or a girl" **James Brown**



from above, clockwise: **BRUCE GREENWOOD** as Francis "Revenue Canada employee by day, patron of Exotica by night"; **MIA KIRSHNER** as Christina, "repository for the gaze" and **ARSINÉE KHANJIAN** as Zoe, "the true controller"; **CALVIN GREEN** as Ian and **DON MCKELLAR** as Thomas, "trafficker in exotic animals and related specimens"





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SINCE LAST year's *Calendar*, a film that sometimes tenderly, often rawly, wrestled with the stickiest and most immediate of obsessions – belonging and identity – Atom Egoyan's production has evolved from an eighties affectation for surface to a profound sounding of contemporary taboos, attendant anxiety intact. Sidestepping the lure of the banal, where Egoyan's imitators usually get trapped, the director's latest effort is a surprisingly intimate film, fittingly entitled *Exotica* (perhaps an apt name for Egoyan's over-all enterprise). Although earlier preoccupations remain – sex, technology, and looking-relations locked into the hermetic horrors of family closets – *Exotica* adds a looser, somewhat lighter touch while maintaining Egoyan's on-going role as resident spokes-filmmaker for our particular skewed brand of modernity, “new world” style.

Perverse formalism, enigmatic narrative, and elliptical style that are signature Egoyan remain, but here the line between the dots or points of arrival is less over-determined. More plot-driven with less bold artifice and narrative fragmentation than early films, *Exotica* makes room for more fully fleshed characters, replacing the chronically detached who usually people Egoyan's films. Perhaps this shift accounts for *Exotica*'s internationally acclaimed status, winning the prestigious FIPRESCI award (International Film Critics' Prize) this year at Cannes. For most local folks, such validation simply repeats common knowledge. Egoyan has arrived.

While the dissolution of home and tradition, and its uneasy lived effects command the twelve-part structure of *Calendar*, with its dialogue with the past (however unrecoverable), *Exotica* offers up no space for nostalgia or the “roots thing.” This time, we share a world inhabited by adult characters without parents, invariably cast off and working through, to varying degrees of success, their individual versions of soul murder – from abandonment to straight-out child abuse. Each orphan-character carries residual marks, living out the “professions,” if not the hair patterns, doled out by the inequities of heredity or just plain bad luck. The parents are gone, but the baggage remains, making sense of why they got what they got and why

they get what they get.

Departing from the features which precede *Exotica* (*Next of Kin*, *Family Viewing*, *Speaking Parts*, *The Adjuster* and *Calendar*), Egoyan breaks out from the familiar and familial enclosure of his own mediated "Armenianness." Ethnicity has always played a pivotal role in Egoyan's fictional universes. Signifying both alienation and *communitas*, ethnicity becomes less fore-grounded in his later works (*Calendar* excepted), but takes a new turn in *Exotica*. Here race pushes the ethnic stakes further while the interracial aspect complements the film's highly articulated structure. Equal opportunity prevails – everyone is fucked, or at least disaffected, in *Exotica*.

This time out, Egoyan adds a touch of warmth and a sense of wonder to his often rigorously chilly narrative structure. But in Egoyan's hands, even the sacred is milked for its ambiguous effects, for its sinister, at least daunting, possibilities. What mystery means to various folks comprises the film's epicentre. Not surprisingly, it coalesces around the sticking point of Toronto life, sometime's Canada's: the issue of "difference." It's all in translation, what we deem or make "special," and where you're at on the structural divide of desire. And as the man said, "it's a man's world." The flattening, colonizing effect that necessarily attends the machinations of exoticism (whether the "other" is a schoolgirl, a bit of colour, a near-extinct mammal, or generalized pussy) is primarily, in this film, the component of a man's game. *Exotica's* centre is decidedly male, but it is not, surprisingly given its setting, hung up on or played out in masculinist terms.

The central action takes place at the upscale strip club "Exotica," where disparate characters congregate. Some work, others watch, and some do both. Those who work the club are bound to each other and to the nightly illusions they help produce. Egoyan's earlier films viscerally teased out the relations between image and identity through a relentless interrogation of the pleasures and pains experienced in the distance or lack of distance between. Here there's less hardware, less overt video or photographic technology to get in the way. Compared to earlier work that probed the thematic and surface properties of photography to help excavate what lay beneath, *Exotica* minimizes this guilty pleasure to a few fleeting, although seminal, moments commanded by a controlling male figure. Scenes of desire are less

right, ELIAS KOTEAS as Eric, "who believes his own hype"; below, BRUCE GREENWOOD and SARAH POLLEY, "the baby sitter"



mediated, generated as they are from the characters' psyches and the primeval desiring machine that the club itself relentlessly manufactures, where the highly stylized erotics of sound and image combine to the measured beat of desire.

The combination of cinematographer Paul Sarossy's fluid perspicuity, designers Linda Del Rosario and Richard Paris' lushly rendered tropical set, and veteran Steve Munro's attendant soundscape is stupendous. These artists approximate what cheap porn meisters have failed to realize and something only Jean-Luc Godard has truly understood – sound is sexier than image. The sharply sensuous soundtrack both eclipses and enriches the erotic properties of the image, sug-

gesting a narrative of its own. If body fluids have a sound, they are approximated here. The habitual exchange of money changing hands has its own impeccable auditory accompaniment. Munro's crisp Dolby precision, coupled with the alluring, melodic musical score by Mychael Danna, further seduces the viewer. Blatantly informed by South Asian music, with the wailing sound of the Shehnai (a traditional wind instrument) predominating, a web of amorous loss is suggested throughout. We soak up the "otherworldly" ambience and are, like *Exotica's* characters, implicated. Sexual display here is so stylized, so *faux*, that we are held at a distance; not sutured into the scene, we are forced to face our own voyeurism.



The act of touching, its pleasures and prohibitions, when and where one can and can't, are repeatedly foregrounded in *Exotica*

Once the camera languidly introduces us to the club and its offerings, the layers of artifice gradually peel off, revealing the underlying supports and operators of illusion. Eric (Elias Koteas, whose effusive and emotionally ravaged character is a wide star turn away from the somber, ambiguously generous insurance adjuster he played in *The Adjuster*) is but one participant in the spectacle. Part pimp master of ceremonies, part DJ fantasy producer, he directs desire, his voice narrating sexual bios, fixing them to the appropriate body. Finding it impossible to keep his own erotic obsession (the schoolgirl archetype Christina [Mia Kirshner] with whom he earlier had been involved) in check, he doggedly sticks to and even believes his own hype.

Transgressing the rules of the club and its ingredients for pleasure, he puts the necessary distance for fantasy and fetishism in jeopardy. Lap dancer Christina is pure physicality and can't easily transcend the limitations of her role as object, as fetish. Her zombie-like manner and "valley-girl" intonation add to her image as cipher, as repository for the gaze, but she sure has a nice bod and can move her ass. Zoe, the sexy, pregnant owner of the club, who changes wigs as often as she changes her clothes, is the true controller, holding all bodies and pieces together with steely mastery while maintaining her own feminine "mystery" within. Charismatic Arsinée Khanjian, who seductively plays the role, has evolved into an integral component

of Egoyan's on-going success. (The sight of Zoe clad in lingerie offers a troubling erotic presence whose image could perhaps kick-start a new fetish, for pregnant women). Like Khanjian's role as Hera, the film censor in *The Adjuster*, Zoe also likes to watch.

As with all Egoyan films, the narrative pivots around the modalities of "the look." The criss-cross of the gaze constitutes narrative space, as the pleasures of voyeurism are voraciously displayed. *Exotica* operates on encounters that are matched and counter-matched, playing on a series of juxtapositions, thematically and through its characters.

Strategically placed two-way mirrors are exploited to great effect in the film's opening and in the club. They serve the twin themes of surveillance and voyeurism, but they indelibly point to how our subjectivity is constituted by looking and sometimes by its return. From Sartre through Fanon to Laura Mulvey, the sadistic power and pleasures of objectification that attend the basics of looking have been elaborated. This dialectic is the crux of *Exotica*, as these procedures are worked out in all of Egoyan's films. His is a dialectically based practice, where once good objects become bad objects and are exchanged for new good objects. Sound familiar? New bodies replace old ones, but they reenact the same story.

Enter Francis (played by Bruce Greenwood, who after this performance, surprisingly naturalistic for an Egoyan film, should never have to stoop to a soap again). Francis is a Revenue Canada employee by day and a patron of *Exotica* by night. Christina's lap dances for Francis are more cathartic than erotic, healing rather than entertaining. Nightly, he incants a speech addressed to Christina: "How could anyone do that to you? How could anyone hurt you?" Gradually, the film's prime mover is revealed. A horrendous deed hovers above the action and links the characters – the murder of a black child, a young schoolgirl. Eric and Christina discovered the body, their relationship forged during the search for the child. Christina is a stand-in for Francis's dead child, as most of the characters are for each other. The act of touching, its pleasures and prohibitions, when and where one can and can't, are repeatedly foregrounded in *Exotica*. Gesturing towards her pregnant

belly, Zoe's incessant entreaty, "Do you want to touch it?" resonates as part dare, part invitation. Men can't touch the women who perform for them, and a father's touch can only go so far.

Characters careen along a series of loops, locked into what Freud called "repetition compulsion," the state where unwilling repetitions of the past erupt into the present. In *Exotica*, however, repetition replaces memory, the "normal" access to the past. Francis re-enacts his child's death with rote precision, obsessively reliving the original trauma. He *acts* complicitously and is implicated, even if innocent by virtue of his actions.

Characters struggle to straddle the gap between what one means and what one says, between what one hears and what one understands. The line "What do you think?" resonates in *Exotica*

Egoyan is a master at setting up expectations and then disturbing them, worrying them. When Francis drives Tracey, the "baby sitter" (the talented Sarah Polley, the least disaffected of the bunch), home, we believe there is an erotic dimension to their relationship. Their interaction, the oblique discussion of how she could improve "next time," with the ubiquitous exchange of money, implies the obvious. Tracey comes across like an early Jodie Foster (sans *Taxi Driver's* attitude and clothes), and the association helps cement Francis's culpability.

All the players are caught in similar circuits of exchange; a predetermined fatality informs their individual dance of loss and recuperation, their particular brand of *l'amour fou*. Despite the ritualized repetition, we remain engaged, partially because their efforts are so fragile. The quick-witted observations of the laconic Thomas (Don McKellar, elegantly extending his eager censor board role in *The Adjuster*) offer hilarious illustration. Quirky pet shop owner by day, trafficking in exotic animals and related specimens by night, Thomas is less affected than the other characters by the diminution of self that follows loss; he is less damaged, leaving more breathing space for humour. His habitual return to the opera house, ostensibly to watch bal-

let, but mostly to participate in a ritual of ticket exchanges which brings its own secret pleasures, is brilliant in its graceful waggishness. Although playing a game of chance, Thomas' object choices, like his *esprit*, get darker and darker; he "likes his coffee black," as he later informs Francis.

Dialogue at cross-purposes is an Egoyan trademark, adding a constant off-the-mark *frisson* that serves the overall tone of all his films – accepted incomprehension, no fuss. Enigmatic communication is a given, as information does not register visibly nor does articulation come quickly or easily. Characters struggle to straddle the gap

between what one means and what one says, between what one hears and what one understands. The line "What do you think?" resonates in this film, as the twice-delivered "What do you mean?" similarly did in *The Adjuster*. *Exotica* loosens up a few notches and dialogue becomes less

stilted and interlocutory than in earlier films. McKellar's Thomas refines the near-miss technique with precision. His unique locution and perfect timing pump up the sly humour. His foreplay banter with the black customs officer synthesizes *Exotica's* strengths and Egoyan's dogged perspicuity. The running gag elegantly cuts and mixes genetic classification, sex, and animal acts, to encapsulate *Exotica's* overall project with sustained frivolity. Yet, Thomas' neurosis is more familiar, healthier even, contrasted with the rougher taboos being played out nearby.

Exotica's free play with difference, from the flirtation with incest taboos, through child sex-murder, to the running gags which conjoin chromatics and animality, demonstrate a fearless tenacity, if not courage, for its straight-out, unself-conscious renditions. Such transgressions guarantee that *Exotica* is not politically correct. Side-stepping the overly regulated tone of this climate, Egoyan has the guts to display how whiteness *is* parasitic on blackness. The sticking point, for some, is that he simply presents this problem, neither condoning it nor moralizing it. He deftly de-naturalizes the process, elegantly making it visible.

Blackness is a signifier in *Exotica*, not an ontology. Egoyan deploys the black

body, like the female body, as a latent image, with weighted symbolic significance. When Francis drops off Tracey, a black, heavy set man walks past the car, making Francis visibly uncomfortable (subtly conveyed in a glance and turn of the head). Black maleness here signals an assertive peripherality, a presence doubly menacing and "cool." Francis' brother Howard, on the other hand, steps himself in the accoutrements of "blackness." Mimicking the "other," he lives above a Roti shop and dons Bob Marley T-shirts. Both Thomas and Francis display equivalent signs of sexual overvaluation. Black "characters," however, don't return the compliment. At the same time, Francis' dead black wife and child are neither totally domesticated nor totally unassimilable. Their structuring absence, caught on video with their faces and laughter intact, punctuate what is lost and not recuperable. Some might consider such representation a replay of the tropicana postcard effect. To others, it might demonstrate the fundamental lack inherent in the white characters' existence – the unbearable "whiteness" of being. To me, *Exotica* is more concerned with confronting and disturbing the pleasures and dangers that attend these power relations than endorsing the ethnographic.

Historically, Egoyan structures his films around difference, cultural and otherwise. When desire crosses racial and sexual lines, it brings anxiety. *Exotica* worries the boundaries between, leading us away from the enslavement of identity politics with their simple validations. Here he attempts to sidestep the moral while exposing what accompanies the reach for the exotic. *Exotica's* causes seem more structural than attitudinal. They remain: without commentary, ideological, moral, or otherwise, and in this way, *Exotica* stands as a brilliant and brave response to where we are grounded, to what we know but don't discuss. How we "other," so to speak, how bodies, black, brown, and white, are commodified and exchanged is at issue.

Exotica fully exploits the meaning inherent in the term exotic, stretching the search for that "something hidden that you have to find." The properties of the exotic from alluring to distant to foreign to colourful are ruthlessly probed in this film. The push for the unattainable raises some complicated issues, resulting in a complexly *felt* film. In the process, the limits of our complicity are tested once again as Egoyan successfully "outs" our complacency ●