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An Interview with Canadian-Armenian Filmmaker Atom Egoyan

Interviewed by Miguel Mera , 5th March 2003.

Keywords: Atom Egoyan, Mychael Danna, film music, collaboration

Atom Egoyan is a critically acclaimed and multi-award winning Canadian-Armenian filmmaker. He was born to Armenian-Egyptian parents in Cairo, Egypt, in 1960 and was named Atom to mark the completion of Egypt's first nuclear reactor. In 1963, his parents left Egypt for Canada, where they settled. As a boy, Atom's attempts to assimilate into Canadian society and struggles with his father led him initially to reject his Armenian roots. However, he later studied Armenian history at the University of Toronto. Diasporic themes have frequently featured in his work, most notably in *Ararat* (2002), a contemporary story—a film within a film—about the making of a historical epic about the Armenian genocide (1915-18) which explores how history, both personal and political, can inspire a legacy of uncertainty and insecurity. Themes such as alienation and isolation abound in Egoyan's films and the interaction of characters is frequently mediated through technology, bureaucracy, or other power structures. Stylistically, Egoyan's films often follow non-linear plot-structures, in which events are deliberately placed out of sequence in order to elicit specific emotional reactions from the audience by withholding key information.

Egoyan has worked consistently with Canadian composer Mychael Danna since 1987. Their first collaboration, *Family Viewing* (1987), has been described as 'an oedipal conflict played out in a technological arena' (Pevere 1995, 26). It was critically successful, winning the Locarno International Critics' Prize and the Best Canadian Feature at the Toronto International Film Festival, as well as being nominated for eight Genie Awards, including Best Motion Picture, Best Achievement in Direction, and Best Music Score.¹ Since then, Egoyan and Danna have worked together on a variety of feature film projects including: *Speaking Parts* (1989), *The Adjuster* (1991), *Exotica* (1994), *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), *Felicia's Journey* (1999), *Where the Truth Lies* (2005) and *Adoration* (2008). Danna is recognised as a pioneer in the combination of non-western sound sources with western orchestral and electronic resources, and aside from Egoyan has also worked on a wide variety of projects with other collaborators including: *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee 1997), *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris 2006), *Capote* (Bennett Miller 2005), *Tideland* (Terry Gilliam 2005), *Monsoon Wedding* (Mira Nair 2001), and *Water* (Deepa Mehta 2007).

This interview focuses on the working relationship between Egoyan and Danna, especially their early work together and issues surrounding the use of 'ethnic' source materials in their films, providing an insight into thought processes and working approaches.



Figure 1 From left to right: Kamo Katchaturian (*dhol*), Atom Egoyan, Mychael Danna, Gevorg Dabaghian (*duduk*) and Grigor Takushian (*dham duduk*). Photograph taken at a recording session for *Ararat*, Church of Saint Gayane, Etchmiadzin, Yerevan, Armenia, 2001. Photograph courtesy of Mychael Danna.

Miguel: The first thing I would like to know is how you met Mychael Danna and how you got to work together.

Atom: Mychael was working at the Planetarium, doing music for the Planetarium, and we met through a mutual friend who gave me a tape of some of his earlier music and I just felt a great affinity with it, particularly some of the work he was doing with instruments from other places, and I felt that that was very exciting.² I felt that there was a degree of emotional reserve in the work I was doing at that time that would really work well with what he was doing, which was this very emotionally-laden... how to put this well? ... because in a lot of the work I was doing at that point the emotions were very reserved and held back, I felt that it would be very interesting to create a dynamic where the music was indicating something that the images were not immediately relating back. That would create an alchemy that I could use in the dramatic structure of my storytelling. That's how it began with *Family Viewing* and it just developed and continues to develop.

Miguel: It would be good to talk about emotion and your developing relationship in a moment, but Mychael has told me about your first meeting, for *Family Viewing*, where

you played various bits of music to each other. Is there anything you can remember about that?

Atom: Sure, I remember playing him a piece of David Munrow, the Early Music recorder player.

Miguel: Are you interested in Early Music?

Atom: Yes, what I enjoy about Early Music is the lack of self, you know, the notion of the identity of a composer not being really involved before the Baroque. What I love about Early Music is that it has a selflessness and a purity, and there's a plaintive quality, which I just find really stirring. I play classical guitar and a lot of that repertoire is really close to me. I just found that—I'm just about to talk about the cult of personality with David Munrow because he ultimately was a victim of that—I remember this one piece of music, by Dufay, or... I'm not sure who the composer was, it was a French art piece of a troubadour sort of style. It was on that album and it had a very intoxicating rhythm and there was something very mesmeric about the piece, and Mychael responded to that and he played me back some music that he was excited by at that time, and we just connected. I think that's basically what it comes down to. It's very satisfying, you don't know when you're going to be able to use those particular tonalities, but of course *The Sweet Hereafter*, which was an Early Music score, was able to actually resource that.

Miguel: So, playing music to each other, is that the means by which you communicate?

Atom: Yes and no, I mean, the one thing that Mychael resists is when I playback his own music. We've now got to a point where there's a body of music that he's written for my films and for other films. He doesn't like to use his own music as a reference. I think he finds it frustrating when directors do that, because what they are saying is that they just want him to repeat that score. I think that's when we get some of his less imaginative work when he's under that pressure, but what he likes is to hear music which either reflects the period of the film or which the director was thinking of when they were shooting, or hoping to be able to use.³

Miguel: You were talking about emotion earlier as one of the main things that Mychael's music provides for your films. Obviously that is true of a lot of film music, to the point that it could be considered extremely manipulative. That's something I'm sure you're very conscious of.

Atom: I think if you look at something like *Ararat*, I don't know if you've had a chance to see it, but that's really dealing with the notion of manipulation, that is quite explicitly saying, yes, the score of the film-within-the-film is something which is of a school where it is completely unbridled and allowed to overtake the experience. The way that insinuates itself into the scenes around that historic film are something that we were very aware of and we used to conscious effect. I think that's true with *Exotica* as well and certainly with *The Sweet Hereafter*. There are so many people who are trying to sedate themselves or lose themselves into another experience; another place where they can find

refuge and often, as in the case of *Exotica*, music is a huge part of that. So that gives us a point of departure in the way we design our work. We say that, well yes, it is about manipulation, but it's not about people allowing themselves to be manipulated. What is the divide between a real experience, an authentic feeling and something which is denied and manipulated. Again, we're not expecting the viewer to absorb all of that, very often you need to talk about those things and have them clear in your mind when you are structuring because they become part of the strategy that you are using.

Miguel: Just to delve into that process a little bit, do you talk mainly about the placement and amount of music, or are you talking about the type and style of the music.

Atom: I will definitely also talk about scenes where there is a particular type of tension or a feeling that I want to pursue, but then after doing all these films together, at a certain point you're just able to trust; you know he understands that. There are scenes where he will be quite adamant about not having music and that's always interesting; an interesting argument. I'm very predisposed towards using music, I've been doing a lot of work in opera lately. I love the film experience, one of the things I look forward to is when Mychael is bringing his interpretation of the work into the process.

Miguel: Obviously you have a background in music, being a guitarist yourself and, as you've just mentioned, all of the opera work you've been doing. Is that a help or a hindrance in working with a composer?

Atom: It's a huge hindrance. The biggest hindrance I've had to face when I work in opera is with new composers. I've become so used to having a dialogue with Mychael that one forgets that when you're dealing with opera you don't have that. It's really the composer's show and you can't suggest that some idea or theme be developed another way. You have to really bite your tongue a lot of the time. And I've become really used to having a very free conversation with Mychael talking about details. In *The Sweet Hereafter* when Nicole goes to the window at the end of the film after reading the story to the children for the last time, I just wanted to have the 'wind theme' the flute theme re-introduced at that point and that was a conversation we had, and Mychael is incredibly adept at being able to work very quickly with those ideas. And with *Ararat* as well, because I am Armenian, some of the themes were things that I was more familiar with than Mychael might have been and he needed to get used to them a little bit.

Miguel: Do you mean musical themes?

Atom: The opening theme of the film, *Groonk* ... Mychael had another theme that he had chosen to develop, but I felt that *Groonk* was actually spiritually more important to the film, just because of what it meant to Armenians, and he found it a much more difficult theme to work with.⁴ It wasn't as emblematic as some of the other material, but I feel free to insist on those things and he feels very free to argue back and that's part of our process. We're not delicate about that because I think we're both perfectionists, and we are also fortunate to share a language in which I can be more specific than maybe some other directors can.

M.M. Do you think that your relationship has changed over time in that you can just be more instinctive with each other?

Atom: Yes, we are. I can say with the cinematography I am very specific about how I want something framed and how I want the camera to move through a scene and I know what I want visually, but in terms of light and in terms of how to paint light I leave that to the cinematographer. I would say with the scores I have a strong feeling of what I want the music to do. I'm very comfortable leaving Mychael with that because I trust him completely. I think where we've had our biggest disagreements are just when he has felt blocked. There are times when he has felt, I mean, with *Felicia's Journey* he was blocked because a lot of the references I brought to him were music that he was not close to and he actually pushed the score into another direction which I think was smart.

Miguel: Is that the atonal material?

Atom: Yes, and I thought that was really good. And then a lot of source music, we were having Mychael treat that as opposed to re-compose that type of music. That worked out really well, it was a pretty smart solution.

Miguel: There seem to me to be three different kinds of 'worlds' in the music for *Felicia's Journey*. You have got the atonal material and then very 'soupy' Mantovani-esque material ...

Atom: Mantovani and Sylvester, the English band leader. We were listening more to the English influences of that period and even singers like Alma Cogan and Helen Shapiro, forgotten singers in a way, not anyone's favourite music, but I just felt it was really reflective of the world that the central character was raised in and he needed to conjour that place.

Miguel: So what is the atonal material doing?

Atom: The atonal stuff comes out of ... we were looking at the Irish themes and we were working on the English syrupy orchestral saccharine completely saturated string sound, and the purity of the Irish instrumentation. It just seemed that there had to be a point where, in the meeting of the two worlds, there was a sense of rupture and the atonal work came out of that. It actually came, interestingly enough, out of the inclusion of *Salome* and listening to Strauss. I was involved in an opera production of *Salome* and I thought that some of the sounds that were produced within that score were very interesting and I actually temped them, or tried to temp them, which didn't work of course, but I think that might have gotten Mychael thinking differently.⁵ But certainly, it is not a type of score you would normally use. I shudder at all the 1970s art movies that overused atonal scores, but I think it worked here.

Miguel: The other material is the Irish folk song. Is that an original folk song?

Atom: Yes. The use of the language was important. There was a scene, in terms of the generational link between Felicia and her great-grandmother and the fact that the great-grandmother is speaking to her in Gaelic, where we thought it would be very interesting to have a female voice, you know, maybe Felicia's mother, singing to her and lulling her, and then disrupting that.⁶ One of my favourite moments in the film is when Felicia comes to Johnnie's mother's house and tries to deliver a letter and what's happening around that part of the film sonically is, I think, really exciting, between Felicia moving up the field with the female voice and the way that begins to corrupt; the other influences and drones, very menacing chordal shifts in the synth tracks, very dark shadings begin to insinuate their way into that scene, it's very strong. Also, I think what was great about the atonal score was then being able to have this redemption theme rise out of it and that was a movement that Mychael really developed well.

Miguel: Why does the use of 'ethnic' instruments appeal to you and what can it contribute to your films?

Atom: I think that often in my films people are in different worlds, they are coming from different worlds or they carry the baggage of different worlds and they are carrying spirits which are very often not present in real time and so the music is a way of evoking that and referencing that.

Miguel: I was just thinking about the African percussion in *Family Viewing*.

Atom: That was very exciting, because in that film you have a contrast between the sentimental and the very brutal. And the whole notion of the nature programme in that film is used to score the way in which the father and the son use nature programmes as a way of escaping from, or rationalising, the violence of their past, the brutality of the father's decision. He finds that by seeing reflections of that in the animal world, it creates a sense of calm. So we really ripped-up those scores, the African sounds and scenes of violent attacks on mice, and cutting that directly into the father being attacked by his stepmother. In all those sorts of scenes there's a humour, that's something we haven't talked about, very often we are trying to use humour, if you look at the scene where the son comes home and the father is making a sandwich and there's this penguin scene that he's watching and there's a circus-like sound, what's it called a kaliaurpie?

Deleted:

Miguel: A calliope?⁷

Atom: The calliope, yes, which is used for very humorous effect. Whether or not people respond to the humour in an overt way, I think it just suggests that there are subversive elements being explored in the music.

Miguel: Is that just through the use of particular instrumentation, or what other things does Mychael do to engender that humour?

Atom: Just being playful. Taking chances and putting in the sound that you may not expect. Having an African drum play through a nature scene is one thing, but then to have

that same drum play in a scene in a nursing home where the father goes to visit an estranged relative, it creates associations. I'm working on a production of *The Ring* and there is a lot of discussion about Wagner's use of leitmotif, but film is all about that; establishing certain ideas and using music to reference those in a subconscious way, they do allow one to come up with a concept. I think one of the things about these films and our approach to working on them is that they are very concept driven. They are not just about using music to fix scenes or to ease the viewer through, they are very thought-out and there is always a strategy at play.

Miguel: Presumably that takes a lot of thinking time and maybe one of the problems with the film industry generally is that there's often not enough time to think. How do you manage those processes?

Atom: Well, the best scores we've had, we've had that time ... we've carved out the time. We've been fortunate to have a very interesting schedule. I usually shoot in the late summer/early fall and then we are premiering in Cannes, this is how it has been for the last few films, we've had a long period of time. *Ararat* and *Exotica*, *The Sweet Hereafter* was a little bit more compressed, but we were thinking about those ideas before we were shooting.

Miguel: I think that comes across, so at what stage are you involved with Mychael.

Atom: From the script.

Miguel: Does he produce ideas for you at that stage or later during the process?

Atom: It depends on the film. There are some films where we need a theme. In *Exotica* we needed a theme for Tracy to play on the piano and that was referenced specifically visually, so we needed that before shooting.

Miguel: Actually, you do have a lot of source music in *Exotica*.

Atom: Well, we have this whole reel which is quite interesting, I think it's reel 3—I can't say without watching the tape—it's from when she comes over to the house and when she starts playing the piano, and then we see that it's one of those Yamaha automatic pianos and it's been programmed, and that begins a whole passage which is about how music is manipulated or recorded and also about how emotions are manipulated, and the theme is passed from the piano to a flute and then it's just scored, you're not quite sure what is source and what is incidental. That type of fusion is something that we both find very exciting, the blurring of those lines, that film is very much about the blurring of experience and *Ararat*, of course, does that as well.

Miguel: I saw it at the London Film Festival, I know you spent a lot of time researching the music for this film with Mychael, can you tell me something about that process?

Atom: Well, it says a lot about Mychael's passion about this. We could have found a lot of those instruments or instrumentalists in Los Angeles, but he was very insistent on going back to the source. In *Exotica* as well, he was very insistent in going to the sources and trying to find an authentic rendering of those sounds. I think that's a very interesting obsession he has. I remember with *Exotica* the sound of the *shehnai*, he knew of a person in a particular village in India that had that sound, and weeks before the mix he got on the plane and went over there just to get that sound. Very often, we both feel that the way image and sound are produced is a reflection of all the decisions that are made behind it. There are easy routes around that, but the sense of compromise is something that is somehow embedded into your experience of what you are hearing and seeing and so we try and challenge that. He insists on going to these places and finding out as much as he can, and not just being a tourist, immersing himself completely in the cultures as he is using them. He is aware of how a lot of his music might be thought of as being exploitative or superficial and it's not. I think it's as deep as a westerner can go.

Miguel: That a very interesting point, because one of the common criticisms of composers who use instruments from other cultures is that they are being exploitative. I've got just one more question: one of the seminal film music texts is called *Unheard Melodies*⁸ and the central conceit is that film music is not consciously heard by the audience?

Atom: It depends on the film. I actually have no problem with having music front and centre. I just think there's a wonderful opportunity to marry drama with music, perhaps because I am an opera fan. Some films don't use music at all, but I think there are times when music can be really overt and should be. I think this idea that the best tracks are not noticed is a bit ridiculous. There are certainly tracks which are ill-conceived and which are almost too muscular for their own good. It would be wrong-headed not to take advantage of the opportunity of marrying image and music and exploring the full possibilities of that and not to be hampered by a preconceived idea of what the outcome should be.

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¹ Genie Awards are presented by the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television and annually celebrate and recognise the country's cinematic achievements.

² The McLaughlin Planetarium, which was part of the Royal Ontario Museum, was founded by using a grant from philanthropist R. Samuel McLaughlin and opened to the public in 1968. However, it was forced to close in 1995 due to provincial budget cuts. Mychael Danna was composer in residence at the Planetarium, providing electronic music for the 'stars shows', from 1987 onwards.

³ For a detailed discussion on the use of pre-existing materials in relation to Danna's compositional practice, see Mera 2007, Chapter 4: 'Evolution of the Score', 77-116.

⁴ *Groonk*, or *Kroonk*, refers to a crane, a long-necked bird that is revered in Armenian culture. Egoyan refers here to a folksong of the same name which is about an Armenian immigrant who asks the bird about his motherland. It is often attributed to Komitas Vardapet (1869-1935), an Armenian composer, ethnographer and musicologist.

⁵ 'Temp' here refers to the temp(orary) track which is a collection of preexistent recordings used during postproduction in order to help focus the ideas of the production team and the composer.

⁶ The song used is '*Coinleach Ghlas an Fhomhair*' ('The Green Autumn Stubble').

⁷ A Calliope is a musical instrument that produces sound by sending steam through whistles, originally locomotive whistles. It is sometimes also called a steam organ or steam piano.

⁸ Gorbman, C. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.