

Cimitile, Anna Maria

"Are you there?" uprootedness and "The story behind the place" in Atom Egoyan's Calendar

The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2008, vol. 6, iss. [1], pp. 89-96

ISBN 978-80-210-4943-7

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/116074>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Anna Maria Cimitile

University of Naples 'L'Orientale', Italy

“Are you there?” Uprootedness and ‘The story behind the Place’ in Atom Egoyan’s *Calendar*

Abstract

The article is on the spatial-temporal articulation of ‘unbelonging-ness’ in Atom Egoyan’s film *Calendar*. The film stresses the contrast between the ‘originary’ place, Armenia, which is visited by a photographer and his wife, and the Toronto apartment of present, idiosyncratic uprooted life. The Armenian landscape and its ruins are rendered as either footage or the pictures in the ‘calendar’ of the film title; this stresses ‘Armenia’s’ difference – as past, as observed space and time under the touristic gaze of the photographer – from Toronto’s ‘presence’, a *hic et nunc* which is nothing but a glossy if empty space filled in by long conversations in foreign languages on the phone, messages left on the answering machine, and the untimely writing of letters the only destination of which is that they will not arrive at their destination.

Drawing on Deleuze’s notion of the time image, I shall also consider the way the stylistic choice of different cinematic modes of representation of Armenia and Toronto respectively, as well as the ‘epistolarity’ of the film (in Naficy’s terms), redefines the imagined relation between the place of origin and the space of present life.

Résumé

L'article réfléchit sur l'articulation espace-temps de l'« unbelonging-ness » dans le film *Calendar* de Atom Egoyan. Le film présente le sens paradoxal de dislocation et d'indifférence que le sujet diasporique éprouve à l'égard de sa terre, de sa langue et de sa culture, à son premier contact. Le protagoniste, un photographe arménien-canadien, revenu à Toronto après son voyage en Arménie, répète ses actions idiosyncrasiques qui ont le seul but de reproduire le même sens d'étrangéité qui a caractérisé son voyage dans la terre d'« origine » ; en même temps il définit son expérience d'aliénation de sa culture comme le seul espace à lui familier. L'article reflète aussi sur les différentes modalités cinématiques employées pour reproduire le contraste entre les espaces ouverts de l'Arménie – qui sont en même temps un signe d'appartenance et d'altérité – et l'appartement de Toronto où l'action se déroule, après le voyage. Il examine encore les relations entre ces modalités et la réformulation de « familier » et « étranger » que ce film propose.

I would like to address the topic of “Questioning Identities: The Canadian Context” by discussing a film by Armenian-Canadian director Atom Egoyan. The film is *Calendar*, it came out in 1993 and it is a cross-cultural artifact, an Armenian-German co-production which tells a story that, although it is only partially set in Toronto, is nonetheless relevant for a discussion of the Canadian specificity in ‘questioning identities’.

The film makes it clear that two of its three main characters are 'hyphenated Canadians' – being Armenian Canadians like Egoyan himself, who in fact plays in one of the roles – and it insists on the relation of each of them with an 'original' nation and culture, a relation which varies in intensity from one character to the other; the notion of 'identity' is thus partly addressed by way of showing the relation of each character with the estranged, and to a certain extent foreign, 'origin'. The story is of a journey to Armenia made by a photographer who has been commissioned a series of shots for the calendar of the title. The man is to take pictures of a number of Armenian churches in ruins. He travels to the places with his wife, who helps him as she acts the translator between her husband and the Armenian driver who accompanies them, as the latter likes to tell them all the "stories behind the places" I refer to in my title. By the end of the journey the wife falls in love with the driver and decides to remain in Armenia with him. The photographer goes back to Toronto, where he resumes his working life, only adding to its routine another repetitive if idiosyncratic event: an arranged dinner with a female 'escort' which takes place once a month, each time with a different woman, who by his request must speak at least one foreign language beside English (I shall come back to this point).

The Armenia part of the film appears as footage material, what was shot by the photographer as part of his work and, occasionally, by his wife as a personal record of the journey and the places they have been to. It comes across as the past with respect to the Toronto part, which is the present moment from which the photographer casts his gaze on what went on during that journey. The two parts are intertwined so that to each Armenian 'moment' there follows a Toronto episode (this intermingling is repeated for more than 10 times in a film with a duration of just over the hour). The temporal contrast is also rendered in spatial terms, as to the open landscapes of Armenia there is opposed the claustrophobic Toronto part shot in the photographer's apartment, where the repetitive dinners with the escorts take place. Indeed, one could say that the Canadian space is in fact non-represented in the film.¹

A look at the format of the DVD of the film is quite revealing. The Menu divides the film into 12 sections, which are, interestingly, each named after the Armenian location that is being shot in that sequence; twelve sites are visited, as twelve are the months of the year and the pictures needed for the calendar, which are also the pictures used in the Scene selection Menu.² Each of the twelve sequences contains at least one Toronto scene, but this is totally ignored by the dvd Menu; by looking at it, as well as at the dvd cover, you would never guess the presence of the Canadian space in the film: Toronto is the present time of the film, yet it is, paradoxically, structured as the other time, the other place of the film even in the paratextual apparatus of the dvd; it is indeed the film's *other scene*.

Related to this is what goes on in the other paratextual apparatus, the credits, where the characters are listed by the common names of 'the Photographer' (played by Atom Egoyan), 'the Translator' (played by the director's actual companion Arsinée Kahnjian) and 'the Driver' (Ashot Adamian). In other words, in the dvd the places have proper names and are the actual 'subjects' of the story, each with its own, well-defined identity – which in the film is uncovered for his mates by the Driver as the three of them go from one site to the other – whereas the

1) I am going to say more about the relevance for my argument of this non-representation later in the essay.

2) Cf. Zeitgeist films DVD of Atom Egoyan, *Calendar*.



three characters are figures whose identities float among the ruins of the toured places and emerge only in, or as, small fragments, bits of identities that let us guess at their complexity but which are never explored in depth.

The film articulates a discussion of post-diasporic identity which turns out to be rather a non-identity. On the Armenian locations the photographer's point of view is the most remote from an understanding or true appreciation of his biographical involvement with the place. Although he has the chance for the first time in his life to be in the place of his originary culture, he does not develop any intimacy with it. The 'story behind the place', invisible yet without which the place would have no beauty according to the driver, is what fails to get the photographer's attention, in the same way as the need to 'get closer' to the places does. Translating a question from the driver, his wife asks him:

- Don't you feel the need to come closer? To touch and feel the churches?

To which his reply is

- No, um... hasn't occurred to me.

The photographer is rather a stranger in his place of origin. This much he understands when he realises that he and his wife are about to break up, but he does not seem to be aware of the implications of what he sees for a reassessment of his own cultural identity. Yet at one point we hear his voice, his reflection from the Toronto present synced onto the Armenian past we see as video material, saying:

You leave me stranded, alone to defend myself... we're both from here, yet being here has made me from somewhere else.

Calendar stages different degrees of 'otherness'. By this word it is also paradoxically meant the relation with one's 'original' culture. The 'story behind the place' told by the driver each time they reach a new location, if it fails to arise any interest in the photographer, has instead a tremendous effect on the other two characters, as it lets another story come about, something the photographer cannot stop or prevent, the falling in love of his companion with the driver. The past 'stories' have still a generative power for the translator, who has, like the photographer, an Armenian-Canadian identity, but whose 'foreignness' to her originary culture does not mean indifference to it. Indeed, the three characters embody three different degrees of 'belongingness' or 'otherness'. The Driver is the one with clear ideas about people and places: at one point he says that the couple would have gone back to Armenia if they had children. The wife/translator has a more recognisable feeling of unbelongingness; she states at one point:

... that's a big problem for me too, to have a child. I don't know which culture could be best for him, or for her.

As a translator, and as a woman, the female character embodies a liminal identity, or, rather, an identity that is aware of its condition of in-between-ness, which makes her neither totally belonging nor completely foreign to either her originary or acquired culture.

A capsized sense of 'otherness' is really the core of the film in my opinion, the fact that, especially in the figure of the photographer, the relation with one's cultural roots is presented in terms of one's foreignness to them, so that 'origin' ends up meaning 'alterity' in fact. Gayatri Spivak has stated that "The notion of origin is as broad and robust and full of affect as it is imprecise" (Spivak, 1992, 781). She insists on the constructed character of 'origin' and sense of belonging: "what we *call* culture ... may be shorthand for an unacknowledged system of representations that allows you a *self*-representation that you believe is true" (Ibid., 785). *Calendar* sweeps the dangers detected by Spivak in the notion of 'identity' out of the way. Possibly, it accepts the notion but, with the photographer, it shows that it can also lead to different, idiosyncratic relations with that 'origin'. It is in fact the sense of unbelongingness in his originary culture that the photographer wants to reproduce and reiterate once he is back in Toronto.

Language

In the Canadian city, his city, he starts his experience with the escorts. His life in Toronto is routine and claustrophobic. The 'other' enters this world in the shape of the women he dates, who are invited to dinner, via an agent, once a month, and who all speak at least one different, 'exotic' language besides English. The dinners are all the action we get to see in Toronto, and they are a real bore. Most of the times the escorts are as dull as the man who has invited them; there are a couple of exceptions, though, women who, in an amicable way, seem to be willing to entertain a normal conversation with him. Their stories, of which we occasionally get to hear but small fragments, are those of migrant subjects, who use their 'original' identity as a performance and make a living out of it (this is the case of the Egyptian belly dancer, who tells the photographer about her shows and how she does not like the men in the public to touch her while she dances). These women too, however, are overcome by the dullness of the photographer who, at one point during the date with each one of them, and careless about her talking to him, signals that the evening has come to a close and that she has to produce a certain expected performance. The performance has to do with her other language and will be the background for the exilic subject's construction of his own identity.

Language's historical functioning for domestication and subjection as it has been employed by modern forces of occupation – and unmasked mainly by the critical discourse of postcolonial studies – undergoes a serious displacement in the inverted and specular use of foreign tongues in *Calendar*, where the latter foreground their own opacity, and almost create a new form of colonialism, a revision of colonialism which instates a completely different relation between the parties involved. For, this time, the imposition of language is *from* the 'other' rather than being exerted onto the other. At the end of each of his arranged monthly dates the photographer wants the escort to go to the phone and pretend to engage in an erotic conversation in her other language with a non-existent interlocutor. An *interference* is produced by the women's other languages in the *here and now* of the photographer's (post)diasporic life in



Toronto and in the English language – a language in which he feels at home. The incursion is desired and in fact arranged by the man himself, so what is actually reproduced is not a sense of belonging through the reproduction of any ‘originary’ ‘mother-tongue’; the photographer does not understand what is said by the women on the phone. It rather seems that he is willing to recreate a diverse form of ‘familiarity’ for himself, which is in fact *an extraneousness to what was or should have been familiar*.

What the photographer actually does in arranging those dates is to reproduce in the Toronto setting his sense of foreignness to his wife’s Armenian speeches, which were pronounced during their journey to that distant country. In involving himself in such peculiar dates, it is as if he confirmed or even ratified a sense of unbelongingness that is but a repetition of what he has always felt towards his cultural ‘roots’; more self-consciously, however, this time he almost creates for himself a sense of ‘familiarity’ out of the unfamiliarity. He feels he is inspired by the sound of the women’s undecipherable languages, and listening to each escort as she makes her fake phone call enables him to bring back the memory of his journey to Armenia and begin to understand what happened then.

Listening to tongues neither he nor we understand (except exceptions) we are nevertheless able to guess the eroticism involved. This is an important element in terms of the kind of space the escort’s phone call opens up for the man’s process of (non)-identification – as opposed to, and substitutive for, self-identification: the photographer wants to recover for himself the experience of a moment when he was linguistically marginalised, yet his relation with what went on (between his wife and the driver) was not totally alienated. Engagement with a foreign language, access to it partakes of an erotic nature. In his apartment in Toronto, alienated from the languages of the phone calls but not from their eroticism, the photographer resumes the letter-writing addressed to his wife. And the question that, in my opinion, arises at this point is the following: Is what the photographer does by dating the escorts exemplary of the only possible way to reproduce the past and belongingness for the diasporic and exilic subject?

I think that in a certain way it is.³ The obsessive repetition of the episodes in the Toronto setting turns his life there into a quest for the extraneousness-of-origins besides being a staging of his own condition in Canada; for let us not forget that the languages are those of the countries which have been on the receiving end of the Armenian diaspora – Russian, German, Hebrew, Italian, and more. (Incidentally, the fact that no subtitles are provided for this parts, just as they are not provided for the Armenian that is spoken in the video footage shows an intention to preserve the opacity of these moments for the audience too.) The dates with the escorts reaffirm the condition of being a stranger to both ends of the bow, the originary culture and the adoptive one. And they prove that this condition is necessary as well as willed.

3) I disagree with Anahid Kassabian and David Kazanjian when they write of the “obsessive-compulsive nationalism of the Photographer” in the film (Cf. Kassabian and Kazanjian, 2005, 137). It is true that the languages spoken by the women are all of the countries which have been involved in the Armenian diaspora; but the fact that the photographer wishes to recreate a sense of displacement, rather than a feeling of belonging, makes the ‘nationalism’ of a peculiar nature and associates ‘the nation’ with the diaspora. I agree with the two critics on the point that the film refuses both the assimilationist fantasy and the nativist one of the diasporic subject’s nationalism.

Media

I should now like to say something on the cinematic language itself.

The three characters embody three different degrees of 'belongingness' or 'otherness'. I have already said of the photographer's marginality with respect to his originary culture. In the film, this is rendered through footage images which are most of the times shot from afar. In the footage material the photographer's gaze always coincides with his camera's shooting angle; he is always behind it and we see what the camera frames as if we were watching through its lenses too. The other characters instead feel free to come and go; they step in and out of the frame and they frequently do so unaware of the photographer's professional – but also touristic – gaze (or perhaps they just pretend so). In one instance, the photographer annoyingly asks his wife and the driver, who are always within the frame of the shots, talking to each other and to himself, to walk out of it and allow him to do his work.

The episode is important for an analysis of the film. Paradoxically, the two who are closer to the place, the driver who is Armenian and the photographer's wife who speaks the language, are considered to be intruders on the site, and, I want to suggest, quite rightly so, as they are 'intruders' not in the place *itself* but in the shot, that is, in a sophistication of the place, a representation in which the identity of the place is annulled in the picturesque character that is required of a calendar picture. (At other times the driver and the woman are filmed with their backs turned to the camera, which is also a sign of their growing more and more distant from the photographer and closer to the place.) In these shots there is an overlapping of the reality of the places 'with a story behind them' with its actual commodification (which culminates in the calendar we see on the wall of the Toronto apartment), a commodification which is also part of the film's reflection on identity and on self-identification as a process of relating to space.

The audio editing is equally important for this argument. The articulation of a desire to reproduce 'unbelongingness' as a variant of the sense of identity is coadiuvated by the way the audio overlaps and interferes with the passages from one footage moment to a Toronto sequence. This has the effect of confusing temporalities as well as our own perception of the footage material itself: are they actual video images or just representations of the photographer's present imagination? Or even of his personal memory of the journey? We are as displaced in our perception of the film as the photographer is in listening to Armenian or to the phone calls in foreign languages.

Again, it is above all through the cinematic language that the film makes its statements about cultural non-identity. The stylistic choice mentioned above offers a reformulation of what Gilles Deleuze defines as the 'crystal-image': the coalescence between an actual or present image and a corresponding virtual or past image. For Deleuze, in this coexistence and unity each image acquires two facets, becoming as it were a mirror image of itself (cf. Deleuze, 1989, 93). In *Calendar*, the particular audio editing that crosses the temporal border between the different cinematic forms (the video footage and the film image proper) reformulates the Deleuzian crystal-image as being one of irreducible displacement: its effect is *foreignness* through and through – for the photographer as well as for the audience – *foreignness* as non-identification; this is how it reiterates, at the level of the cinematic language, the thematic non-identi-



fiction with an 'origin' as well as with an originary language. As *displacement* also emerges in the ambiguity between the actual, footage-style image and the virtual image (what it stands for, the actual video shot in Armenia or the photographer's memory of the journey, or even the past journey itself), it allies with the foreignness of languages present in *Calendar*. The overall effect is the representation of an identity identified by its non-coincidence with itself, its roots, its originary language.

* * *

By way of a conclusion, I would finally like to say something on what the film makes of Toronto itself. The city comes across as recipient of multicultural, diasporic and exilic identities, where any attempt to reproduce an originary identity results in a reproduction of unbelongingness, if not in a fake altogether (the phone calls). However, Toronto as a multicultural space plays no role here, except for the fact that it makes available to the photographer the variety of hyphenated national identities represented by the escorts. The possibility of 'encounter' is forever banned: all the photographer asks of the women is that they perform their identity-as-distance-from-him at the signalled moment. They prove indispensable for the man, but only to the extent that they allow the ritualised staging of his unbelongingness. The identities emerging in this quite invisible Toronto, whether they are self-consciously displaced or attempting at regaining a (non)relation with origins, are always beside themselves. The city's potential for intercultural encounters is wasted on the photographer, shut up as he is in the obsessive repetition of his non-identification with the Armenian space.

One final consideration. In *Calendar* the affirmation of Armenian diasporic identity as a specific form of displacement, produced by the unfamiliarity of language, intertwines with the representation and use of communication forms in which, as Hamid Naficy has noted, 'passages' and 'fluxes' – of voices as well as of images – are rather the occasion for a missed communication (cf. Naficy, 2001). The telephone is there only for the escorts' fake calls or for the wife/translator's failed attempts to talk to the photographer from Armenia through a scrambled line; photography can only reproduce the photographer's detached, touristic and mechanical gaze on the Armenian churches and through it underline the divide between him and the other two protagonists as they carry on in their journey; and the letters he starts writing at the end of every arranged dinner in Toronto will never be sent, they will never reach the addressee. Naficy has called this film the most epistolary, ethnic and exilic of Egoyan's films (Naficy, 2001, 137); in the final scene the voice of the wife on the phone tells of the eventful moment in Armenia when everything started between her and the driver, and it finally asks: "Were you there? Are you there?" These are the very last words of the film for the question is left unanswered. Epistolarity only underlines its own failure to bring people together. Language is forever foreign; in the film this is the shared feature that draws together the mother tongue and the other languages or tongues of the 'others'.

"I only have one language, ... it is not mine," is Jacques Derrida's deconstructive, serious reflection on monolingualism. Derrida refers to French as his mother yet acquired tongue, the language he learnt in Algeria at the time it was still a French colony. In its representation of the photographer's compulsive staging of and identification with his own non-identity in the

mother tongue, in the mimic repetitions-with-a-difference the dates with the escorts stand for, *Calendar* adds its spatio-temporal, visual and acoustic modulation to that statement. In the film, English would be for the photographer the equivalent of what French is for Derrida. The film shows the re-enactment of displacement in the originary culture when the only language of the subject is another language, the language of the other. Toronto, as a multicultural city, with all the creative potential that this involves, could only be cut out of the frame and turned into the invisible host such exilic subjects.

There is no proper way of being in a language, no proper way of being in a place. Being 'there' in Armenia for the photographer (which was at the same time a non-being there), being 'here' in Toronto (before and especially after having *not* been 'properly' there), has made him forever from somewhere else. The photographer's identity, arising in the awareness of this, is a sad, compulsive one; it can only look to non-identification as its form of being. The photographer fails to realise what Derrida also reminds us of: "We only ever speak one language; we never speak only one language" (Derrida, 1998, 7).

Works cited

Deleuze, Gilles, *L'immagine-tempo. Cinema 2*. Milano: Ubulibri, 1989 (Paris, 1985).

Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*. Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1998 (Paris, 1996).

Kassabian, Anahid and David Kazanjian, "From Somewhere Else: Egoyan's *Calendar*, Freud's Rat Man and Armenian Diasporic Nationalism". *Third Text* 19, 2 (March 2005): 125-144.

Naficy, Hamid, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Film-Making*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton U.P., 2001.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Acting Bits / Identity Talk". *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 770-803.

