Postcinema/Postmemory

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As technologies of mass entertainment undergo accelerated development, their affiliated institutional complexes likewise inhabit a state of apparently endless transformation. By institutional complex I mean the commercial and social contexts of production and consumption, as well as the forms of textuality and aesthetic experience associated with particular technologies – easy contrasts being between narrative cinema and the fragmentary action and spectacular intensity of music videos or the idiosyncratic variability of interactive web experiences. In technological, textual and structural terms, these different media compete for preeminence, for literal and symbolic capital, in an increasingly global context. This chapter focuses on the agonistic dimension of contemporary technological changes as manifested in cinema.

While its new technical and stylistic possibilities suggested an early potential to contribute to political or aesthetic innovation, cinema actually carried the burden of memory in modernity. In fact, it shouldn't surprise that one of the key transformations cinema wrought involved the restructuring and revising of retrospection. If the process of memory can be linked to remediating experience, the fate of that process largely depends on the context of the 'construct' which available technologies provide as means and models of remembrance. The shape and possibility of meaningful memory, then, are immediately questions concerning technology. Cinema's iconic, even monumental moments, figures and styles offered something like a continuous cultural tradition and set of strategies, a simultaneously public and subjective mnemonics for framing the past and imagining the future. New, competitor technologies seem initially to deliver the same goals, only more efficiently and powerfully. If film's felt ability to model and remake the world seemed to

deliver reality to our collective control, newer technologies like video seem to deliver reality to our individual control. This possibility destabilises our notions of what memory might be by privatising its collective form and totalising its subjective form. The instruments, institutions, styles and practices that one would term postcinematic also, by definition, lead us into a state of postmemory.

Not surprisingly, for filmmakers and critics alike memory plays a crucial role in efforts to distinguish between the nature and influence of these different media. To a great extent, recent North American cinema forwards a profound contrast between narrative cinema and the textual forms associated with new technologies as models and modellers of memory. From one point of view, this transformation may lead to panic, as in an entire genre of techno-dystopian films emerging from Hollywood such as *Strange Days*, an example I will return to shortly. From another, it demands sober acknowledgement as an irreversible change for consciousness and cultural practice – as, paradigmatically, in the work of Fredric Jameson. A more interesting and exemplary response, I argue, may be found in the cinema of Atom Egoyan. Here postcinematic technologies and textual forms disappoint, rather than deliver upon, cinema's promises. Specifically, they reveal postmemory as an admixture of longing and forgetting, as the disappointment of that promise to model and remake the world as an expression of will. Rather than merely dying, the memorialising project of cinema lives on, in agonistic balance with the frustration of this project. In this regard, the conjunction postcinema/postmemory may be read both as a symptom of, and as an indispensable strategy for, our new historical epoch of globalisation.

In terms of cultural and institutional dominance, cinema faces a future which, by any measure, will be less than its past. In Hegelian terms, we have reached the End of Cinema.¹ Rather than a sudden death, productive negotiations with competitor media and forms initially characterise film's posthistorical era. Hollywood quickly assimilated new procedures and styles into its repertoire – including computer imaging and animation, miniaturisation and digital developments in sound recording and amplification. This incorporation of video and electronic technologies into the core production processes and values of Hollywood cinema drives such second-generation products of the blockbuster strategy as *Jurassic Park*, *Titanic*, *Independence Day* and so on. The coordinated structuring of pay-per-view, cable, video and network release dates, along with

the incorporation of global release planning into every facet of production, virtually renders the larger class of Hollywood releases risk-free. For these sorts of productions, the boundary between film as text and film as event blurs as global forces of promotion and distribution mirror the immense scale of the technology-driven movies themselves. Not only do such films pull cable-ready, video-renting consumers into theatres in staggering numbers, configuring a global public in the process, but the almost-Omnimax scale and volume of their spectacular productions entice repeat viewings at multiplexes and home. From this perspective, the film industry appears unnaturally durable, capable of domesticating any changes in the contours of production or reception.

But these industry practices are only the visible portion of the iceberg. If audiences have begun to ration the attention and investment they give to a medium *qua* medium – as the simultaneous levelling off of cinema attendance, television viewing and book purchasing seems to indicate – then the clear provocation is the emergence of a variety of alternative entertainment technologies offering a range of cognitive and somatic experiences which can best be described as postcinematic: the illusion of sensory immersion in virtual reality; the varieties of interactivity; multimedia and hypermedia. Cinema faces the crisis of becoming *passé*. The self-conscious and symptomatic response of cinema to its challengers likewise turns to the register of the past. Film itself is undergoing a displacement from a cultural pre-eminence that, in the wake of modernity, is still figured in being toward the future. Think here of Walter Benjamin's linkage of cinema and revolution. Now dislodged from this privileged position, film moves towards the opposite and marginalised position of being of the past. Many current films can be seen as figuring their difference from other media precisely through a textualisation of film technology's relationship to the past, to human and collective memory, in contrast and competition with the same relationships as mediated by different technologies.

Exhibiting a common tendency to simultaneously imitate and demonise new techno-developments, Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) elaborates a future which is nightmarish in its contours precisely as it represents a mediascape in which film is increasingly but one medium among many. This future appears salvageable only insofar as a return to past narrative formulas, linked explicitly to film as the form of these formulas, is possible. For example, in the

conclusion of *Strange Days* a figure of traditional authority, the Los Angeles Chief of Police, saves the city from complete social breakdown by exercising his authority to punish particular individuals for corruption. That the city seems destined for anarchy if its enormous inequities of wealth and power are not addressed is momentarily forgotten, as this scene coincides with the romantic union of the two protagonists, standing here for a wildly imaginary reconciliation of the city itself under the Phoenix-like power of film. After all, social inequality pales in comparison to the film's true nightmare: the spread of a postcinematic virtual reality technology so addictive as to require criminalisation.

Resistance and anxiety towards competitor media has a long history in cinema, a fact which might seem to militate against the more extremely dystopic visions of other forms presented in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1982), Brett Leonard's *Lawnmower Man* (1992), James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994). From Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957), through Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976), to Gus Van Sant's *To Die For* (1995), film has constructed a vision of television as destructive of character and community under the irresistible logics of profit, spectacle and saturation. However, to take this history of inter-media tension as simply a cautionary note against techno-phobia is to mistake the extent to which such television-oriented films accurately indexed, if not the exact dimensions of the tube's deleterious effects on the human condition, the specific radical disruption of cinema's relationship to its consuming public, financial infrastructure and entertainment rivals. Furthermore, if these anti-television films can be read, broadly, as retextualising the emergence of a rival in morality tales of individual corruption and redemption, this fact, by contrast, also illuminates the scale of the challenge presented to film by contemporary technological developments. In techno-paranoia films, new technologies threaten to spin away and exceed any effort to renarrativise them in a way that returns at least a measure of cultural prestige to the cinematic medium. Perhaps the best example here is *Natural Born Killers*, in which postcinematic technologies are demonised by association with the inscrutably pathological violence of Mickey and Mallory. These characters' alienation from any coherent or organic notion of memory signals the film's failure to contain their threat in some explanatory narrative. At the same time,

the film collapses into the dizzying array of postcinematic effects and affects it conjured up initially as the object of its satire. If *Strange Days*, or even *Lawnmower Man*, with its surprising evocation of a thematic of Christian resurrection, are films about the redemption of cinema, *Natural Born Killers* achieves something like the status of the Book of Revelation. It is a film about the eschaton of film figured as the end of comprehensible time within film; it is thus about the end of film as memory. From this perspective, we can understand that television forced changes upon film, but that the two forms eventually developed a technical, industrial and textual symbiosis, with cinema trading a measure of mass appeal for a relatively greater prestige. The threat of electronic media seems to be of a whole other type, signaling less a future of managed co-existence than the advent of a postcinematic age.

The collapse of the cinematic into its postcinematic other symptomised by Stone's film parallels a more widely perceived decline of perspective and critical authority in postmodernity. A fundamental crisis of memory connects and drives these formulations. Jameson explicitly locates the demise of memory through a comparison of cinema and television:

If anything like critical distance is still possible in film, indeed, it is surely bound up with memory itself. But memory seems to play no role in television, commercial or otherwise (or . . . in postmodernism generally): nothing here haunts the mind or leaves its afterimages in the manner of the great moments of film.²

The concept and phenomenological experience of subjectivity depends ultimately upon memory:

[H]aving a self, it seems, necessarily involves a disposition on the part of an appropriately constituted organism to identify itself with remembered states and actions, perhaps also with states and actions it does not remember but may be convinced occurred (as an amnesiac might come to feel guilt over her own unremembered but reliably reported crimes).³

Without a memory-enabling narrative, the distinction between spectator and spectacle disappears. According to Jameson, the postcinematic subject becomes 'a quasi-material registering apparatus for . . . machine time . . . and the video image or "total flow"'.⁴ Absent a stable economy of memory, extracting any clarifying interpretative vantage fails immediately; such moves mistake the logic of total flow:

a ceaseless rotation of elements such that they change place at every moment, with the result that no single element can occupy the position of 'interpretant' (or that of primary sign) for any length of time; but must be dislodged in turn in the following instant (the filmic terminology of 'frames' and 'shots' does not seem appropriate for this kind of succession) . . . anything which arrests or interrupts it will be sensed as an aesthetic flaw.⁵

Jameson extends this concept beyond a specific aesthetic experience, arguing that the contemporary medium that 'serve[s] as some supreme and privileged, symptomatic, index to the *Zeitgeist* . . . as the cultural *dominant* of a new social and economic conjuncture is clearly video'.⁶ Video, on one hand, refers to a discrete set of instruments and practices. On the other hand, it may stand for postcinematic technology writ large, due to the dispersal of its form into film, computer networks and television. Egoyan, whose films I shall rely upon to work through and beyond Jameson's diagnosis, himself argues that video determines our experience of both older and newer technologies; for him, computer networks only repeat the metaphors of video.⁷ In general, video's exemplary status as a 'do-it-yourself' practice presaged and permeates our contemporary valuation of 'interactivity'. In their ubiquity and solicitation of particular subjective dispositions, video images offer a prosthetic alternative to previous models of memory. In this sense, video links the postcinematic to the postmemorial.

Under the cultural dominant of video, Jameson calls for a criticism more oriented toward reiterating a complete experiential context than explaining singular artefacts. He suggests the anachronism of memorialising, through interpretation, texts that are themselves not amemorable. Thus he connects the demise of the 'monumental' or 'autonomous' work of art to the fate of a subject now 'vanished' or 'volatilised'.⁸ Jameson returns repeatedly to a dictum against discrete hermeneutical responses to video texts, to a dictum against remembering them:

if we find ourselves confronted henceforth with 'texts' . . . with the ephemeral, with disposable works that wish to fold back immediately into the accumulating detritus of historical time – then it becomes difficult and even contradictory to organize an analysis and an interpretation around any single one of these fragments in flight. To select – even as an 'example' – a single video text, and to discuss it in isolation, is fatally to regenerate the illusion of the masterpiece or the canonical

text, and to reify the experience of total flow from which it was momentarily extracted . . . What is quite out of the question is to look at a single 'video work' all by itself . . . there are no video masterpieces, there can never be a video canon, even an auteur theory of video . . . The discussion, the indispensable preliminary selection and isolation, of a single 'text' then automatically transforms it back into a 'work', turns the anonymous videomaker back into a named artist or 'auteur', opens the way for the return of all those features of an older modernist aesthetic which it was in the revolutionary nature of the new medium to have precisely effaced and dispelled.⁹

To be fair, Jameson himself immediately breaks his own prescription, suggesting at least the rhetorical necessity of the example. From a Lyotardian standpoint, we might grant his account descriptive value (this is our critical problem) while jettisoning its prescriptive features.

By emphasising criticism's anachronism, Jameson eulogises memory. It seems as if memory, even or especially critical memory, is always already nostalgia in postmodernity. Nostalgia is a disposition more easily assailed than defended. Even in an age that has seen ideological critique turn inward upon itself, nostalgia remains – nostalgically, of course – a sign of false consciousness, of individual and mass delusion leading to commercial, critical and political vulnerability. Beyond the various monuments, *lieux de memoires*, television shills in documentary form, fashion revivals, musical retreads, pop cultural recyclings, political atavisms, religious parochialisms and business enterprises nostalgia props up, it emerges as instrumental memory itself. Not memory of, but memory for, a state of contra-cognitive affect rendering subjects singularly malleable. If nostalgia appears as the antithesis of enlightenment, the low status it often receives amongst contemporary theorists and critics is in its own right a paradoxical instance of nostalgia. If postmodernism demands scepticism towards narratives of progress, how then does the progressive view of temporal consciousness implied by the derogation of nostalgia remain so readily acceptable? Perhaps nostalgia is less a problem here, than the nostalgia implied by negative interpretations of the disposition. It is on this ground of memory that I wish to bring Jameson and Egoyan together. For the latter, memory and technology seem closely related, before instrumental approaches seem to alienate the remembering subject from his or her desire. Nevertheless, the impulse toward memory, the longing to make good imagined or real losses, does not thereby disappear or become any less

important. Rather, this desire reveals itself as not only animating potentially regressive forms of nostalgia but also animating affective and cognitive alternatives to the seductive technologies through which it may express itself.

If subjectivity depends upon memory, memory may be inseparable from some degree of nostalgia. Sophisticated critical hostility to nostalgia may, then, strangely echo the fears of dominant cinematic institutions. While holding onto the notion that video represents profound transformations, it is possible to understand that its role in techno-paranoia films or Jameson's criticism is something like that of a guest star. Pre-existing narratives, of institutional self-preservation or the long-running critique of the illusory ego, incorporate video into their workings while denying the possibility of other sorts of engagement. In Egoyan's work, we find a more particularised account of how video changes, but does not destroy, memory, and thus how it changes, without erasing, subjectivity. Postcinema connotes, then, not merely the end of cinema, but its endurance beyond the recognition of the form's limits. In turn, postmemory suggests not simply the demise of memory, but its attenuation beyond the recognition of the impossibility of its totalisation. Finally, we shall see that postcinema/postmemory can serve as 'an index to the *Zeitgeist*', understood not as the dissipation of critical agency but as its modest but irreducible potential in the new cultural structures and processes of globalisation.

Positing Egoyan's work as exceptionally symptomatic of the postcinematic is in itself uncontroversial. After all, his films chart the same technological territory Jameson does, 'dealing with the process of memory and the construct of memory'.¹⁰ In contrast, suggesting that this single filmmaker offers an occasion to achieve a measure of perspective on the postcinematic is a riskier claim. Jameson consigns the auteur to the cutting room floor, as the forgotten avatar of monumental memory. He argues that in video there is no signature as the apparatus is ontologically anonymous and anti-subjective. However, Egoyan suggests that video's democracy of access and application – its ubiquity, simplicity and affordability – may enable rather than flatten expressivism. Speaking of the most banal of video practices, amateur pornography, he says that such particularised and idiosyncratic images 'immediately suggest an allusion to the person who made [them]'.¹¹ This may be the zero degree of auteurism, but its significance ought not be underestimated. If the agency of the maker is

not wholly subsumed into the apparatus, then even the banal work may not be inseparable from the overwhelming flow of indifferent texts from which it is assembled and against which it is encountered. Further, the 'old autonomous subject or ego' for whom monumental works were staged (or restaged, at the level of criticism), may not have been fully 'volatilised'. By implication, such a subject – even if it is the zero degree subject – remains capable of shaping a sort of critical memory out of the not-quite irresistible experience of the postcinematic.

Capable of linking experiences across time to a consistent ethical identity, this subject may approach and exceed exactly what Jameson argues is unimaginable:

A description of the structural exclusion of memory, then, and of 'critical distance' might well lead on into the impossible, namely a theory of video itself: how the thing blocks its own theorization becoming a theory in its own right.¹²

Egoyan explains his own understanding of the relationship between film and video precisely in terms of memory's exclusion through externalisation:

Video images are suggestive of the images that go on inside people's heads. [T]here's a profound difference in attitude toward . . . video and film. In terms of home movies, everyone using film knows in the back of their minds that they are going to have to pay for a roll. That means no matter how obsessive they are about recording, they have to chose [sic]. With video, the process can be indiscriminate. You can record an entire day in real time without any form of selection. That experience of time is extremely dangerous. Some people never look at what they record but by recording something, they make it a possession. It has an effect on the process of memory. We give away responsibility for memory to a piece of technology. I don't think film was so insidious.¹³

If memory becomes a matter of indiscriminate information and image storage, then its character changes radically. The series of oppositions and associations that define memory disappear when retention becomes infinite, retrieval a function of electronic prostheses, and communication instantaneous. Memory's other, forgetting or oblivion, recedes as the distinction between past and present fades. Rather than unfolding in a horizon of temporality with mirrored vanishing points of past and future, experience becomes a

matter of continuous recollection, which is to say that it is simultaneously a continuous performance of and for recollection:

in terms of how this works with the patterns of memory and the patterns of our shared experience . . . we have to be able to see our lives are artifacts which can be exchanged . . . the extension of that is for me to somehow imagine every moment of my life, every word that is coming out of my mouth as being suitable for the process of documentation, because the process of documentation defines our modern sense of what it means to lead a truly rich experience.¹⁴

Where once modernity and the cinematic could be seen to break the grip of history on the present – precisely through disciplining the past by monumentalising it – and redirecting action and sociality toward an unmade future, postmodernity and the postcinematic seem initially to wrest the present from the domination of the future in a process by which the here and now becomes identical with the there and then. In this light, documentation no longer serves as a useful means for recording actualities in order to enable discourse based on empirical authority. Instead, documentation becomes an end in itself, a goal of self-fashioning for ongoing retrospection. Such a degree of mnemonic arrest produces a melancholic culture in which progress is marked by the increase of intimacy with the past: whole libraries available through a home terminal; lives video-graphed from birth through toddlerhood, graduations through sexual encounters, surgeries through testaments. Rather than Benjamin's Angel of History, the figure for this condition might be Lot's wife. Fleeing the traumas of history, the flight to the future itself becomes traumatic. She turns back, not fearing death but loss and transformation. She desires to transform memory into the memorial, to fix the past and future in a permanent present. Literally becoming a monument satisfies her desire.¹⁵

Egoan's work manifests these processes of self-reification in a number of ways. Typically, the diegesis consists of repetitive character interactions with different mediations of memory. The reliance on prosthetic memories results in increasing figurative and literal alienation, as signified in the frequent physical isolation of characters who primarily relate to the world through technological devices – phones, tape recorders, microphones, video or photographic images – and are thus regularly framed in hermetic spaces, whether the empty rooms in which they dwell or the screen itself. Above all,

'Video is everywhere – recording experience, mediating experience, "surveilling" experience, reducing reality to replica'.¹⁶ While the registers and modes vary across the films, a general trajectory holds true. First, the attempt to record, manipulate and control experience reveals itself as an effort to transfer the burdens of memory to postcinematic technologies. Next, in the wake of the arresting malfunction of these controlling gestures, the persistent and powerful attraction of a seemingly authentic, if ultimately unavailable, form of memory forces itself upon the characters and viewers. Finally, there emerges an impulse to renarrate the films in such a way that these contradictory desires are neither met nor cancel each other out. Instead, they are held in an agonistic balance that simultaneously reflects the paradoxes of consciousness in global culture – postcinematic, postmemorial – and provides a critically and ethically astute perspective on them.

The postcinematic effort to manage memory through denaturalised representation aims to ameliorate the traumas of subjective, familial and social life. Egoyan's larger exploration of cultural identity in postmodernity gathers these otherwise diffuse examinations. Specifically, he investigates the question of identity in the context of Canada, in so far as the problems posed therein are understood to stand for postmodernity generally. A nation without an epic story of origin, whose identity is a resolutely open question, Canada emerges here as a definitively postmodern state.¹⁷ The fabricated and anti-septic interiors of Egoyan's work foreground the *sui generis* character of their national and historical setting. For example, in *Next of Kin*, Peter's sterile home of origin, where his fantasies provide the only sign of life, parodies an affluent Anglo-Canada dissociated from a meaningful sense of the past or future. *Speaking Parts*' hotel figures as a symbol for metropolitan Canada, with fugitive figures moving throughout its transitory spaces while being recorded by surveillance cameras. In transfer to film stock, this footage degenerates and begins to lose its indexical function; as the images morph, their abstract circulation resembles the flow of commodities through markets. Noah Render's home in *The Adjuster* varies this logic of commodified simulation: a prototype in an abandoned suburban development, the borrowed space includes fake furnishings and a *faux* family.

Against this sort of simulated existence, Egoyan elaborates the attractions of an 'authentic' Other, an object of desire through

which characters imagine they might transform themselves. Compared to the pale and washed out images of Anglo-Canadian spaces and faces, other ethnic locales and bodies are presented as warm and vibrant (the Armenian family in *Next of Kin*), rooted in unattainable tradition (the silent grandmother in *Family Viewing*), or sexually irresistible (the ‘other’ men with whom Thomas trades opera tickets for sex in *Exotica*). By *Felicia’s Journey*, the attractions of origins have become worn – mostly indicated by sequences of Felicia’s father hectoring her about ethnic treason in a ruined Irish fortress – but nevertheless powerful, as Felicia pursues the absconded father of her child. Like cultural orphans, caught between an unhomely present and an inaccessible past, characters perform rituals of appropriation and self-transformation to acquire a new identity.

Characters enact a self-memorialising process by becoming consumers of their own spectacular performances. What Lipman writes of *Exotica* could be said of virtually every character in every film:

Almost every member of this group mythologises who and where they are through play acting and ritual. Zoe plays the part of the dispassionate matriarch. Christina is crystallised into the schoolgirl she acts onstage. Francis turns his mourning for his dead daughter into a fetishistic, psychosexual relationship through Christina’s striptease character. Thomas, a pet shop owner, would rather see himself as a smuggler of exotic goods.¹⁸

Here we might think also of the father in *Family Viewing*, methodically revising the family romance by overdubbing home videos of his first marriage and son’s childhood with pornographic footage which he and his partner are coached through by a phone sex worker. Despite these characters’ attempts to transform and exoticiise themselves, their alienation from such idealised identities remains foregrounded. Egoyan’s actors perform in a deliberately awkward manner. Their stiff and muted delivery and motions provide neither the normative expressivity or transparency of screen acting, nor the affected naturalism of direct cinema. Rather, the actors appear as functions without interior motivation, or at least none they recognise or communicate. The dialogue suggests a flattening of affect and minimising of connections between characters and within their own psyches, compounding their isolation even from an assumed identity. No matter what lengths they go to, the desired revision of the self seems impossible.

Some form of sexualised self-othering provides the chief vehicle for such efforts at transformation, as characters attempt to link identity to substitute somatic experiences. Their obsessive rituals of commodified sensation effectively instrumentalise the body, making it into an extension of the technologies, broadly defined, that promise a liberation from their pasts. The Armenian father in *Next of Kin* belies his dogged traditionalism by visiting strip clubs; burdened with the care of her invalid, immigrant grandmother in *Family Viewing*, Aline works as a phone sex dominatrix and an escort; Clare in *Speaking Parts* sublimates her grief and frustration with a mediated relationship with Lance, really a consensual onanism as the two perform before their respective digitised images on a videophone. The motives are various, but tend in all cases to be lost in the very process of externalising identity in the form of commodified memories. The father in *Family Viewing*, for instance, a videotape salesman, is initially moved by guilt over his sadistic treatment of his first wife, whom he drove to abandon the family; but his guilt has been taped over to the point that he no longer knows its origins, as when he fails to recognise his mother-in-law, whom he earlier institutionalised as part of his effort to erase memory.

Whereas these characters use technology to avoid the ethical burden of memory, other figures seek to use technology to invent a past they never had. In *Next of Kin*, Peter's ability to gain access to the history of an Armenian family through the video tape of their therapy sessions permits him to insert himself into the vacant role of their long-lost son, put up for adoption when the family struggled upon their immigration to Canada. A particular postcinematic equation of representation with the real permits this family to accept that Peter/Bedros looks like (one is tempted to say 'is', but that would miss the point) a fair-skinned WASP. Likewise, Van in *Family Viewing* absconds with the videotapes his father has not yet overdubbed and with his invalid grandmother, also an Armenian immigrant, in order to reinvent for himself a family history and unity which he has never in actuality experienced.

All these cases enact a sort of rolling fabrication of the past while foregrounding this very process:

not only does technical memorization replace the factuality of beings and things when we seek confirmation of our own remembrance in a second look at certain images; even more, this technical recall actually becomes a new part of our memories.¹⁹

As memory and the real become fully mediated and externalised this image field offers itself as the field of action in which subjects may search for or construct a self that has never been and will never be. Yet this field is more properly a screen for projecting artificial identities while blocking access to a new reality. In *Felicia's Journey*, for example, Hilditch obsessively re-enacts an Oedipal romance with a mother who lives only in the footage of her television show, videotapes the confessions and murders of the stray young women he takes into his care, all while framed in a carefully photographed film self-consciously saturated with elements of a prime cinematic genre, the psychological suspense film. Less a vehicle for authentic self-fashioning, video here delivers us to a psychoanalytic labyrinth in which Film the Father and Television the Mother produce neuroses in the Video Child. Video's heightened powers of editing and retention promise greater intimacy and agency; they actually deliver greater irrationality and alienation. If the desires evoked by video now appear unattainable, in contrast, Lisa emerges at the end of *Speaking Parts* with her desired relationship with Lance, a relationship significantly enabled by her failed attempt to learn to use video technology.

Up to a certain point, Egoyan's films depict a familiar scenario in which technology has simultaneously obliterated textuality, memory, and agency. Like techno-paranoia films or Jameson's analysis, such a dystopian line depends upon idealising the technologies in question as a monolithic and irresistible set of forces.²⁰ However, Egoyan escapes such determinism through his rigorous attention both to video's rhetorical power and to its limits. Video's conspicuousness and omnipresence undercuts its own power. While video may bear with it certain dangers it also solicits subjective action in a way film may not. In contrast with his description of video's tendency toward reification, Egoyan describes video as exceptionally susceptible to criticism:

the video image has associations which are far more quotidian, far more domestic and less mystified. There is still a mystification which exists around the filmmaking process. When people see a projected image, they're seeing something which is beyond them and therefore invites a very specific type of identification. When people see a video image, the first response is that it is something that *they themselves* could make . . . therefore it is far easier to be suspicious of a video image.²¹

Video is a domesticated technology: with a videocam and two VCR's or a digital camera and an iMac any home can be a site for production. Egoyan seems to want to transfer the skepticism such domestication enables to viewers' reception of films. As he says, 'The most important thing is to be open about the process, at every opportunity to demystify the process of making films'.²² The palpable dysfunctions of technologised memory in Egoyan's work encourage suspicion in viewers towards the images and actions before them. In turn, this suspicion revives a putatively defunct hermeneutic impulse that reverberates across our understanding of the film.

In a manner typical of other films, the retrospective re-evaluation of previous mausoleum scenes in *Speaking Parts* engages our own awareness with the tenuous nature of our construction of sense in the film, a mediated image ensemble which we relate to in the manner that characters relate to the own image rich milieu. Here, Clare's entry into the oft-repeated video-mausoleum images of her brother, who died while donating an organ to her, is undercut by the revelation that her own torso is unscarred; the original traumatic wound that drives the film never occurred. The echoes of association that ensue from such a jarring exposure – such as Nicole's decision to lie at her deposition in *The Sweet Hereafter* – redirect and substitute for the specular and exteriorised desires which the films initially establish as the stakes for both characters and viewers. The obtuseness of such redirections of spectatorial investment from the image, due to its exposure, is in direct proportion to the stakes at hand. As Lageira writes, 'memory is the final rampart against the depersonalization carried out by machines and the media. But it is the most fragile as well, for the terrible effort involved . . . often veers dangerously toward the absurd'.²³

The absurd moment when image becomes manifestly derealised is not a danger but a relief, freeing characters and viewers from an illusory and debilitating repetition compulsion. The effort to maintain stilted, hermetic and morbid connections with a technologised past fails. Spectatorial attention is shifted away from the transfixing image toward a reexamination of the stakes behind characters' efforts at self-transformation. Writing in terms of the image, Daniele Riviere argues that Egoyan's films are 'interactive':

For in fact, the image that interests Egoyan is the one projected by our gaze, redoubling the image of the world . . . [He] focuses on this

ambivalence of the image in which the spectator, redoubled on the screen, watches himself projecting his mental images onto the images of the world . . . the image extracted from ourselves materialized, becomes incarnate, and now begins to regard us.²⁴

Precisely the same argument of interactivity, I think, can be made in regards to the chronotype of narrative, of memory, as viewers become aware of their projections of causality and connection. The films, therefore, tend to engage viewers in a retrospective engagement with their images and narratives in a temporality which is quite literally postcinematic. After the film, that is, we must remember and reorganise the images, repetitions and juxtapositions in order to make sense of them. This effort, crucially, depends on the willful forgetting of the melancholic performances of self-memorialising that have constituted the films thus far. This retroactive narrativisation, therefore, binds recollection to oblivion, the limiting force which makes memory coherent. As Virilio reminds Egoyan in a citation of Norman Spear, 'The content of memory is the function of the speed of forgetting'.²⁵ By self-consciously abandoning the pretense to monumental totalisation implicit in the cinematic, or the intimate totalisation seemingly promised by the postcinematic, such an enduring and delimited mnemonics can be understood as postmemory.

The stakes in this elaborate play of technologised memory and willful forgetting are not simply subjective, but connect with issues of identity and agency on a collective, even global scale. Egoyan continuously contrasts an acculturated, technologised metropole with the residual attractions of an organic cultural identity. Cosmopolitan and consumerist Toronto is identified with the commodification of the past. In contrast, the remnants of an ethnic identity, the memory of Armenia, is defined by its persistent attractions: stability, meaningful community beyond the imploded bounds of the nuclear family, the attenuated temporality of place and history embodied in the landmark. Given the profound appeal of Egoyan's Armenia – from the party at which Peter decides to remain in the role of Bedros in *Next of Kin*, with Egoyan himself smiling into the camera, through the variety of romanticised grandmothers, to the interpreter's decision to re-emigrate to Armenia in *Calendar* – we can understand how easily the anomie of metropolitan life under the postcinematic could seem to be resolved by similar movements. However, the draw of deep identity Egoyan evokes is as dangerous as it is appealing. After all, a response to contemporary cultural

changes quite opposed to Egoyan's reveals itself in the flowering of a thousand fundamentalisms across the contemporary world. The emergence of a variety of atavisms, precisely akin to the ethnic particularism that resulted in the Armenian genocide and dispersal, can be read not as a regressive echo but as a response to the disruptions of traditional schemes for framing contemporary experience in relation to a continuous past and future. Given the dichotomy between the contours of identity available in the technologised metropole and the native land, Arjun Appadurai convincingly argues that 'the central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort at sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideals of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular'.²⁶ Egoyan elaborates a possibility for an alternative to these equally unappealing antinomies.

Egoyan's cinema embodies and explores globalisation, using the postcinematic technologies of these developments to examine the consequences for subjective and collective identity when peoples are relocated and autochthonous traditions begin to circulate and collide with others. Armenia offers a locus of desire, a figurative alternative to the tempting unreality of global life. That this nostalgic desire cannot be satisfied in no way decreases its value. Quite the opposite is true. From his perspective, one of the attractions of Armenia is its metaphorical status, the way it stands for all sorts of desires for a replete past. The most obvious film in this sense is *Calendar*. 'In conceiving *Calendar*', Egoyan notes, 'I wanted to find a story that would deal with three levels of Armenian consciousness: Nationalist, Diasporan, and Assimilationist'.²⁷ The photographer (Egoyan), interpreter (Arsinée Khanjian, Egoyan's spouse and collaborator) and native guide (Ashot Adamian), all in fact can be defined this way. Born in Egypt, Egoyan has only a scant knowledge of Armenian and a second- or third-generation relationship to this cultural legacy. Khanjian, meanwhile, grew up in the midst of a first-generation immigrant community, and her familiarity with the language and culture figures in many of the films. An Armenian actor hired on-site, Adamian spoke no English, the latest global language. Throughout the film, the photographer relates to the landscapes, indeed all of Armenia, strictly through videotape. Likewise, he only relates to the interpreter who chooses to repatriate, and later her call girl proxies, through mediating technologies. However, after a

certain point of repetition, both his reviewings of the videotapes and the rejection ritual, the photographer emerges into something like real time. As the calendar with his photographs becomes outdated, he finally writes about his perspective on his experiences. In the act, he achieves a measure of linkage between interiority and the world of others and objects, with the communicative act of writing standing for both the non-imagistic and tenuous nature of this connection. The photographer remains in postmodern Toronto, but is fully aware of what he has lost and why, and to what extent it differentiates him from his acculturated surroundings. Here, in miniature, is Egoyan's alternative to acculturalisation and nativism, two varieties of memorial excess: by inhabiting the in-between space, neither the metropole nor the particular, it is possible to imagine a future, however difficult, for critical memory.

Writing of the transnational dispersals of peoples and traditions, Appadurai notes that:

the central paradox of ethnic politics in today's world is that primordial (whether of language or skin color or neighborhood or kinship) have become globalized. That is, sentiments whose greatest force is in their ability to ignite intimacy into a political sentiment and turn locality into a staging ground for identity, have become spread over vast and irregular spaces as groups move, yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities.²⁸

By coupling an awareness of globalisation with an understanding of the seductions of both the technological and its apparent opposite, the autochthonous, Egoyan invites us to direct a critical forgetting in two directions at once. Technologised memory and nationalisms are both instrumental in a strong sense and produce, in his films and the world itself, the irrationalities of any totalising system. In order for memory to have meaning in postcinematic culture, Egoyan could be seen to invite us to occupy the transitory consciousness of the migrant, to guide us toward an Armenia of the mind in which the true past is already somewhat lost. But lost as well are any fantasies of total memory.

Notes

- 1 Arthur Danto provides the model for this point. He translates the Hegelian dialectic to the terms of contemporary visual art. If we conceive of artistic history as progressive, he argues, we are operating

- under the aegis of Hegel's historicism. The dialectic, however, demands that we accept the inevitable dissipation of progress in any particular field: 'Hegel's thought was that for a period of time the energies of history coincided with the energies of art, but now history and art must go in different directions, and though art may continue to exist in . . . a post-historical fashion, its existence carries no historical significance whatever'. Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 84. In its combination of mass appeal and aesthetic development, cinema is arguably the supreme art form of the last century. This chapter explores how cinema negotiates its transition to a posthistorical status.
- 2 Fredric Jameson, 'Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text', in Nigel Fabb (ed.), *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments Between Language and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 202.
 - 3 Steven Knapp, 'Collective Memory and the Actual Past', *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 137.
 - 4 Jameson, 'Reading', p. 206.
 - 5 Jameson, 'Reading', p. 218.
 - 6 Jameson, 'Reading', p. 201.
 - 7 See Jonathan Romney, 'Exploitations', *Sight and Sound* (May 1995), 6–9.
 - 8 Jameson, 'Reading', p. 208.
 - 9 Jameson, 'Reading', pp. 208–9.
 - 10 Paul Virilio, 'Video Letters: An Interview with Atom Egoyan', in Carole Desbarats *et al.* (eds), *Atom Egoyan*, trans. Brian Holmes (Paris, Editions Dis Voir, 1994), p. 106.
 - 11 Virilio, 'Video', p. 108.
 - 12 Jameson, 'Reading', p. 202.
 - 13 Amy Taubin, 'Memories of Overdevelopment: Up and Atom', *Film Comment* (November/December 1989), 28.
 - 14 Virilio, 'Video', p. 112.
 - 15 The story of Orpheus also resonates with this condition. 'In the Orphic underworld the dead must avoid the springs of oblivion; they must not drink the waters of Lethe, but on the contrary drink from the fountain of memory, which is a source of immortality', Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. Steven Rendell and Elizabeth Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 64.
 - 16 Peter Harcourt, 'Imaginary Films: An Examination of the Films of Atom Egoyan', *Film Quarterly* (Spring 1995), 6.
 - 17 For a brilliant analysis of the construction of Canadian national identity through the wiring of its vast and underpopulated spaces with the world's most complete telephone and broadcasting network, along

- with Canada's peculiar dominance of techniques of satellite imagery, see Jody Berland, 'Mapping Space: Imaging Technologies and the Planetary Body', in Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Martinsons and Michael Mensa (eds), *Technoscience and Cyberculture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 123–37. For broader discussions of Canadian self-perception, under the rubrics of postmodernism and cultural studies, see Valda Blundell, John Shepard and Ian Taylor (eds), *Relocating Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 18 Amanda Lipman, 'Exotica', *Sight and Sound* (May 1995), 45.
 - 19 Jacinto Lageira, 'The Recollection of Scattered Parts', in Carole Desbarats *et al.* (eds), *Atom Egoyan*, p. 33.
 - 20 For a persuasive detailing and critique of techno-determinism in contemporary criticism and theory, see Richard Gruisin 'What Is an Electronic Author? Theory and the Technological Fallacy', in Richard Markley (ed.), *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 39–54.
 - 21 Virilio, 'Video', p. 106.
 - 22 Romney, 'Exploitations', p. 9.
 - 23 Lageira, 'Recollection', p. 34.
 - 24 Daniele Riviere, 'The Place of the Spectator', in Desbarats *et al.* (eds), *Atom Egoyan*, p. 96.
 - 25 Virilio, 'Video', p. 114.
 - 26 Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in Bruce Robbins (ed.), *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 287.
 - 27 Farah Anwar, 'Calendar', *Sight and Sound* (February 1993), 49.
 - 28 Appadurai, 'Disjuncture', p. 285.