



# Death, Canadian Style: Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*

By Geoff Pevere

**TRY THIS ON** as a distinguishing characteristic. In American movies, death tends to be an event, either a cathartic punch line that snaps the intricately crafted spell of suspense ("Go ahead. Make my day.") or, in revenge terms, a convenient motivating agent ("Now it's your turn to die"). In short, it's either someone getting shot or someone getting license to shoot them. Its emotional effects tend not to be lingered on, as that would hinder action instead of promoting it, and the only fate worse than death in contemporary Hollywood—think is stasis, the suspension of interest caused by even the slightest lapse in action. That's why death is reduced to a form of spectacle in most of our current mall movies, shorn of consequence and shrugged off with a winning wisecrack. Instead of stopping anything—let alone anything so abstract and irrelevant to a contemporary action movie as a *life*—it adds momentum.

In many Canadian movies, death tends instead to be a process, something that exerts an effect that shapes the emotional trajectory of the drama itself. When it descends over a drama—as it tends increasingly to do in our movies—it becomes inescapable and pervasive, and so no easier to shrug off than a winter that seems to sprawl from the end of one Canadian summer to the beginning of another. When death occurs, it is an issue, in the same way that weather itself is a real, honest-to-God *issue* for any Canadians living outside of the shovel-free oasis that is Vancouver. It cannot be ignored, for its effects over us are so of bad weather has played an active role in defining who we are and what we do, the influence of death in our movies is profound and all-encompassing. In American movies life continues until—like a bullet-shaped punctuation mark—death stops it. In Canadian movies, it is defined by it. Another revealing expression of this shift in perception is the fact that death, for all its influence over Canadian movies, so seldom plays out on screen. It's true, in the

same way that gunplay is such a rare spectacle in Canadian movies—there are, for example, no cop movies in our cinema—we appear to be less interested in watching death than probing its effects. Thus, while three of the most talked about and widely seen Canadian movies of the past year—David Cronenberg's *Crash*, Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed* and now Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*—are hopelessly entangled in an infatuation with the impact of death on the living, the physical fact of death is pretty well irrelevant. The bodies lusted after by the dead-eyed carnage fetishists in *Crash* tend to be long vacated by the time we see them, as are those that stir the hormones of the lead character, a necrophiliac undertaker's assistant, in *Kissed*. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, a movie that deals with the effects of a school bus crash on a small community, the bus may crash on screen, but it does so slowly and in terrifying long shot, a decision that has the deeply disturbing effect of allowing us to imagine the long-term consequences of this tragedy at the same moment we're watching it.

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It is always risky to speak of traditions in something as amorphous and under-developed as Canadian cinema, but this is recurrent enough to feel like one. The death that defines the quality of living in Claude Jutra's *Mon oncle Antoine* is also an off-screen event, as is the hunting accident in Francis Mankiewicz's *Le Temps d'une chasse*, the father's death that lures an estranged family together in Robert Lepage's *Le Confessionnal* and the teenage suicide which culminates Micheline Lanctôt's *Sonatine*. Consider also just about every act in all Guy Maddin's movies—movies which seem to be rendered delirious from the lurid aroma of funeral bouquets—since his first, the resonantly titled the *Dead Father*. Or there is the issue of death as such a palpable dramatic inevitability in certain Canadian movies—as in Denys Arcand's *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* and *Jésus de Montréal*, Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo*—as to bear nearly as much influence over events as those that happen before the drama unfolds. Anyway you cut it, death is not taken lightly in very many Canadian movies, nor is it light. Indeed, it bears down with the weight of winter itself. Even in less well-known films, such as Chris Philpott's undeservedly under-seen *The Eternal Husband*, the death that pervades the drama—in this case, the death of a woman loved by two living men—not only happens in a distant, off-screen past, it seeps through the movie like an unwashable stain. Truly this is what is meant by haunted.

Yet, if the interest in death's influence on the living has long been evident in Canadian movies, lately it has evolved from an interest to something approaching a condition: death, it would seem, becomes us. Is it not compelling that the three most internationally visible Canadian movies of the past year—*Crash*, *Kissed*, *The Sweet Hereafter*—deal with the hopeless grip of the dead over the living, and in such a way that living itself is inconceivable without it? Is it not even more arresting that two of the films (from a country that is lucky to see two or three going international any given year anyway) are about the erotic allure of death, the need for the living to possess and be possessed by death in the most literal manner next to actually checking out oneself? What is this fascination with oblivion?

Death has always pressed against the narrative perimeters of Atom Egoyan's movies—the grandmother in *Family Viewing*, the video mausoleum in *Speaking Parts*, the death-wish trajectory of Spinner Spencer in *Gross Misconduct*, the cruel serendipity of disaster in *The Adjuster*, and of course the murdered child in *Exotica*—but with *The Sweet Hereafter* it has made its occupation complete. This is a movie about death in the same way that *Contact* is a movie about God or *Batman and Robin* is about merchandizing: though not the narrative's stated concern, it is nevertheless pervasive and inescapable to





the extent that the film is incomprehensible without it. In Egoyan's case, this saturation is a natural one in the context of a body of work that seems drawn obsessively to the limbo between feelings more heavily than grief. And nothing is more grievous, particularly to new, insecure or guilty parents (and what parent hasn't been one of these at one time or another?) than the death of a child. If *Exotica* wondered about the impact of a dead child on an individual's ability to inhabit the future, *The Sweet Hereafter* increases the stakes: what happens to a community and its sense of hope when, like the story of "The Pied Piper" that it evokes, nearly all of the children are taken away?

Grief, and its rude upheaval of social and emotional stability, are the real subjects of *The Sweet Hereafter*. We know this not only because Egoyan spends so much

pressing charges against the company that ran the bus. Offering "a voice for your anger" to parents still shell-shocked by their children's deaths, the lawyer Stephens is not unlike the benign professional predator played by Elias Koteas in *The Adjuster*, which is to say someone whose exploitation of tragedy is personally rationalized as some twisted form of charity. It's not that Stephens is in it for the money. On the contrary, like Noah before him, he devoutly believes that what he's doing is offering help—in the form of litigation, the only compensation he knows—to the grief-stricken survivors. In fact, he only offers to take money from the suit if he wins. If the case is lost, so is his cut.

Like Noah then, whose faith in fiscal remuneration as a form of salvation to the disaster struck allowed him to function, Stephens believes grief has its price: that it can

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time showing us the wrenching contentment of life before the tragedy—a life where the presence of children manages to salve the wounds of adulthood—but because of the film's focus on the troubled lawyer (Ian Holm) who comes to the small town to coax the shattered survivors into

be paid for and expiated in a court of law. But what Noah and Stephens also share is a profound state of denial. Egoyan makes it clear that both are deeply wounded and unfulfilled souls who need the tragedy of others to avoid facing the turmoil of their own lives. A man steeped in his



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own sense of paternal failure and loss—his only daughter is a self-destructive junkie and his wife appears only in flashbacks to better times—Stephen's only means of burying his own demons is beneath the greater demons of others. In other words, Egoyan has again taken us to the limbo between feeling and expression, where actions are as much a cover for what is felt than an expression of it.

The difference is, where Noah's personal turmoil is concealed—for a time, anyway—by his successful impersonation of a saint, Stephens has a hard time convincing any but the most vulnerable and wounded that the help he offers has anything to do with relieving the pain they suffer. That's because Stephens, in his own self-absorption and sour middle-aged remorse, has managed to confuse his guilt with grief, which is exactly what attracts him to this wounded community in the first place. He thinks he can help them because he too—the forsaken father who considers his daughter and most of the younger generations to be “dead to us” in the first place—knows grief, when what he really knows is failure. Which seems to be his fate, or at least tragic flaw, considering that the entire enterprise of fixing pain through finances, particularly in

this place where an entire generation has been wiped out, is itself doomed to fail. For what Stephens faces through the course of the film is not just grief as a condition of an expression, but as a force. A force so potent and oppressive, it's like a fog he stumbles through as constantly as he does blindly. Indeed, Egoyan repeatedly emphasizes Stephens's chronic detachment from his surroundings. The first time we see him, not only is he trapped in a car wash that prefigures the bus sinking into a mountain lake, he's trying to speak to his daughter on a cell phone that he's having a hard time hearing clearly. Egoyan often frames Stephens in outdoor long shots, the better to emphasize his hopelessly inadequate and anachronistic presence in the very community he descends upon to save.

As Stephens, Ian Holm—who took the role only after it had been turned down by Donald Sutherland—brings a new dimension of tortured fussiness to Egoyan's expanding gallery of people engaged in a ceaseless struggle with emotional impulses. Precise, short and somewhat gnome-faced (and therefore the exact genetic opposite of the gaunt and vulture-faced Sutherland), Holm's Stephens

is a marvel of barely repressed frustration and re-channeled rage, the kind of person who must work to control his anger at the very people he appoints himself saviour to. Watch him as he scans—indeed, processes—the domestic spheres of the people he interviews and the way his lips tremble in impatience when people aren't giving him the most professionally expedient responses. Indeed, watching the film makes one wonder at the marvels Egoyan might produce working with an entire cast of British actors, those uncanny specialists at impersonating barely corked volcanoes. Imagine the dark labyrinths of feeling and motivation the director might lead us down with people like Jeremy Irons, Anthony Hopkins or Alan Bates as our guides. Last year Egoyan made a riveting postmodern entertainment out of Strauss's opera *Salome*, which only hints at what, equipped with the right text and an aptly stuffy Anglo cast, he might do with Shakespeare. In fact, he may have been off base seeking out Sutherland in the first place. If a Canuck with an international profile was what was required to play the polite bloodsucker Stephens, perhaps Egoyan should have been bothering Christopher Plummer's agent. What other Canadian has that proper blend of patrician frostiness, thespian precision and blank professionalism? Besides, as cathartic as it is to see Bruce Greenwood—as the bereaved father who is also the town's sole opponent to Stephens' litigation campaign—threaten to pound Holm to a pulp, nothing could match the thrill of someone threatening to do the same to Chris Plummer.

No matter. The point is, Holm—who once played the duplicitous android in *Alien* and a telepathic pharmaceutical hallucination in Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*—is a confident acrobat when it comes to walking the tightrope between feeling and expression, the nebulous limbo which draws Egoyan the same way that existential crisis compels Antonioni or hypocrisy lured Buñuel. But while Egoyan's protagonists have ventured into this territory before, this is the first occasion where the world they confront is even more deeply suspended there than they are. For all Stephens's roiling undercurrents, his depths are nothing compared to the parents whose children—and future and function—have been so suddenly torn away from them. If, as Egoyan apparently believes, one of the defining social challenges of our era is navigating the gap between emotion and action, this gap may be nowhere more paralyzing than for those who have lost a child. How does one

begin to muster the appropriate emotional response under such circumstances? What is the proper form for such profound grief to possibly take? This possibly explains not only the attraction to the dramatic potential of grief but Egoyan's interest in Russell Banks's source novel in the first place. It's an account of a town rendered an emotional Pompeii by sorrow and regret, a community trapped in the aspic of despair. Stephens's moral reckoning is the ultimate recognition of the relative selfishness of his own sorrow. Unlike the people he deigns to "help," he is at least not paralyzed into inactivity. As misguided and unintentionally cruel as his actions may be, he at least has action as an option, and like the children lured by the Pied Piper, the bereaved parents have no choice but to follow.

Considering the constant emphasis given by the film to the sustaining role that children play in the lives of the adults—a role which for many in the movie seems cruelly clarified only by the sudden loss of children—it's worth noting how relatively absent kids actually are from the drama itself. Apart from the bedtime story ("The Pied Piper") read in flashback to Bruce Greenwood's children by Sarah Polley—playing, after *Exotica*, her second all-seeing babysitter for the director—and shots of the children obliviously riding the bus to their doom, they are kept largely silent and peripheral to the film's main interest, the maneuverings of Stephens. The better to



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haunt it perhaps, but also the better to emphasize the sheer force of grief as a dramatic agent. Were Egoyan to have spent more time establishing the individual relationships between parents and children in the community, the film would be something else entirely; a movie about the event of death rather than its effects, about the loss of particular children rather than the nature of loss itself. In a very literal sense therefore, *The Sweet Hereafter* is a ghost story, a story about life after death.

As are most of the past and current Canadian movies about death. *Crash*, while completely lacking—and deliberately so—the churning emotional undercurrents of *The Sweet Hereafter* is also nevertheless a movie about living with death. However, it is less concerned with lives forced to live with death than death as a lifestyle, as the chicly decadent choice of people so burned out on everything else they've turned to death as the final erotic frontier. The irony there, of course, is that the real dead in the film are actually the living. Cronenberg's crew of crash fetishists are so bereft of affect as to be deceased anyway. Hormonal activity notwithstanding, they're deader even than the broken bodies who turn them on, commodity-culture zombies too bored and disaffected even to bother dying first.

Lynne Stopkewich's *Kissed*, another Canadian movie about the erotic allure of the big sleep, also reduces its dead to objects, in the process lending vivid new meaning to the term "stiff." Moreover, the spent nature of its dearly departed is at least compensated for by an overriding concern to answer the question—a reasonable one, it would seem—about why someone might be turned on by death, a question *Crash*, in its artful, millennium's end amorality, cannot be bothered to address. One is left with the impression that these people like to fuck near fresh car wrecks because

they're jaded by all other forms of urban nightlife. *Kissed's* modest triumph is the extent to which it makes clear the reasons for its protagonist's dark desires—it's the only thing in life over which our hero (so to speak) can exert complete control—a motivational issue that simply isn't one in the colder-than-death-itself experience that is *Crash*.

Similarly, and even more pungently (if less provocatively), *The Sweet Hereafter* sees death as the defining force in the lives of its characters. It is the oxygen they breathe, the environment they inhabit, the condition they cannot escape. It has become them. Some have (and more will) find something to despair in this abiding attraction to death in Canadian movies, but they will no doubt be the same people who question the necessity of a Canadian cinema in the first place, or who wish our movies could be more like theirs, and that ultimately, is the issue. In restoring the sting—whether it be emotional or erotic—to the cinematic hereafter, Canadian filmmakers have found yet another way of marking oppositional territory against the splat-and-chuckle mayhem of Hollywood. In American movies, where consequences matter so much less than action, the dead are forgotten before the bodies even hit the ground. In a number of recent Canadian movies, death is only a beginning.

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