Israeli independence, or the founding of the Jewish state in 1948, is known among Palestinians as Nakba, the disaster or catastrophe. Conversely, disaster in the form of the Holocaust constitutes a key event in Zionist foundationalist discourses alongside the more triumphalist implications of the notion of an independence struggle. Similarly, in *My Father and I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community*, David Caron describes the role that what he calls “the inaugural function of disasters” (11) plays in “the realization of the community” (8). In his compelling example of personal or autobiographical criticism, Caron theorizes how inaugural disasters help define the communities that coexist in (or at least that, across historical time, have shared) the Parisian neighborhood named in his title: the Holocaust for the Marais’s Jewish community and the AIDS pandemic for its gay community. The connections between these two communities are played out in relation to “the founding failure” (139) that, according to Caron, characterizes his relationship with his Hungarian-born Jewish father as they stroll together through two different Marais (different because seen through different eyes, experiences, and histories). From the individual failure that defines his familial relation to the inaugural disaster that founds communities on the scale of an urban neighborhood, we can further extend this understanding of “a founding disaster” (8) to the national level at the roots of both Palestinian and Israeli identities.
Indeed, “the inaugural function of disasters” extends even beyond the borders of the nation altogether for diasporic peoples, be they Jewish (because of dispersal) or African (because of the slave trade). Armenian diasporic identity likewise rests on a “founding disaster.” In 1915 when, during World War I, as the Ottoman Empire was approaching its demise, forced migration and accompanying massacres and starvation resulted in the death of about a million Armenians. These events, widely recognized as genocide, resulted in a dispersal that has long constituted one of the most conventionally accepted instances of the phenomenon of diaspora. Consideration of the Armenian case has also furnished diaspora studies with an important example. The prominent diaspora studies scholar of Armenian descent, Khachig Tölölyan was the founding editor of *Diaspora*, and he has frequently drawn on the Armenian diaspora for his contribution to the definition of diaspora studies as a field. And, while the Armenian diaspora may seem to have fewer implications for postcolonial studies than the other diasporas considered in this volume, the Armenian diaspora’s historical origins in the rush to replace the Ottoman Empire upon its breakup on the part of European powers (which would impose mandates and the like in its former territories) make postcoloniality more relevant to understanding the effects of Turkish independence than it might seem at first.

The genocide that founded the Armenian diaspora is also key to understanding the films of the Canadian director of Armenian descent Atom Egoyan. Most explicitly, *Ararat* (2002), made almost twenty years after Egoyan’s first commercially released feature-length film, extensively tells the story of the Armenian genocide. *Calendar* (1993) is likewise partially set in historical Armenia, across whose landscape are scattered the remnants of ancient churches that seem abandoned, perhaps because of the displacement of their original congregations. This chapter also argues that founding failures characterize the more familial narratives of Egoyan’s earlier films. Some of these—like his first two, *Next of Kin* (1984) and *Family Viewing* (1987), as well as *The Adjuster* (1991)—have explicitly Armenian characters and are thus situated within the Armenian diaspora in Canada. Indeed, in these films, family narratives have been frequently read as allegories of both the Armenian diaspora’s history and diasporic identity (just as the “founding failure” of Caron’s relationship with his father comes to allegorize the more collective inaugural disasters he weaves into his cultural study). Furthermore, Egoyan always situates the question of identity within the structure of family genealogy in his films.
Yet for Egoyan, kinship is always invented, performed; indeed, it is frequently by highlighting instances in which affiliation takes precedence over filiation in family structures or by populating his invented families with non-repronormative relations that Egoyan queers the kinship unit of the (mostly) heterosexual family that roots Armenian identity in diaspora. This queering then functions at the allegorical level as a queering of diaspora itself. Furthermore, even films like *Speaking Parts* (1989) and *Exotica* (1994), which do not have explicitly Armenian characters, can be read through his narratives about Armenian families or national history to tease out the ways in which they reflect on the queer roots of Armenian diasporic identity. As such Egoyan’s films contradict the restrictive definition of *diaspora* that Tölöyan articulates in “The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies” by arguing, “It is helpful to distinguish [diaspora] from a dispersion that is the consequence of individual and chain migration, motivated by economic reasons; in such communities, nostalgia can be strong, but commemoration and collective mourning are less prominent” (649). Tölöyan maintains that a broader understanding of the concept of diaspora that has developed within diaspora studies is problematic, and one casualty of his stricter definition is the concept of queer diaspora: “When . . . queer communities . . . are . . . labeled diasporas, the struggle to maintain distinctions is lost” (648–49). Yet this definitional exclusion of the notion of queer diaspora fundamentally misunderstands the critical work that this term has enabled in queer diaspora studies, which, contra Tölöyan, does not define *queer diaspora* as “queer communities” that constitute diasporas in and of themselves but as, at the very least, queerness within the very communities he accepts as diasporas or, more significantly, as the queer relation between these communities and their roots or even as the critical queering of the very concept of diaspora.

It is through his characters’ relation to founding familial failures and the inaugural disaster of the Armenian genocide (as well as the way in which the one allegorizes the other) that Egoyan contradicts Tölöyan’s heteronormative understanding of diaspora by queering Armenian diasporic identity in relation to its roots. In an interview, Egoyan stated, “There’s a group of analysts in Toronto who have looked at all my films. They’ve told me that from their point of view, all my films deal with a process called ‘faulty mourning’—when a patient builds up a ritual of mourning which only accentuates and exaggerates the sense of loss which they think they’re dealing with” (Rayns 8). Emma Wilson, however, literally questions the desirability of successful resolution when it
comes to mourning or the possibility of a “cure” for faulty mourning and writes instead of “the pleasure of this faulty mourning” (34–35). She further elaborates, “Faulty mourning may be Egoyan’s subject, but what is difficult to determine is how far, for Egoyan or his viewer, this process is at fault. Questioning this may lead us to a different reckoning with Zoe’s role in Exotica” (33). In his book-length study of Egoyan’s career, Jonathan Romney does likewise in his discussion of the film Exotica:

There is, of course, another ritual concerned, like striptease, with laying bare, and similarly informed by the understanding that the desired object of revelation may never be wholly uncovered or exorcised. Francis’s private sessions with Christina are nothing if not a course of psychoanalysis. Zoe tells Francis, “We’re here to entertain, not to heal,” yet this seems a misunderstanding of the club’s real function, and indeed of cinema’s function as Egoyan conceives it. Rather than provide passive entertainment, Egoyan’s work has an inherent psychoanalytic drive: we not only analyse a film but become its analysands, our own neuroses and perversions exposed, if not necessarily healed, by the fiction. . . . Francis’s “therapy” is not necessarily directed towards an end: it has become self-sufficient, an addictive ritual. It seems a perversion of his grief. (118)

Yet, while this passage focuses on the murder of one character’s daughter in Exotica, it might also be used to characterize personal loss in other films and, indeed, the more collective losses represented in Ararat and Calendar. In other words, in Egoyan’s films psychoanalytic narratives of loss and trauma become allegories of collective experiences of loss and trauma as constitutive of Armenian diasporic identity.

In Egoyan’s films, in other words, the loss of roots—never successfully mourned but carefully cherished in an eroticized melancholia—becomes seductive in and of itself. If Egoyan disseminates meaning in his filmic explorations of diasporic identities, this very Derridean dissemination (i.e., precisely not the insemination that might accompany coming stories and “happy endings”) conjures up the ghosts that are the phantom pains left after the amputation of/from one’s roots. Melancholia, therefore, not mourning, becomes a pleasure in Egoyan because its happy ending is denied (and here “happy ending” should be read in its multiple meanings, as both successful resolution and the orgasm sometimes provided as closure to a massage), and this questioning of the happy ending serves a narrative function similar to the challenges
to closure examined in chapter 3. Egoyan thus leads his viewers away from such endings, leads them astray or seduces them in the etymological sense of the word *seduction*. His particular acknowledgments of the narrative paradox, in fact, exploit the *après-coup* structure that, as we shall see in the psychoanalytic writings of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, characterizes the function of seduction as the root of sexuality. If seduction provides a narrative structure to their theorization of fantasy, Egoyan offers roots narratives in which origins are the *après-coup* products of similarly seductive fantasies.

Furthermore, just as a number of Reich’s pieces make audible the process of their own composition, Egoyan’s eclectic editing techniques make visible the very process of “piecing together” (as on the editing board) the filmic narrative. Lest some find my readings of Egoyan’s films overly literary, I point out that these readings focus on their narrative *structure* in its specifically filmic manifestations, since this is what most characterizes the filmmaker’s innovation as an auteur. For, as we shall see, Egoyan’s characteristic editing technique involves intercutting scenes from many moments along his narrative’s chronological trajectories, thereby leaving viewers to piece together this narrative gradually by themselves, a cinematographic practice he himself characterizes as seductive. Egoyan, furthermore, combines this approach to montage with a multiplicity of metacinematic references that far prefigure the shift from film studies to screen arts (a shift made necessary in part by the increasing obsolescence of celluloid film as the medium on and by which films are “filmed,” produced, reproduced, distributed, and projected or otherwise screened). Such references deconstruct the filmic text into its visual and sound components, blur the distinction between film as a medium and its alternatives (like magnetic video- and audiotape, social media, closed-circuit surveillance footage, television footage, and live performance), and highlight the technologies that permit the consumption of film (such as projectors and screening rooms), as well as that of alternative media (VCRs, answering machines, tape recorders, and the telephone). Further uses of mise-en-abyme—like film-within-the-film, filming of a film-within-the-film, the material film and videotape as physical objects—as well as metavisual references to home movies, paintings, and photographs and photography, some of which are to the extradi- egetic (snow, horizontal and vertical roll, freeze frame, rewinding, and the jarring inclusion of a bit of laugh track within a narrative film), draw attention to the filmic gaze, especially in relation to other visual-culture
practices. Other references to various technologies of desire (telephone sex, sex via live video feed, pornography, strip club performances, and prostitution) highlight the fact that narrative cinema itself is one such technology. Combining all these references with a blurring of the distinction between flashback and other forms of analepsis contributes to what one might call an allegory of watching as viewers observe the very processes by means of which the filmic narrative is constructed.

Rooted in Genocide

*Ararat* is comprised of several interrelated narratives, which Egoyan intercuts within the montage of the film as a whole. The narrative of the Armenian genocide is recounted in classic film-within-the-film in the form of a historical epic directed by the fictional Edward Saroyan (played by the well-known French-language singer of Armenian origins, Charles Aznavour). *Ararat* also tells the story of the making of this film, for which Ani (played by Egoyan’s wife, Arsinée Khanjian, whom he has cast in almost all his films) has been hired because she is an art historian who specializes in the work of Armenian-born artist Archile Gorky. Gorky’s supposed childhood experience of the genocide is incorporated into Saroyan’s film (with the child Gorky being played by Garen Boyajian), and scenes of Gorky (played as an adult by Simon Abkarian) in New York while painting *The Artist and His Mother* are also interspersed throughout *Ararat* (fig. 1). The family narratives of Ani and Ali (Elias Koteas), the gay, half-Turkish actor cast as the villain in Saroyan’s epic, constitute two additional narrative threads that make up *Ararat*. Raffi (David Alpay), Ani’s son from a first marriage to an Armenian militant killed by the police during his participation in an attempt to assassinate a Turkish diplomat in Canada, is hired to run errands for Saroyan and is in a sexual relationship with Celia (Marie-Josée Croze), his stepsister from Ani’s marriage to a second, late husband. *Ararat* as a whole is framed by yet another fragmented narrative, which occurs after most of the events of the film (we learn at the end that it coincides with the premiere of Saroyan’s film): Raffi’s experience of going through customs after a trip to historic Armenia (now partly in Turkey). Because of the fragmentation of its narrative threads, however, it would be difficult to describe *Ararat* as structured as a more conventional flashback. Indeed, Ali’s “family” narrative crosses several of these threads. His lover Philip (Brent Carver) is a
guard at the museum hosting a Gorky exhibit (the occasion of a lecture by Ani), and Philip’s father David (Christopher Plummer) is the customs officer who interrogates Raffi.

Just before Ararat’s final credits, the following message appears onscreen: “The historical events in this film have been substantiated by holocaust scholars, national archives, and eyewitness accounts including that of Clarence Ussher.” Egoyan himself has used public speaking engagements in the aftermath of Ararat’s release to assert the veracity of the Armenian genocide, a veracity often denied or at the least diminished by the Turkish Republic (Egoyan, “In Other Words”). Ussher’s account is taken from An American Physician in Turkey (1917), with Ussher played by Bruce Greenwood in Saroyan’s film (and, by extension, Egoyan’s). The young Gorky also becomes a fictional character in Saroyan’s film; he participates in the Armenian resistance against Ottoman forces in the Battle of Van and is one of the boys whom Ussher asks to relay a message to US or other western consulates about the impending massacre. Indeed, Ani explicitly relates Gorky’s self-portrait to the Armenian genocide: “His experience as a survivor of the Armenian genocide is at the root of [the painting’s] power. With this painting, Gorky had saved his mother from oblivion, snatching her out of a pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal of life.” Ani also uses this painting, which is unusually representational in the context of Gorky’s mostly abstract life work, to connect Gorky to his roots by characterizing it as “the only image that exists of the artist in his native land.” Finally, by incorporating the session in which the photograph (fig. 2) on which the painting is based into the narrative of the Battle of Van, Saroyan reinforces its supposedly referential nature.

In spite of such claims to veracity, however, Egoyan’s film also suggests that the relation of this founding violence to the contemporary diasporic Armenian identity is of a fictional nature. Is it a coincidence, for example, that Gorky took great pains to hide his Armenian origins once he was in America? Furthermore, Ani is most noticeable during scenes of filming the film-within-the-film for the challenges she poses to its accuracy. In the following exchange between her and Saroyan, for example, she goes to the heart of his film’s eponymous point of identification, the mountain that represents, more than anything else, a diasporic identification with a lost homeland:

**ANI**: You wouldn’t be able to see Mt. Ararat from Van.

**SAROYAN**: I thought it would be important.
Fig. 2. Gorky and his mother in Van City, Turkey, 1912. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Bruce Berberian.)
Ani: But it’s not true.
Saroyan: It’s true in spirit.

When he justifies the liberties he has taken with Armenian geography by staking a claim to “poetic license,” she asks in reply, without the slightest hint of irony or sarcasm, “Where do you get those?” He has just admitted, in fact, “Everything you see here is based on what my mother told me.” The eponymous mountain is thus marked as having a fictional relationship with the imaginary cultural geography of an Armenian homeland; it appears as a figment of what is almost a childhood fairy tale. And, given that the title of Egoyan’s film names this imaginary Ararat rather than the real one, his very title marks *Ararat* as a fictionalized account of the relation between genocide and diasporic identity.

Footage of the *actual* Ararat, however, is what Raffi supposedly brings through customs in canisters he claims cannot be opened because their exposed film has not been developed. In response to the customs officer’s numerous questions, Raffi explains why such footage is necessary for Saroyan’s film by first claiming that it is intended for migration scenes to which images of human actors will be added digitally. When customs officer David does not understand why Raffi could not get permission from Turkey to send such footage through a bonded agent, the latter carefully explains the historical significance of the film (not to mention the genocide it represents) in relation to Armenian identity; Raffi, in other words, gives him a lesson on the politics of an Armenian diasporic identity rooted in a genocide denied by Turkey. Yet what at first seems to be a plausible narrative on Raffi’s part starts to break down in subsequent fragments of this narrative thread as he must change his story in response to David’s unmasking of its contradictions and the increasingly tenuous nature of Raffi’s connection to *Ararat’s* production. As Raffi’s story unravels, he goes on to claim that he encountered a film crew shooting a commercial whose cameraman loaned him his camera. Raffi then bribed a Turkish soldier to take him up a military road to Ararat. When David asks, “Did he ask you to do him a favor in return?” Raffi responds that the cameraman asked him to bring the film canisters back to Canada and that he had simply accepted as truth the cameraman’s assertion that they contained only film. It finally turns out not only that the footage was not really needed for the film but also that Saroyan’s film is already complete, which means that any footage Raffi carries can no longer be incorporated into the film-within-the-film.

In short, just like the fictional and geographically inaccurate Ararat
of Saroyan’s film, the validity and veracity of the supposed footage of the actual Ararat, symbol of Armenian roots, is undermined in Egoyan’s film. In fact, when Raffi calls Ani from customs, she tells him in Armenian that she will say whatever he wants. She is willing to lie, in short, which only adds to the web of lies around the “real” Ararat. In a final shot of this narrative thread we see an open canister containing heroin. Is this heroin, then, a metaphor for the roots narrative fabricated in the film-within-the-film, a kind of “opium for the masses”? Does Egoyan suggest that Saroyan’s kind of story about Armenian origins inevitably involves the kind of fabrication Sapho exposes in Un mensonge? In one scene between Raffi and David, the latter is quite open about the patience with which he waits for potential drug smugglers to defecate their stash, for the truth to come out, as he puts it, the truth that comes out as shit! This is not the most reverent of associations with what Raffi claims is in the canisters—images of the beloved symbol of the Armenian homeland first of all, then, with more distressing political-ethical implications, proof of the Armenian genocide. In fact Raffi is delayed at customs in part because of Celia’s police record as a marijuana grower and drug dealer, and, as it turns out later in the film, it was a friend of hers who entrusted him with the canisters.

Celia’s character is even more important in Ararat’s challenges to truth claims regarding the roots of Armenian identity. And first and foremost among these are her pesky challenges to Ani’s reading of Gorky’s place in the Armenian diaspora. Fairly early in the film, Celia disrupts Ani’s lecture on Gorky, in part by bringing up the name change that helped conceal his Armenian origins. Yet, whereas Ani reads the mother’s gaze in the portrait as a challenge to her husband to return to Armenia from the United States, where he was at the time, Celia interjects an alternative connection with the Armenian genocide by suggesting that Gorky’s father may have known that Armenians were about to be massacred (hence his move to America to prepare a new life for them there) and that the photo on which the painting is based was sent to him from Armenia as proof that they were still alive. In a later scene during which Ani reads from her published study in conjunction with an exhibit that includes Gorky’s self-portrait with his mother, Celia again challenges Ani’s reading of the painting and finally attempts to take a knife to the painting. And, in parallel with Ani’s reading of Gorky’s painting, Egoyan’s film brings Gorky himself back from the dead in one of the many narratives that Egoyan intertwines and intercuts with Ani’s family drama, the film-within-the-film, and the making of the film-within-the-film. That
Gorky shows up at the premiere of the film-within-the-film blurs the distinction between Saroyan’s film and Egoyan’s and thus between fact and fiction within the fictional world of *Ararat*.

In her opposition to Ani’s readings, however, Celia does not seek to replace a family narrative with a collective one (or vice versa) or to deny autobiographical or Armenian diasporic readings of Gorky’s work; indeed, she suggests that Ani is reading her own life story into Gorky’s painting by accusing Ani of confusing Gorky’s father with her first dead husband. Ani counters by suggesting that Celia is the one reading her own life story into Gorky’s work; because Gorky committed suicide (see Spender, *From a High Place* 306–72), she assumes that her father must have done so as well. (At first Celia insists that Ani pushed her father off a cliff and then that he committed suicide by jumping off because of Ani. In Ani’s version, he simply fell, although she later admits that she was not actually looking when the fall occurred. Her version, however, is given the weight of truth in a flashback or analepsis to this fall.) In short, Egoyan’s most individualized personification of diasporic identity in relation to the Armenian genocide is also the object of sharp disagreements over family tragedies that occurred in Canada. Furthermore, these family disputes extend into Raffi’s attempts to understand the meaning of his father’s death and therefore of his own place in the history of the Armenian diaspora due to how impossible it is for him to live up to his father’s heroic martyrdom in the struggle to reestablish an Armenian homeland. For example, whereas Raffi’s father was a terrorist, he can refer to his father as a freedom fighter according to Celia; as she says to Raffi, even though she is likewise haunted by “the ghost of the father, my father, not yours; yours died like a hero.” That Raffi is in a relationship with his stepsister, which Ani characterizes as incestuous, further complicates the family tree that allegorizes collective identity, even more so since Celia is not Armenian but French Canadian; normally, neat lines of linear descent structure genealogy, but here incest tangles up these lines by requiring the representation of multiple connections between the same individuals.

The familial narratives of *Ararat* are most literally queered, however, in David’s gay son Philip, whose sexuality he at first has difficulty accepting. Indeed, David has no problem suggesting to his grandson that Phillip’s lover Ali does not believe in the same God Christians do (a blatantly racist misunderstanding of Islam). As in the case of Ani’s family drama, therefore, there is much tension in this family as well. This tension, however, looks well on its way to being resolved at the end of the film when
David tells Philip about his interview with Raffi, conducted on his last day of work before retirement. David describes, in what we are led to believe is an unusual moment of openness for David when it comes to his son, allowing Raffi to pass through customs in spite of the fact that one of his canisters contained drugs. David explains that he did not believe Raffi was lying: “The more he told the closer he came to the truth.” “What came over you?” Philip asks. “You did, Philip,” responds his father, highlighting the generosity of accepting Raffi’s account as truth regardless of evidence to the contrary and in spite of other indications in Ararat that Armenian roots are a fabrication. As in Sapho and Haley, therefore, narratives of origins may be fictional but they nonetheless establish and tell the truth about roots. In Egoyan’s case, however, this truth is inserted into a kind of queer family romance (see Munro, “Queer”) in which David identifies the Armenian Raffi, returning from his homeland, with his gay, presumably Anglo-Canadian son. As we shall see below, such family romances characterize even the earliest of Egoyan’s films, which will offer pre-texts for further theorizing the relation between family stories and diasporic roots narratives.

David’s newfound family romance, in fact, turns out to be related in multiple ways to the other aspects of the story of the Armenian genocide. His son’s lover Ali is cast as the villain in Edward Saroyan’s film, Cevdet Bey (written Jevdet Bay in the credits), Bey being the governor of Van province who oversaw the treatment of the Armenian population during the genocide. Once shooting is completed, Edward thanks Ali in a polite but distant manner, and here is where Egoyan places denials of the genocide in Ali’s mouth. Ali first wonders whether he was cast in this role because he is half Turkish. Then there ensues a discussion about whether Edward wonders whether a genocide actually happened. When Edward answers “I’m not sure it matters,” Ali explains that he thinks there might have been a reason why the Ottomans felt threatened by the Armenian population, that killing is a standard occurrence during times of war. Charged with driving Ali home and bewildered by Edward’s failure to refute Ali’s objections, Raffi continues the discussion and explains that, prior to seeing the violent scenes starring Ali, he could not imagine what would make him want to commit murder as his father had done. Raffi thus comes to feel at home in his Armenian family tree by hating a fictionalized historical character to the point of almost hating (indeed perhaps being willing to kill) the actor who played him. He sarcastically thanks the half-Turkish Ali for this gift almost as if Armenia has Turkey to thank for its diasporic identity.

In a dinner conversation following a lecture on Ararat at the Univer-
sity of Michigan (Egoyan, “In Other Words”), after overhearing a reference on my part to being gay, Egoyan stated that making Ali gay was his way of complicating the Turkish villain (and his reluctance to recognize the Armenian genocide); it was thus a way to “soften” the character of Ali and the Turkish/Armenian opposition. While problematic (because of the long-standing association of softness with homosexuality, for the “colonization” here of gayness for its liberalizing potential in making a political point, and for the way gayness is projected onto a Turkish character where it runs less of a risk of “infecting” Armenianness as defined in opposition to Turkishness), this comment nonetheless suggests that Egoyan considers queerness central to his film’s representation of diasporic identity. Also in this conversation he engaged with two Turkish colleagues, Aslı İğsız and Aslı Gür, about their reaction to the film, the very ones who had initiated Egoyan’s visit to begin with due to the way his films (as opposed to when he is speaking in more straightforward genres) complicate not only official Turkish histories of the Republic but also the very Turkish/Armenian opposition at the heart of official versions of both Turkish and Armenian identities. Egoyan was curious as to what a “Turkish reaction” to his film might be like, and Aslı İğsız surprised him by arguing that she found David to be the most important character in her opinion because he is precisely the character who provides the model for a Turkish need to listen to the Armenian version of the genocide.

I added that I also found him to be the queerest character in his central role within the queer family romance that I have argued is the key to understanding the film as a narrative about diasporic identity whose roots are queer. For in “adopting” Raffi as a kind of queer son, he also renders the very national borders his job requires him to police more porous, more open to “infection” by the very drugs he is supposed to keep out. In accepting his own son’s gayness, in other words, he opens up his own Anglo-Canadian identity to a rhizomatic connection to the Armenian diaspora as he simultaneously forces Raffi to acknowledge the fictions (and even lies) on which his own Armenian identity is founded. Through David, therefore, more so than through Ali, the Armenian diaspora comes to have a queerer relation to its own roots in Ararat.

Perverting Roots

Ararat is not Egoyan’s only explicit filmic representation of an Armenian homeland. About half of his earlier Calendar (1993) was filmed in Armenia. Egoyan had even received a grant from the Soviet Union to make
this film when Armenia was still a Soviet republic (which it no longer was by the time Egoyan got around to making the film). In Calendar, an Armenian Canadian couple undertake a trip to Armenia so that the husband (played by Egoyan himself) can photograph historic churches for the eponymous calendar. On the surface, the film’s trajectory is thus a return to roots. Yet the photographer’s wife (played by Khanjian) must serve as her husband’s interpreter because he cannot speak the language of his ancestors and has therefore, to a certain extent, forgotten his roots.4 The driver hired by the couple (Ashot Adamian) is, as it turns out, a wealth of historical knowledge about the churches. In the beginning, the wife translates his historical commentary, in which the photographer seems mildly interested. He is less interested, however, in the role the churches have played in Armenian history, and therefore what they represent for his own identity, than in their image, their commercial value as simulacra.

The driver is perplexed by the photographer’s lack of interest in getting close to the churches (he always photographs them from a certain distance): “If you had seen someone else’s photographs of these places, you wouldn’t have wondered like what it must be inside, what it would look like inside?” The photographer responds, “No, I would just think they were very, very beautiful places, and I’d think they were very, very well composed, beautifully lit and very seductive.” Bit by bit, the wife pays less and less attention to her husband and more and more to the driver. To a certain extent, this estrangement is first brought about by the photographer, who frequently asks them to remove themselves from his field of vision so he can get a good shot of the church. She also translates less and less of her conversations with the driver. (Since the film has no subtitles, the non-Armenian spectator is placed in the same position as the photographer.)5 The husband is bothered by their constant conversation, which he cannot penetrate, but by the time he realizes that he is being excluded it is too late; his wife has been seduced by the driver (by her roots in a sense), for whom she leaves her husband (who returns to Canada alone).

In addition to being seduced by the churches as simulacra, however, the photographer is seduced by his roots in another way, also different from his wife’s seduction. Intercut with the “Armenian” narrative is a series of somewhat erotic encounters with “exotic” women in his Toronto apartment. The calendar, prominently visible on the wall, marks the “Canadian” narrative as subsequent to the “Armenian” one, and we see the photographs that make up the calendar one by one, month by
month, in order from January to December. The calendar thus structures the two parallel narratives—both the series of events that occur in the photographer’s Toronto apartment and the series that occurs at least as far back as during the previous year—and we know this because the order in which the churches are photographed in the Armenian narrative is the same order in which they appear in the calendar.6 In the Toronto narrative, furthermore, another parallel gradually emerges. (The encounters are not always represented in toto, which makes figuring out the plot, at least at first, an interpretive endeavor as in many other Egoyan films.) At a certain point during the “dates” the photographer has in his apartment, the women ask to make a phone call, which always occurs in a language the photographer cannot understand. The erotic tone of each conversation leads the photographer (and the spectator) to understand that the person at the other end of the line is a man (husband? boyfriend?) to whom she owes a primary allegiance.7 During these conversations, the photographer writes what at first seems to be an endless letter to his wife after having refused to answer her numerous phone calls and messages.

When an agent leaves a message on his machine confirming the choice of the next woman and her language and outfit, we understand that these women are being paid to “entertain” the photographer. But why is the “entertainment” consistently cut short? As this incident repeats itself over and over, something begins to seem fishy; no one has luck this bad! Finally the spectator hears what the woman hears on the other end of the line—a dial tone! The entertainer or actress is thus performing the role she has been hired to play and not trying to escape an encounter she has begun to find uncomfortable.8 In other words, the photographer gets off, so to speak, on having his desire to get off frustrated; he gets off on not getting off. If the “actresses” are read as escorts, therefore, Egoyan frustrates the closure male orgasm seems to provide at first in Un mensonge and suggests that all origins are not only fictions but also sources (and products) of perverse desire, the most basic of which is Egoyan’s casting of his real-life wife as the character who leaves him for someone more “authentically” Armenian. Calendar, then, one of Egoyan’s most explicit films about his own origins, is also a story about the failure of coming stories. If male ejaculation supposedly brings closure to heterosexual intercourse and gives it meaning, therefore, Egoyan refuses this closure. In a certain sense then, the narrative of roots can never have closure, just as the seduction of roots remains ultimately uncontrollable. For Egoyan, however, this seems to be a positive thing.
Like *Ararat*, *Calendar* is composed not only of two parallel narratives but also of multiple media. In addition to the photographs that make up the calendar and the answering machine recordings, portions of the Armenian narrative are made up of videotaped (as opposed to filmed) footage, presumably taken by the photographer, who watches this footage in this apartment after his return. He frequently rewinds this footage, which takes up the full screen, and this rewinding is shown complete with “snow” and horizontal roll, as if the film *Calendar* itself is being projected in reverse (a kind of looking back that, like Memmi’s *Statue de sel*, parallels the return to roots narrated by the film). In one scene in which the photographer watches this video footage we see his bare torso and legs. Is he masturbating? If so the parallel between his breakup in Armenia and the scenes played by women hired to leave him becomes even stronger. In his Toronto apartment, therefore, the photographer not only watches and re-watches his rejection, but he also repeats this loss of desire with the women he hires. One possible way to watch the film is therefore that of experiencing being dumped in real time or even slow motion. (When is the agony of being dumped *not* experienced as if in slow motion?!) In their multiple stagings with hired women, therefore, the photographer’s “dates” repeat the loss of his wife to a man to whom she spoke in a language the photographer cannot understand. This repetition also imbues the calendar images with the affair about to happen. In *Calendar*’s Toronto narrative, therefore, the photographer’s failed marriage stands in ruin much like a number of the churches he has photographed, ruins that stand as traces of the violence depicted in *Ararat*, even if only through the medium of a fictional epic film.

For while following his wife and the driver with a video camera in Armenia, the photographer speaks of “our history of each other,” as if the story of the couple’s shared past in Canada might be read as paralleling a more collective history. Yet the photographer is most marked by his lack of connection with the collectivity that he supposedly shares with his wife. “You make me feel like a stranger,” he says at one point while watching video footage and writing his letter, “We are both from here yet being here has made me from somewhere else.” Thus, instead of strengthening their connection as Armenian Canadians, the return to roots actually leads to their “separation” (as both physical distance and the prelude to a divorce). When read “back” through *Ararat*, then (and yes, I am suggesting that the “looking back” that makes *Calendar* an allegory of reading or watching itself can also be used as a method for “reading” Egoyan’s complete works as a coherent corpus), the mon-
tage or intercutting between the two parallel narratives also establishes a parallel between the photographer’s loss of his wife and the loss of an Armenian homeland. Rewinding videotape, then, constitutes a meta-cinematic reference to the filmic narrative’s numerous analepses and, furthermore, corresponds to the photographer’s looking back (again, as in Memmi) to a desire lost in his homeland, to the lost love of his wife, which then allegorizes the loss at the heart of his diasporic identity. In other words, the repetition of sexual loss, played out as having one’s loved one seduced and led astray, thus becomes an allegory for the loss of an Armenian homeland, the loss of connection with the roots of diasporic identity.

Instead, in its ruins is left family as diaspora, as in the following description, by Caron, of the relation between homosexuals and their families:

[T]he first conscious image of oneself that young homosexuals often “make” as homosexuals is one of failure and separation from the family, a domestic fall from grace in which we realize that we were not exactly made in our parents’ image. This “extant shortcoming”—in effect the departure point of the queer diaspora—generates the first instance of gay shame and, from then on, posits identification as difference from the family rather than as sameness with the family. The memory of our separation from the familial Eden and subsequent isolation remind us that there hasn’t always been community and that, therefore, there may not always be community. An identity thus defined by its own negation through an identification mediated by difference cannot produce communities simply on the basis of a shared positive trait. It doesn’t ground communities so much as disseminate them on a free-floating diasporic model of out-of-placeness and out-of-timeness, in which the self can only be comprehended through its contact with others and experience its selfness as otherness. (148)

In other words, there is something diasporic about a queer relation to family and the “out-of-placeness and out-of-timeness” that characterize communities imagined, indeed “disseminated,” to use Caron’s word, through this relation. This “out-of-placeness and out-of-timeness” might also describe the narrative structure of most Egoyan films. Resolution occurs not through a progression of events ordered in a cause-and-effect order but with the viewer finally putting together the pieces of the plot; resolution occurs not with a successful completion of mourning but with
an entrenchment of melancholia, queerly embraced as a state of being in diaspora.

In other words, diasporic Armenian identity founded on an obsession with loss comes to have sexual implications in *Calendar*. These implications have normative implications in the wife’s choice of the driver over her husband. For in the Armenian narrative the driver suggests to the couple that if they had children they would have had a reason to live in Armenia, and he thereby proposes a heteronormative explanation for the connection between diaspora and its roots: the childless couple has not yet chosen to pass down their Armenian roots to offspring and therefore has not (yet) reproduced diasporic identity. The wife’s choice might thus be read as a heterosexual embrace of the authenticity of bearing Armenian-speaking children in a common homeland. Whereas his estranged wife chooses heterosexual roots over diaspora, however, the photographer eroticizes his loss and ultimately replaces his roots with a diasporic family romance in reverse (reverse because it is the potential parent, not the child, who fantasizes about adoption). In a hokey sentimentality (as hokey as the heterosexual ending of *Un mensonge*), the photographer “adopts” an Armenian child (cue in late-night infomercials starring Sally Struthers here). For a small monthly donation, he receives photos and video footage. In the end, the letter to his wife is replaced with a letter to this adopted child, who thereby replaces his wife in an alternative and diasporic family romance.

*The Roots of Seduction*

Understanding *Calendar* (and through it *Ararat*) as a peculiar kind of family romance (structured by haunted genealogies) will, as we shall see, allow us to go farther back in Egoyan’s corpus to read his earliest films as diasporic even when they have no obvious connection to the Armenian diasporic identity. But I would first like to consider at greater length the role of seduction in *Calendar* (specifically) and the queer role that seduction might play in roots narratives more generally. In *Calendar* both the photographer and his wife are seduced by their Armenian roots, each in his or her own way; both are led astray, the wife from her husband and the photographer from his roots. In the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis, however, seduction is at the root of even normative sexuality. In “Fantasme originaire, fantasmes des origines, origines du fantasme” (1964) [Primal Fantasy, Fantasies of Origin, and the Ori-
gins of Fantasy (my translation)], they articulate a psychoanalytic model that explains the connections among roots, fantasy (and therefore fiction), and seduction. This essay, which might be seen as a part of their collaborative work *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (1967) [*The Language of Psycho-Analysis*], offers only a glimpse of a particular understanding of seduction, which would become central to Laplanche’s work after his collaboration with Pontalis ended. Indeed, in *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis* (1987), seduction, though understood quite differently from Freud, becomes the foundation for psychoanalysis. Since roots narratives share the narrative structure of seduction and since seduction is itself a particular kind of roots narrative, Laplanche and Pontalis suggest a way to understand how the fictionality of roots, when not denied as in more conventional narratives of origin, might nonetheless lead us astray (seduce us, in the etymological sense of the word), away from the paths or routes of patrilineal descent and heterosexual couplings.

In spite of Freud’s abandonment of his seduction theory over a hundred years ago, in the work of Laplanche and Pontalis, seduction continues to be considered the origin of sexuality. In their return to Freud “in their own manner” (an expression they use to distinguish their return from Lacan’s), they have read much of Freud’s writings as roots narratives. Freud was obsessed with and seduced by fantasies and myths of origin—the roots of symptoms, the primeval origins of circumcision and the Oedipus complex, the primal scene as the origin of the individual, castration as the origin of sexual difference, and, in his early writings, seduction as the origin of sexuality. If Haley seduced so many viewers into searching for their own roots, considering psychoanalytic models of the origins of sexuality allows us to reconceive the role of seduction in the originating “lie” or fiction of roots. In this chapter, I am not interested in psychoanalyzing roots narratives but rather in examining what psychoanalysis can tell us about their narrative structure. In roots narratives, I have suggested throughout this study, origins are written après coup. The après coup is also a central concept for Laplanche and Pontalis because it sums up the narrative structure of seduction. Seduction is rewritten as an origin only after the fact through a retroactive fantasy (or fiction). Furthermore, given the structural parallels between psychoanalytic myths of the origins of subjectivity and roots narratives of the origins of identity, the trope of seduction constitutes an important nexus for theorizing the relations between queer subjectivities and identities and the individual’s affective relation to his or her roots. When I speak of my roots as a way of describing who I am, I am not just articulating an iden-
tity but a means of embodying that identity; I am imbuing my identity with subjectivity. Roots narratives are therefore about not only identity but also subjectivity.

In their essay on fantasy, Laplanche and Pontalis (re)read the historical moment in the development of psychoanalysis between 1895 and 1897, the latter being the date when Freud is usually said to have abandoned his seduction theory. Originally, in Laplanche and Pontalis’s understanding of Freud, seduction actually consists of two events:

In the first scene, called “seduction scene,” the child is subjected to a sexual approach from the adult . . . without arousing any sexual excitation in himself . . . As for the second scene, which occurs after puberty, it is, one might say, even less traumatic than the first: being non-violent, and apparently of no particular significance, its only power lies in being able to evoke the first event, retroactively, by means of association. It is then the recall of the first scene which sets off the upsurge of sexual excitation. (“Fantasy” 9)

The sexual nature of the first scene is the retroactive fantasy of a postpubescent subject who cannot remember it as such. Since the “subject” who lived the first scene was a presexual subject incapable of understanding the sexual implications of the event, the first event is actually written for the first time après coup, after the second scene. In fact, to a certain extent, this (re)writing also writes (as a fiction) the sexual subject who finds his or her origins in seduction.

Faced with the alarming possibility that so many fathers were actually molesting their daughters, Freud abandoned the “reality” of the first scene, which he then converted into fantasy. Laplanche and Pontalis, however, see a paradox there:

[A]t the very moment when fantasy, the fundamental object of psychoanalysis, is discovered, it is in danger of seeing its true nature obscured by the emphasis on an endogenous reality, sexuality. . . . We have indeed the fantasy, in the sense of a product of the imagination, but we have lost the structure. Inversely, with the seduction theory we had, if not the theory, at least an intuition of the structure. (14)

Many cited this abandonment as itself a kind of origin within psychoanalysis, for it marks “the beginning of psychoanalysis as a science, a therapy, and a profession” (Masson xix). According to this view, only
when Freud abandoned his seduction theory was he able to “discover” the importance of fantasy life and the Oedipus complex.

From a feminist perspective, of course, abandoning the seduction theory is problematic since it denies the “reality” of sexual abuse suffered by female patients. But as Laplanche and Pontalis point out in *Language*, “Right up to the end of his life, Freud continued to assert the existence, prevalence and pathogenic force of scenes of seduction actually experienced by children” (406). They thus define *seduction* as a “[r]eal or phantasied scene in which the subject, generally a child, submits passively to the advances or sexual manipulations of another person—an adult in most instances” (404). And in *New Foundations* Laplanche would distance himself even further from Freud’s understanding of seduction: “I am, then, using the term *primal seduction* [séduction originaire in the original] to describe a fundamental situation in which an adult proffers to a child verbal, nonverbal and even behavioural signifiers which are pregnant with unconscious sexual significations” (126; 125). Seduction thus has much larger implications in terms of a child’s gaining access to the adult world and becoming a sexual subject. In what he calls a “general theory of seduction,” Laplanche “regard[s] ‘primal seduction’ as including situations and forms of communication which have nothing to do with ‘sexual assault.’ The *enigma* is in itself a *seduction* and its mechanisms are unconscious” (128). Whereas one might discern an Oedipal structure in the western family tree, then, in Laplanche’s view of seduction both Oedipus and castration become secondary stages of primal seduction (149).

Although seduction theory presupposed an innocent child initiated into sexuality by an adult or older child, after the abandonment of seduction theory, sexuality was seen as developing naturally from inborn instincts. These instincts are not entirely biological as they are related to what Freud called *Urphantasien*, or “primal fantasies” (*fantasmes originaires* in French), that is, fantasies that take us back to the origins of humanity, fantasies whose origins are found not in the lived experience of the fantasizing subject but in the collective experience constituted by the history of human civilization (e.g., in the way the Oedipus complex reenacts the primal horde’s murder of a original father). Primal fantasies (as opposed to Freud’s seduction theory) are more like roots narratives à la Haley in that they seek out prehistoric anthropological origins of psychoanalytic phenomena. In addition, since “the origin of the fantasy is integrated in[to] the very structure of the original [or primal] fantasy” (“Fantasy” 18), origins are a creation of narrative and do not
preexist it. Laplanche and Pontalis end their essay on fantasy with a discussion of autoeroticism, in a perverse move that resembles Derrida’s in *Of Grammatology*, where masturbation—supposedly “ce dangereux supplément qui trompe la nature” [that dangerous supplement that cheats and fools nature (my translation)]—actually becomes central, thereby making (heterosexual) coitus a supplement to masturbation. Freud himself argued that fantasies of seduction cover up autoerotic activity in the first years of childhood, and Laplanche and Pontalis see it as crucial to the origins of the sexual subject in fantasy. But the queering that goes on here is more than a decentering of heterosexuality; it also has implications vis-à-vis a related disruption of narrative.

“Narrative, like genealogy,” writes Peter Brooks, “is a matter of patronymics” (302). If we think back to many of the grand fictional narratives of the nineteenth century (*Les Rougon-Macquart* first comes to mind), we begin to understand how closely narrativity and genealogy are related. In the example of Zola, narrative structure depends and is modeled on genealogy. Each character’s character (*le caractère du personnage*) depends on his or her placement within the family tree (which conveniently folds out like a centerfold in the Pléiade edition), and “reading for the plot” (Brooks) requires retracing this family tree just as it does in the fiction of Glissant and Faulkner (as described in chapter 1). In “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” one of his most elaborate articulations of seduction (though limited to hysterical symptom formation), Freud traces a link between seduction and the family tree through a description of tracing backward (in analysis) from hysterical symptoms to their origins through a chain of connected memories:

*[T]he chains of memories lead backwards separately from one another; but . . . they ramify. From a single scene two or more memories are reached at the same time, and from these again side-chains proceed whose individual links may once more be associatively connected with links belonging to the main chain. Indeed, a comparison with the genealogical tree of a family whose members have also intermarried, is not at all a bad one. Other complications in the linkage of the chains arise from the circumstance that a single scene may be called up several times in the same chain, so that it has multiple relationships to a later scene, and exhibits both a direct connection with it and a connection established through intermediate links. In short, the concatenation is far from being a simple one; and the fact that the scenes are uncovered in a reversed chronological order . . .*
certainly contributes nothing to a more rapid understanding of what has taken place.

If the analysis is carried further, new complications arise. The associative chains belonging to the different symptoms begin to enter into relation with one another; the genealogical trees become intertwined. (198)

So, while the task of psychoanalysis is to create a narrative linking hysterical symptoms to their roots, in the psyche of the hysteric and in the text he or she produces in conversation with the analyst, linear narrative is complicated. If one could qualify the resulting narrative structure as being hysterical, then Freud is certainly the hysteric here since the narrative structure of this passage mimics those of the patients’ stories that he is describing.

At this point, one can only speculate as to how much the necessity of abandoning this rather un-Oedipal family tree in order to theorize the more modern nuclear family lay at the root of Freud’s abandonment of seduction theory. It is in this hysterical structure (pre-Oedipal in the historical sense), in this unconventional family tree, that we might find an alternative narrative structure for writing origins. As we saw in the first chapter, Traversée de la mangrove’s family trees and narrative structures (intertwined no less than in Zola’s oeuvre) constitute a tangle of “messy” roots remarkably similar to Freud’s hysterical family tree. In its disruption of linear narrative, Condé’s mangrove leads us astray, seduces us. The example of intermarriage in Freud’s family tree here also resembles the glitch that Raffi’s relationship with Celia introduces into Ani’s family structure. Since seduction always occurs après coup, it is both a cause (because written as origin) and an effect (because its effect has always already occurred and might therefore be more accurately described as a cause). Condé’s rhizomatic story line(s)—simultaneously plural and singular—therefore impel(s) us to rethink origins as being as much an effect of identity as its cause. Likewise, if we take Laplanche and Pontalis one step further and understand seduction as being not only the root of sexuality and subjectivity, but also both an origin and an effect of roots, a queer understanding of roots emerges that can lead to radically different family trees.

As described above, seduction is a major theme of Egoyan’s work. He has also described it as one way of thinking of the narrative structure of his films. Sylvain Garel compares the structure of Egoyan’s 1991 film The Adjuster to a puzzle that is gradually put together (43). In an interview,
Egoyan also described this film (like his previous ones) as an attempt to seduce differently:

I believe that one of the great advantages of the feature-length film is the ability to play on expectations. During the first twenty minutes, it is very difficult to understand what’s going on, to know whether there is a narrative. At the same time, I know that the spectator expects to be told a story. Between fulfillment and this expectation a tension is thus created, which is very important for me. Among my films’ audiences, there are many people who are seduced by this tension, but there are also those who reject it. (Rouyer 25)

Whereas “most films attempt to seduce in the very first minutes” (Egoyan, qtd. in Garel 43), Egoyan’s deferral of the conclusion to his films’ coming stories puts spectators in the position of the photographer in Calendar; if they are to get off, it will have to be on not getting off. Seduction, here, leads the spectator astray by leading him or her away from linear narrative by means of a narrative structure that mixes up causes and effects and requires spectators to write for themselves a narrative that matches effect with cause, thereby creating their own origins. This understanding of seduction as narrative structure therefore strengthens the link between the narrative and sexual paradoxes in the allegory of watching that is Egoyan’s films, which also allegorize the relation between psychoanalytic models of seduction and film by which film spectatorship becomes one mode of writing the fiction of roots as fantasy.

In her own reading of Laplanche and Pontalis, Judith Butler describes fantasy as follows:

There is, then, strictly speaking, no subject who has a fantasy, but only fantasy as the scene of the subject’s fragmentation and dissimulation; fantasy enacts a splitting or fragmentation or, perhaps better put, a multiplication or proliferation of identifications that puts the very locatability of identity into question. In other words, although we might wish to think, even fantasize, that there is an “I” who has or cultivates its fantasy with some measure of mastery and possession, that “I” is always already undone by precisely that which it claims to master. (“Force” 110)

In addition to Butler’s understanding of fantasy “as the scene of the subject’s fragmentation,” we might also draw attention to her suggestion of
fantasy as fantasy of an “I” or subject, particularly one with a rooted identity, which would then be precisely the roots narrative as fantasy. Such a fantasy would then be, in a rather de Manian fashion, an allegory of fantasy as the fantasy that simultaneously deconstructs what it fantasizes: the subject of a rooted identity. Egoyan’s films, I am arguing, are precisely the visualization of such fantasies.

Indeed, through the very repetition of loss performed by the actresses/escorts in Calendar, the loss of homeland as allegorized by the loss of a heterosexual attachment to homeland is constituted as a kind of primal scene (being dumped at and rejected by one’s roots), which then becomes its own kind of origin. That is, after all, what primal scenes do: they are constituted as origins après coup. It is a cliché of a certain kind of nationalist discourse that being detached from one’s homeland, either in diaspora or by having one’s homeland colonized, is akin to prostitution. Indeed, in Calendar’s Toronto narrative, a neighbor takes one of the actresses/escorts to be the photographers wife. Leaving him for the driver is thus his “real” wife’s Pretty Woman story. By being married to her in diaspora, one might say, the photographer has prostituted his Armenian identity and turned his wife into a kind of prostitute. He does not, however, seek to connect with his roots in any sexually normative way but rather does so by indulging in his perverse relation to the loss of roots with an excessive jouissance, itself rooted in the rejection of the kinds of coming stories examined in chapter 3 and Memmi’s and Derrida’s challenges to masculinity discussed in chapter 4.

**Egoyan’s Porn Diaspora**

A number of Egoyan’s earlier films also deal with a kind of personal loss on the part of explicitly Armenian characters and likewise become allegories for the loss of an Armenian homeland. In The Adjuster (1991), for example, it is the job of the eponymous insurance agent, Noah Ren- der (played by Koteas), to help people through the loss of their homes after a fire. Noah puts all his clients up in the same motel and even has affairs with some of them while they await a settlement. His wife Hera (Khanjian) is an Armenian Canadian censor for the Ontario Film Classification Board (see McSorley 60), who pirates copies of the porn and horror films she is hired to classify and shows them to her sister Seta (Rose Sarkisyan), who can only speak Armenian. In an obvious parallel with Calendar, therefore, The Adjuster eroticizes loss, and the latter more
explicitly queers this eroticization on one occasion especially, when Noah has sex with a male client named Matthew (Raoul Trujillo), who owned a home with his lover Larry (Stephen Ouimet). The eponymous character’s name is, as well, a reference to the biblical Noah, who, we remember, landed on Ararat with his ark. The connection between the eponymous character of *The Adjuster* and the biblical narrative of Noah’s ark has not been lost on critics. In the book-length work on this film in the University of Toronto Press’s Canadian Cinema series, Tom McSorley writes, “Like almost all the characters on this Noah’s ‘ark,’ Noah himself is unknowable” (55). (The ark, here, is the hotel where he puts up his clients.) He thus connects *The Adjuster* with *Ararat*, and a storyline from the latter was deleted that would have explicitly queered the deluge narrative even further. In the first scene of this narrative fragment, David gives his grandson Tony (Max Morrow) a hand-carved model of Noah’s ark as a birthday present. As the latter rehearses the biblical narrative of loading the ark with animals two by two, one of each sex, Tony wonders, “So Noah didn’t take any gay animals?” In another deleted scene, as Tony’s gay father Phillip is recovering after being stabbed in Celia’s attack on the Gorky painting, Phillip reads his boyhood children’s version of the same deluge narrative, a version that includes a pair of unicorns. And, as if this detail alone were not enough to make Noah’s ark gay(!), Phillip explains that he always found this version comforting. Pointing out that both have “horns,” Phillip suggests that they might also both be male.

Furthermore, like *Ararat*, *The Adjuster* represents the making of a film within a film, for which Noah lets out his family’s home, the model home in a housing development that never happened. The filmmaker, a homeless man named Bubba cruised and cleaned up by a bored, wealthy, and sexually active woman, Mimi (Gabrielle Rose), gradually destroys the home/film set in the process and ends up setting it on fire, presumably along with himself. In a flashback/memory Noah has while watching his home go up in flames at the very end of the film, the spectator finally learns that Hera is also a former client of Noah’s who lost her previous husband in a house fire. Noah has put his family up at the same motel to avoid the inconveniences of the filming, and we see his family leaving him in frustration, also at the end of the film. Figuratively, then, his family goes up in flames as well. Since Hera has a baby in her arms in the flashback, we finally learn that her son Simon (Armen Kokorian) is not Noah’s biological child but rather a kind of adopted son. Noah’s eroticization of loss thus accompanies his own kind of family romance based on rescuing those in need of succor.
He is, in other words, a paternalistic and patriarchal figure, one with colonial overtones, such as those echoed in an image that figures on a poster for the film (as well as the box cover for its videotape version), the image of Noah wearing only a towel around his waist (like a loincloth) and shooting an arrow with a bow. In another scene in which he engages in archery, Hera says of Simon, “He wants to know if you’re an Indian.” Noah replies, “What if I say yes?” When Hera responds, “He’ll believe you,” Noah answers, “Yes.” The colonial reference to the displacement of indigenous Americans by European settler colonialism in the New World (paradoxically figured through “playing Indian” or “going native”) is reinforced by the billboard advertisement for the housing development that serves as his target. The failed development, for which the billboard stands as a reminder, thus suggests a colonial project of “development” in ruins and places the narrative of The Adjuster within a colonial narrative of progress (like Calendar’s references to the adopted Armenian girl, from a “developing” country). Another allusion to settler colonialism may be teased out of the impending promise of an insurance settlement, for which all the creatures in “Noah’s ark” are waiting. As the film proceeds, however, this settlement seems continually deferred in a frustration of desire (of everyone’s but Noah’s), which foreshadows the elaborate ritual of desire being frustrated in Calendar.

The frustration of desire is most literally eroticized in the censoring of pornography that occurs at Hera’s workplace. When a coworker, Tyler (Don McKellar), blows the whistle on her piracy, her supervisor, Bert (David Hemblen), thanks her for bringing into the open what no one else is willing to admit, that their job is sexually stimulating. Hera counters that she records these films not for sexual use but to share her work with her sister so that the latter can understand what she does for a living. Hera remembers doing the same as a schoolgirl to teach Seta what she had learned earlier each day. As the older sister, Seta was unable to attend school as Hera later would. “That’s how things are where I am from,” Hera explains. In this somewhat veiled reference to their diasporic existence as Armenian Canadians, the connection in diaspora between Hera and Seta is provided by the sharing of pornography.

In the director’s commentary to the DVD version of Calendar, Egoyan explains that he was led to understand that one particular conversation an escort has on the phone in a language the photographer cannot understand is pornographic. Pornography also replaces diasporic memory in Egoyan’s earlier film Family Viewing. It is only by watching home videos that Van (Aidan Tierney), the protagonist of Family View-
ing, whose very name references the same Armenian city that serves as the setting for the film-within-the-film in *Ararat*, can still remember his happy childhood before his Armenian mother (Rose Sarkisyan) left his Anglo-Canadian father Stan (David Hemblen). Yet Van discovers that his father is videotaping sex with his live-in lover Sandra (Gabrielle Rose) over the home movies of Van and his mother and grandmother Armen (Selma Keklikian). Since memory here is inseparable from video representations of it, Stan’s erasure of the home videos also erases Van’s childhood memories. Since these tapes constitute the only remaining trace of Van’s childhood ability to speak Armenian, their erasure also constitutes the effacement of his roots along with their replacement with pornography.

In *Calendar*, we remember, sex is mediated though a wide range of media: the wife’s voice on the answering machine, the escort-service agent’s recorded messages, the photographs that constitute the calendar, the home videos that the photographer and his wife made of their trip to Armenia. These, along with the more conventionally filmed narratives in Armenia and the Toronto apartment (conventionally filmed but less conventionally edited through intercutting) make up the material film of *Calendar* (itself structured like a calendar). This mixed media, in fact, is typical of Egoyan’s films, for representation in *Family Viewing* also occurs through a variety of media: the telephone technology that allows phone sex, videotapes produced by hotel surveillance cameras, the television programming Armen is constantly watching, the videotapes of Stan and Sandra having sex, Van’s early childhood memories preserved on videotape (memories made possible because Stan worked for one of the first companies to distribute VCRs), and the surveillance videos of Van made by a private investigator hired by Stan. What little connection Van has with his father comes from watching TV and videos with him and Sandra; a common experience of watching television thus stands in for kinship structure. At one point, as Van is watching TV just before he is about to kiss Sandra, the narrative that is supposed to be the “true” story of the film (as opposed to sequences shown in the film as video representations) is freeze-framed. Then there is applause, as if the film itself were a sitcom with laugh track, and the film is rewound complete with horizontal interference. Snow and rewinding, as in *Calendar*, interrupt the film at other points as well, thereby explicitly representing the family plot that constitutes the film’s narrative as no less of a mediated representation.

Although it seems at first that *Family Viewing* will explore a quasi-
Oedipal relationship between Van and Sandra, as it turns out Van will make alliances within his family tree along markedly un-Freudian lines; when necessary, he will even invent it anew. It thus comes as no surprise that, instead of investing himself in his nuclear family, Van devotes most of his attention to Armen, who, neglected by other members of the family, is now suffering from a loss of speech in a rest home. Since we hear her speaking Armenian in the home movies, this aphasia also allegorizes a loss of the Armenian language in diaspora. While visiting Armen at the home, Van meets Aline (Khanjian) who also visits her mother (Jeanne Sabourin). Aline is a phone sex worker, and Stan and Sandra are among her clients. While she is away servicing a client in Montreal, her mother dies, and Van switches the bodies in order to write his father out of his alternative family and constitute a new one with Armen and Aline.

Film critic Amy Taubin writes, “The phrase ‘family viewing’ evokes both the 6 pm–8 pm broadcast time slot and a funeral parlor ritual” (28). Both meanings are combined as Van puts the “biological” family to death in so many ways. The family (Stan and Sandra) with whom he has experienced several family viewings of TV in the evening is killed off, as he fakes Armen’s death and films Aline’s mother’s funeral so Aline can watch it. (Aline’s mother’s family viewing is thus only accessible to her on videotape, which replaces the experience of attending her own mother’s funeral. For Egoyan, therefore, even when the death of a family member is “real,” it can lead to fictional family viewings.) In essence, the death of her “biological” family allows Van to replace her “real” mother with Armen. In the end, Stan, who was previously indifferent to his son’s maternal kin, can only catch glimpses of this family on video surveillance tapes, which constitute, to a certain extent, a parallel to the tape of Aline’s mother’s funeral; Stan’s family is falling apart before his eyes, and there is nothing he can do about it. When Stan initiates an investigation to find out why Aline was placing flowers on what was supposed to be Armen’s grave, videotapes maintain (or at least attempt to maintain) paternal authority and, therefore, kinship structure through surveillance. But is Van’s relationship with Armen any less mediated by videotape? At the end of the film, as Van and Aline find Armen in her new shelter, a surveillance camera figures prominently. Thus no family—not even an alternative one—escapes the mediation of surveillance.

Part of the film’s constantly running television shows is a series of Discovery-Channel-type nature documentaries. Stan wonders one day, after reflecting on one of these shows, why humans have not lost their nails, which no longer seem to serve any biological or evolutionary pur-
pose. After Van manages to convince him to visit Armen for her birthday in spite of his reluctance, she scratches his face and proves that nails can still be useful for human survival. Whereas evolution is usually considered to be a scientific account of the human “family” tree, one existing independent of representation, *Family Viewing* demonstrates that television biologizes genealogy as something natural and attempts to cover up the ways it constructs sexuality as biological rather than cultural. According to *New York Times* film critic Caryn James, Egoyan has “come to see the camera as an insidious voyeur’s tool, a barrier to communication, the root of many evils” (13; emphasis added). In his more scholarly article, “Video as Accessible Artifact and Artificial Access,” Timothy Shary similarly misses the point: “[W]hatever access [Egoyan’s characters] do attain to their past, to their identity, or to the unknown, is constantly undermined by their continuing dependency on images” (26). Van’s family is obviously a dysfunctional one, and its reliance on video mediation emphasizes the breakdown of human-to-human connection within the family. But is there a family that is not dysfunctional? Is the functional family itself not a fiction? Critics like James and Shary (and they are not alone) seem to think that the families Egoyan represents are dysfunctional because they are abnormal in their contamination by videos and other media, which in this case are in part pornographic. A careful reading of Egoyan’s films, however, demonstrates that “biological” families are no more authentic, no less mediated through video representation, no less fictional than “made-up” ones. Every family, in short, is a family romance in the Freudian sense. If Deleuze devoted an entire chapter to Nietzsche’s powers of the false in his work on cinema (*Cinéma II*, 165–202), here we see these powers laid bare.

After Van replaces the videotaped home movies with blank cassettes to preserve his childhood memories, Stan discovers the exchange and is upset about it. This detail suggests that it is not just the making of sex tapes that turns him on but also the erasure of his son’s childhood spoken in Armenian. In one videotaped scene, Van as a young boy (Vasag Baghboudarian) sings an Armenian song to his father, who responds by asking him to sing a song in English. Stan’s relation to his own son, therefore, allegorizes an assault on diasporic connections to Armenian roots. This assault takes on additional sexual implications when Van and Armen, watching home videos together, discover footage of Van’s mother mostly undressed and tied up while engaging in sadomasochistic sex with Stan. This clip provides one possible explanation for Van’s mother’s leaving the family and foreshadows the scene of bondage and sexual
violence depicted in *Ararat’s* film-within-the-film as a part of the Armenian genocide, which, according to Lisa Siraganian, constitutes a kind of primal scene (130).

The assault on Van’s Armenian identity intensifies when he removes Armen from the rest home after faking her death. Stan—who previously showed no interest in her and, in fact, neglected her—becomes obsessed with finding out what Van is up to, perhaps because she represents Van’s only remaining connection to his Armenian identity. Stan hires a private detective and places Van and Aline (with whom he and Armen begin to live after removing the latter from the rest home) under surveillance, videotapes of which are edited into the film. Each time Stan gets close to uncovering their ruse they move Armen to another location until they finally escape Stan’s Anglo and Anglicizing gaze by dressing Armen up as a “bag lady,” faking her discovery in a closed wing of the hotel where they are working at the end of the film after Aline has quit her job as a sex worker, and having her taken in by social services. Video surveillance thus seems to be detrimental to safeguarding a diasporic identity throughout most of the film, but this danger is turned back on the Anglo gaze when Stan is caught on surveillance in despair after failing to uncover “the crime” his son is engaged in. In a final scene, we also see a surveillance camera in Armen’s final shelter as a new kind of family is reunited. Aline and Van walk in to see Armen smiling while sitting with her daughter. The new family is thus constituted by ridding the patricentric one of its Anglo father. And if Aline is read as Armenian (she is not identified ethnically, and there are some indications that she could be French), this family romance is written in an invention of its Armenianness.

*The Family Romance of Armenian Identity*

Romney also describes *Family Viewing* as a family romance (44). According to him, Egoyan’s first feature-length film, *Next of Kin*, constitutes a family romance as well, albeit in a variation on the Freudian understanding of the concept:

Above all, Peter’s story exemplifies the “family romance,” Freud’s term for the fantasy by which a child rejects its real parents, fancying itself to be a step-child or adopted (Peter’s surname is “Foster”) and its true parents to be socially elevated, typically royalty. But *Next of Kin* inverts the Freudian scenario: here the impersonator is the child,
replacing the real son in his parents’ affections. And where Freud refers to idealised parents of “high social standing,” Peter’s adoption of working-class Armenian immigrants chimes with a western middle-class fantasy of ethnic authenticity—a dream of belonging to a culture more rooted, more marked by social oppression and bearing more conspicuous signs of identity than the WASP bourgeoisie. (26)

In *Next of Kin*, about a teenage boy, Peter (Patrick Tierney), undergoing therapy with his parents, each group session is videotaped so that family members may later watch them individually. Peter’s parents have initiated this family therapy because they think “he doesn’t want to work, has no pride, and pretends that he is someone else all the time.” Yet, in spite of the fact that he has no friends, he assures everyone that he is not lonely, which may suggest that he is not maladjusted or psychologically underdeveloped or damaged but merely not conforming to his parents’ (and perhaps society’s) normative expectations. In short, maybe it is the family (and Family as norm) that is “sick” not Peter. When his mother describes catching him in his room in the act of pretending, she suggests that “making believe” is for Peter a pleasure as guilty as that of masturbation.

One day at the practice, Peter checks out the wrong tape and watches it instead of giving it back. The tape is a recording of the sessions of members of an immigrant Armenian family, who, in their early days of hardship in Canada, gave their son Bedros (of Peter’s age) up for adoption. Claiming that he needs some time on his own, Peter requests a getaway trip, and the therapist supports this request in the interest of furthering Peter’s development and independence. Yet, as in a Derridean understanding of masturbation (most literally Rousseau’s) in *Of Grammatology*, “making believe” (producing fantasy in the sense elaborated by Laplanche and Pontalis) will replace reality; the supplement, that is, will displace what it is considered to supplement when Peter presents himself as the long-lost Bedros, thereby inventing for himself not only a new kinship unit (as in the film’s title) but also new roots. But is there a family that is not such an invention? The film suggests, in other words, that fictive roots may be no different from “true” ones. When Peter first meets his Armenian family, a discussion ensues as to whether he resembles his grandfather or uncle more. Genetics (the “science” of origins) also turns out to be a fiction in *Next of Kin*.

In fact the introduction of a fictional son even strengthens kinship
ties within the biological family, as Peter mends the dispute between his Armenian “father” George (Berge Fazlian) and his “sister” (Khanjian), a rupture that allegorizes the schism between “tradition” and modernity, Armenia (roots) and Canada (diaspora). During a surprise birthday party given for him by his “adoptive” Armenian family, Peter makes an impromptu speech:

In a way, it’s a pity that you’re born into a family. If you’re raised with a group, you’re obliged to love them, and that really denies you the possibility of getting to know them as people outside of that group. Now, in a way that means you can never really love your family. And that’s because you’re denied the freedom that’s required to make that sort of commitment, I guess what you would call the freedom of choice.

Peter is arguing here for a family based on affiliation as opposed to filiation, a family that would be an “imagined community” that can serve as an allegory for the diasporic community imagined through the “adoption” or invention of roots by means of fictive narrative practices. The kinship structure alluded to by the film’s title is therefore one constructed through fictional narratives.

The expression “next of kin” is usually used when settling an estate after the death of a family member; in Next of Kin, however, because in deciding to remain with “his” Armenian family he kills off his biological one, so to speak, in order to consolidate his invented family, the Freudian family romance, in short, becomes “real.” In telling his Armenian family that the family that adopted him (in “reality,” his biological family) has been in an automobile accident, as their son (i.e., “next of kin”) Peter imagines a kind of death for his parents. His adoptive family becomes his “next (of) kin” as they inherit sole custody of him. Since the roots of the filmmaker are those not of the boy but of the adopted family, Egoyan suggests that his “real” family narrative is also a family romance in the Freudian sense. In fact he goes so far as to suggest that psychoanalysis itself is a kind of family romance. At one point during the film Peter says in a kind of interior monologue (i.e., a voice-over), “I envy therapists. It must be really exciting getting involved with another family, trying to solve their problems.” The film reinforces the notion that analysts engage in family romances when two therapists conversing in an elevator speak of each other’s analysands as their wives and husbands with second-person possessive adjectives. The analysand, here, becomes
the “next of kin” of the analyst who inserts him- or herself in the patient’s kinship structure. The patient seduces the analyst, in other words, into a fictional family (romance).

In film after film, Egoyan has explored the relation between origins—often his own—and desire, especially perverse desire. Film after film explores the relationship among kinship, sexuality, and Armenian diasporic identity, whose roots he queers by making them up through inventing such unconventional kinship structures. As Egoyan’s roots are often intertwined with, and indeed even invented through, sexual fantasies (including pornographic ones), we could even say that for him all roots are necessarily sexual fantasies, sexual fantasies whose après-coup structures (as described by Laplanche and Pontalis) also structure the roots narratives as a whole. In short, the narrative and sexual paradoxes become almost indistinguishable in Egoyan’s case. In the final section of this chapter, I consider what the eroticization of a loss that is more explicitly linked with a loss of direct connection with Armenian roots (or with their replacement in a family romance) might tell us about Egoyan’s films that seemingly have little or nothing to do with the Armenian diaspora.

Allegories of Loss

A number of Egoyan’s non-Armenian films focus on such losses or disasters. In The Sweet Hereafter (1997), for example, a lawyer, Mitchell (Ian Holm) visits a small town to explore the possibility of a class-action lawsuit in the aftermath of a school-bus accident that killed almost every child aboard. In the end, Nicole (Sarah Polley), the surviving girl who would have been a key witness, lies in her description of the accident and ruins the possibility of a lawsuit. In one of the film’s final scenes, Mitchell runs into the school-bus driver, Delores (Gabrielle Rose), who is now working for airport transportation. Delores smiles, indicating that she has recovered not only from her injuries but also from her loss. Nicole says in a voice-over:

As you see her two years later, I wonder if you realize something. I wonder if you understand that all of us, Delores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn’t, that we’re all citizens of a different town now, a place with its own special rules and its own special laws, a town of people living in the sweet hereafter, where waters gushed and
fruit trees grew and flowers before the fairy hew and everything was strange and new. Everything was strange and new.

Loss therefore results in a kind of idyllic paradise, a kind of Eden. And standing up to Mitchell and her own father (ignoring loss, in other words) is what allows Nicole to recover from an incestuous relationship with the latter.

In another example, *Felicia’s Journey* (1999), Egoyan takes allegories of loss out of the Canadian context altogether by telling the story of a young Irishwoman, Felicia (Elaine Cassidy), who has set off to England in pursuit of the fantasy that her beloved still loves her and will marry her when he learns that she is bearing his child. He has told her that he left for England in search of work, but he has actually betrayed his nation by joining the British army. Interestingly, Felicia’s fantasy, which is merely one of conforming to the rules of heteronormativity, becomes the most perverse of all because she persists in spite of mountains of evidence that she is being naive. Along the way, she is helped by a man, Joseph Hilditch (Bob Hoskins), who gets off by offering succor to girls down on their luck. He deals with the loss of his mother (and that of the idyllic childhood he never had with her) by investing in the mother-to-be that is Felicia, in whom he kills off the mother by facilitating her abortion before attempting to kill her. At first he seems like an incredibly nice man, but as spectators begin to understand the videotapes he has secretly made of these girls the violent nature of his desire becomes obvious: he turns out to be a serial killer. So the normal, in *Felicia’s Journey*, turns out to be a perversion, and the pervert easily masquerades as normal.

In a third example, *Adoration* (2008), a French teacher, Sabine (Khanjian), assigns a translation of an account of a thwarted terrorist bombing of a flight between Toronto and Israel. One student, Simon (Devon Bostick), completes the assignment by reading his own family history into the narrative. In the fictional version, his pregnant Anglo-Canadian mother Rachel (Rachel Blanchard) takes the flight alone to visit the family of her Palestinian husband Sami (Noam Jenkins) in Bethlehem to be joined by him later. He has placed a bomb in her luggage without her knowledge and without the thwarting of this attempt by Israeli security, Simon would have never been born. As we gradually learn, Simon’s mother and father died in a car accident that his maternal grandfather Morris (Kenneth Welsh) claims was caused on purpose by the father whom he characterizes as a terrorist. Simon has been interviewing Morris on his deathbed, and the latter maintains his racist posi-
tion that Sami must have been a terrorist because of his ethnicity until the very end, but we finally learn that Sami had an eye condition that should have prevented him from driving at night. He was forced to do so because Rachel got drunk at a family dinner due to racist comments her father made to Sami. We also learn that Sami was married to Sabine when he first met Rachel, for whom he left his first wife. Simon’s fictional story of averted loss (which causes many tempers to flair on Internet live-stream video chat rooms) also provides a surrogate for Sabine’s loss of a beloved husband, and the film ends as Simon becomes a part of her life in a different family structure based entirely on affiliation, in another of Egoyan’s many family romances in short.

But of all his films about loss, I would suggest that Speaking Parts (1989) and Exotica (1994) might most productively be read as allegories of Armenian diasporic identity. In both, as in Calendar and The Adjuster, diaspora is also pornographic. Speaking Parts is about a woman, Clara (Gabrielle Rose), whose brother died because he gave her one of his lungs. Her memory of him is represented onscreen through the videos of him she watches at “the mausoleum with video monitor memorial plaques” (Klawans 15); as in many Egoyan films, the medium of videotape is thus strongly connected to the themes of memory and return to the past. Clara has written a book about her brother’s death, which is itself being made into a movie. As part of the production process, she is staying in a chic boutique hotel where Lance (Michael McManus), a struggling actor, works on the cleaning staff and doubles as a gigolo between the sheets when he is not changing them. When Gabrielle meets him, he reminds her so much of her brother that she supports him for the role of her brother in the film. They also have an affair, which continues through “live-feed, closed-circuit sexual intercourse” (Klawans 15), or what one might call video sex. She is, to a certain extent, having sex with her dead brother. This video mediation is further complicated by Lisa (Khanjian), also a hotel employee, who is obsessed with Lance. She persists in her obsession in spite of his very cold shoulder and feeds it by renting videos of movies in which he has played small roles (including porn videos), roles that are not “speaking parts.”

Exotica is set largely in a strip club owned by Zoe (Khanjian). As in Speaking Parts, therefore, the pornographic gaze is inseparable from the character played by Egoyan’s “real-life” wife, which therefore disrupts any autobiographical contextualization of his diasporic identity within a heteronormative kinship unit. The strip club, also named Exotica, is the place where Francis (Bruce Greenwood) goes to deal with the loss of
his daughter from a murder for which he was a suspect. Christina (Mia Kushner), his former babysitter, is a stripper who works at Exotica and gives Francis regular table dances, which foster a fantasy, indeed a family romance, on his part that she can somehow replace his daughter. (Her stripper getup is that of a schoolgirl.)

Like the photographer in Calendar, Lisa in Speaking Parts gets off on not getting off. Lance and Gabrielle get off on being physically separated, on facing obstacles to getting off, which can then be mediated through film (or the live video feed that serves as a metacinematic reference to it). In short, their video sex is a mise-en-abyme of the spectator’s scopophilic gaze cast so longingly on the character played by an Armenian actress desiring someone else’s loss, which remains inaccessible to her. The film also stages a failure of heterosexuality in the very same character of Lisa, who questions marriage and quite literally so. When she discovers that her video store’s employee Eddy (Tony Nardi) tapes special events such as weddings and orgies on the side, she insinuates herself into his work and ruins a wedding. During her own interview with the bride, Lisa reveals the stupidity of marriage through a giggling newlywed incapable of articulating the reason she has espoused the institution of marriage:

Lisa: What do you see in Ronnie?
Trish: What?
Lisa: What do you see in Ronnie? When you look at him, what are you looking at?
Trish: (perplexed) Him.
Lisa: Did it come easy?
Trish: What?
Lisa: His love?
Trish: (giggling) I’m not quite sure if I get what . . .
Lisa: Have there been times when it didn’t seem so . . . certain?
Trish: No, I . . .
Lisa: I mean, these things are pretty delicate, aren’t they? There’s no telling what could happen. One of you begins to have second thoughts and the whole thing can crumble away. And then what?
(114–16)

When Lisa suggests that the new husband might not love his wife forever, the bride breaks down: “Why should I even think about it?” (120), she says as she bursts into tears. With the slightest questioning, the ideal of
marriage “crumbles away.” Unlike Lisa, Toni understands that if he is to continue in his job of enshrining others’ memories of marriage as happy ones (and of marriage as the “happy ending” to a love story) he must lie. Before accompanying Toni on a gig, Lisa watches a video in which he tells his patron, “I can honestly say that this is the best wedding I’ve ever taped.” When Lisa asks, “Is that true?” he responds, “Of course not. You’ve seen one, you’ve seen ’em all” (78). Speaking Parts therefore suggests that (heterosexual) marriage is an institution whose foundation is based on lies in much the same way that Sapho’s *Un mensonge* reveals the heterosexuality of origins to be a lie.

Lance finally gets the speaking part that has always alluded him, but Clara is gradually pushed out of the production process as her autobiographical role of sister is turned into that of a brother, and her story, she feels, is cheapened by being framed as a talk show episode. She fails to cope with her loss and commits suicide on the film set. Lisa, however, finally gains access to the object of her desire, since the film ends with her kissing Lance. Yet how “real” can we understand this ending to be? Having lived out her fantasies about Lance by watching his nonspeaking parts, she experiences the boundary between video and reality being blurred (as borders are so often crossed in Egoyan’s films) in the last video we see her watching. She sees what resembles surveillance footage of Lance, the hotel manager, and the body of the female guest/client who has committed suicide because her love for Lance was unrequited, and in a *Poltergeist*-like moment, Lisa is able to talk to Lance through the television screen that separates them. He asks for her help, but she does not know how to cross the border between her reality and his, a boundary represented by the television screen.

While Speaking Parts might be considered figuratively queer in its challenge to heteronormative kinship structures, Exotica literally has a gay character, Thomas (Don McKellar), a pet shop owner who illegally smuggles rare birds into Canada. His illegal job involves sneaking across borders in a manner similar to Raffi’s experience with contraband in Ararat. Like the airport scenes in so many of Egoyan’s films, especially those of Raffi at customs in Ararat, the opening scene of Thomas’s arrival portrays the policing of borders as one customs official trains another in how to stop contraband from entering the country. On his way home from the airport, the man with whom he is sharing a cab offers him ballet tickets in lieu of his share of the fare. Thomas offers the second ticket to a man whose crotch and thighs he eyes during “The Montagues and the Capulets” movement of Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*. After not
following through on his invitee’s subsequent advances, he later repeats this scene by restaging it (as the photographer repeats his own primal scene in *Calendar*). He ends up bringing a subsequent invitee home, but the latter turns out to be one of the customs officials who found him so suspicious at the film’s beginning. When Thomas wakes up there is a message on his answering machine explaining why the incubating eggs smuggled into Canada are now missing. His trick from the previous evening handed them over to the unit that takes care of contraband exotic animals, probably by giving them to a zoo. He has lied to his supervisors, probably to avoid reporting Thomas, and states that he would like to see Thomas again.

Thomas’s queer potential, however, is not confined to this particular narrative thread but also crosses its own kind of border into the strip club as a self-exoticizing diasporic space, first of all in the parallel that the film establishes between Exotica and the pet shop. Zoe inherited Exotica from her mother, and Thomas inherited the pet shop from his father. Zoe lives in a kind of tent inside Exotica with her tropical bird, and sounds in this space resemble those we hear in the pet shop. Editing frequently intercuts directly between the two spaces, and, as Romney writes, “*Exotica* is itself a dense jungle, its narrative an intricate network of hidden roots and interconnections” (110). Furthermore, Zoe’s space in the club functions as “a panopticon,” which “recalls . . . the . . . customs office . . . , where two inspectors watch [Thomas] behind a one way mirror” (Wilson 32). When the hirsute Thomas is making out with his trick, the latter remarks, “It’s like petting a gorilla.” Thomas responds, “I got it from my mother, I mean my mother’s side of the family. That’s where you inherit hair patterns.” Way too lanky to be a “bear” (more common—as an animal—in more temperate and colder climes), he can only be a gorilla (more common in tropical regions). Like Zoe, in other words, he has inherited something exotic from his mother. As it turns out, Francis (an auditor for Revenue Canada who has been inspecting Thomas’s books) has suspected the smuggling operation all along. After being tricked by Eric (Koteas), Christina’s ex-boyfriend and Exotica’s deejay and announcer, into touching Christina, with the result that he is barred from Exotica permanently, Francis blackmails Thomas into handing over his gun and going into Exotica wired and undercover to discover Christina’s reaction to Francis’s expulsion. Thomas is tasked with requesting a table dance in order to touch Christina and get kicked out in the same manner. The gay-owned pet shop therefore crosses over into the heterosexual strip club; like contraband, queerness is smuggled
For it is during this table dance that Thomas (and, through the mic wired to him, Francis) discovers that Francis’s need for Christina, his need to protect her as he could not protect his daughter, is mutual; she describes their “special type of relationship” and confides that she needs him for certain things just as he needs her. A rather queer kind of family is consolidated at this point. Francis cannot follow through on his intention to kill Eric, who finally seems to give up on Christina (whom he met as part of the search for Francis’s daughter). Zoe, pregnant through a contract with Eric, will bequeath her legacy (a strip club) in a rather queer alternative to the driver’s notion of what a baby could give the photographer and his wife in Calendar. Instead of rooting Calendar’s couple in a homeland, Zoe’s baby reproduces a porn diaspora. Francis himself has reproduced his dead daughter’s “babysitter” with Tracey (Sarah Polley), who ostensibly comes over only to house sit. Tracey’s question, “Do you think this is normal, what we do?” (which might be applied to Egoyan’s entire oeuvre), highlights the perverse fantasies that Francis has articulated around his daughter’s death. Tracey’s father Harold (Victor Garber), Francis’s brother, was having affair with Francis’s wife, who was killed in the same car accident that disabled Harold (hence the police’s suspicion that Francis may have killed his own daughter upon discovering that Harold might actually be her biological father). Tracey discontinues her services at the end, which may suggest that Francis’s faulty mourning has finally resulted in a resolution to the mourning process or a cure.

Other parts of the ending, however, until which we must wait to learn about Harold’s affair, contradict such a normative resolution. In fact much of the ending simply returns to a time prior to the death of Francis’s daughter as Francis is taking Christina home in the exact same way we have seen him taking Tracey home throughout the film. The younger Christina notes, “I was just thinking . . . about the way you talk about Lisa. You get so excited. It’s nice.” He remarks that Christina and Lisa really listen to each other. Christina had become a kind of adoptive member of the family, in other words, a family she has come to idealize. In other words, the end of Exotica only serves to emphasize the “founding disaster” that is the destruction of this idealized family, not
to mark the successful mourning of the loss in which it resulted. Tracey may have removed herself from Francis’s perverse jouissance in indefinitely prolonging his faulty mourning, but he no longer has access to his “therapy,” for which the “analyst” pole dances and the “analysand’s” lap replaces the analyst’s couch. This therapy may have reached its “happy” end, but hardly because the “talking cure” has been a success.

Like the photographer’s eroticized restaging of loss in Calendar and Clara’s live video sex with a surrogate for her dead brother in Speaking Parts, Francis allegorically translates the loss of rootedness at the origins of diaspora into the roots of desire. Like the families invented through fantasy in The Adjuster, Next of Kin, and Family Viewing, Francis’s strip club family, with all its queer intrusions, allegorizes the crossing of national and cultural borders entailed in diasporic migration. And, like the unmasking of the eroticized fictionality of the fetish of inaugural disaster in Ararat, Francis’s acknowledgment of his perverse attachment to his own familial loss in no way results in its mourning. Ends may indeed “come” in Egoyan’s films, but they come without narrative closure, without a reattachment of the Armenian diaspora to its roots, without the retracing of a heteronormative family tree that might structure a return to Armenian origins. Je sais bien . . . mais tout de même.