The Forbidden Gaze: Orphic Visuality and Loss in Atom Egoyan's *Exotica*

JUAN GONZÁLEZ-ETXEBERRÍA

Abstract

Ancient myths are relevant to postmodern texts, as illustrated by Atom Egoyan's *Exotica* (1994). This paper examines the Canadian work as an example of Orphic visuality, singling it out from the numerous films that have rewritten two of the salient points addressed by the myth of Orpheus: traumatic loss and healing processes. The present hypothesis is that Egoyan develops further the cinematic possibilities of the tragic *fatum* of the poet-singer found in literary works and previous films, in particular Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Starting from the premise that both film *auteurs* appreciate the significant role of gazing in the standard mythical account, consideration is given to the use of this theme as an ontological and epistemological symptom of their respective age traumas. Attention is also drawn here to the metafictional meaning of visuality as a means of human representation, which explains why this specific aspect of the myth is recurrently articulated in cinema.

Keywords: Orpheus, *Exotica*, Loss, Image, Egoyan, Hitchcock.

1. Introduction

The dialectical truth behind "everything is the same yet different" leads us to reconsider the nihilistic "*Nihil novum sub sole*" (*Ecclesiastes*, 1: 10) in our perception of myths present in different contexts and media, twisting Adorno's view on the oxymoronic nature of artistic works: "An artwork is real only to the extent that, as an artwork, it is unreal, self-sufficient, and differentiated from the empirical world, of which it nevertheless remains a part" (1999 [1970], 279).

In this paper, the myth of Orpheus will exemplify the creative link between the classical world and contemporary Canadian fiction, as well as between literature and cinema, through the elements that the Canadian film *Exotica* (Egoyan 1994) shares with the tragic story of the Thracian musician, and, more importantly, through the different layers of significance that the myth inspires. The working hypothesis is that Egoyan, with this film, offers a postmodern example of intertextuality through a perverse rewriting of the ancient myth under the influence of one of his masters, Alfred Hitchcock. Our starting premise to study the mythical underpinnings of Egoyan's film is based on the cultural proximity classical Greece and postmodern Canada, both post-national realities comprised of essentially independent territories, share as civilized examples dealing with epistemological questions about identity in their culture.

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 43, No. 4, Winter 2020 [64-78]

In Northrop Frye's view, literature, which is not determined by external processes, offers a structure to mythical reality. "Literature," Frye argues, "is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of story-telling, its mythical concepts, sun-gods and the like, become habits of metaphorical thought" (1965, 822). Working on this same mythical vision of art that suggests imaginative perspectives on the actual world, cinema has been often interpreted as visual mythology, "the art of film supremely lends itself to the transmittance of mythic themes" (Singer, 9). Transforming myths' anthropological and psychological contents into images has definitely shortened the long way that took cinema to finally be considered an art, taking into account that it carried on the role of a vehicle of culture-dealing with thought-provoking issues, as Christian Metz contends: "[Film] 'says' things that could also be conveyed in the language of words, yet it says them differently" (1974 [1968], 44). More specifically, cinema embodies our reality, reshaping it in the form of moving images and concrete sounds. This way, the seventh art tackles our experience of subjectivity, both as physical and as inner reality, which reinforces Cassirer's view of human beings' nature: "[…] instead of defining man as an *animal rationale*, we should define him as an *animal symbolicum*" (1944, 26).

Egoyan, whose films are described as texts to be "read rather than consumed" (Andrew, 24), confirms both his main subject and its complexity when he states, "There's nothing simple about representing a human being" (Pevere 1995a, 9). Obsessed with emotional realism, he resorts to human processes transforming them into images in order to show our metaphysical questioning. The mythical component reveals itself through the way his cinema displays possibilities to spectacularize significant motifs, such as the absurdity and unhealthiness of the modern world. The complex nature of his films has to do both with his own cinematic world in which his role as director is complemented by scriptwriting, producing, camerawork and editing, as well as with postmodern cultural approaches to existential chaos and their indecipherable spiritual vacuity, as his words prove: "I'm attracted to people who are lost in a world that I can navigate" (Egoyan 1993, 48).

The versatility of mythical accounts and the relevance of their mythemes make possible their cyclical recurrence. Besides, each new reinterpretation enriches the original text, adding different nuances to represent new contexts. The classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, mainly known through Virgil's book four of his *Georgics* (1988) and Ovid's book ten of his *Metamorphoses* (1955), is one of the most productively recycled stories. This is probably due to the way Eros and Thanatos are closely linked in it, even if their connection can be interpreted differently. According to Charles Segal, varying interpretations are fostered by the myth's triangular basis: "The meaning of the myth shifts as different points form the base: love-death, love-art, art-death" (1989, 2). The polysemic nature of the narrative about one of the strangest Greek heroes seems to have interested Egoyan and influenced his first commercially successful film, *Exotica*. Surprisingly enough, a $2 million budget film managed to gross $5.13 million in North America (Wilson 2009, xi) and it won the critics' prize in Cannes in 1994, together with eight Genies Awards from the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television.

To what extent Egoyan's new acquired status is connected to the classical world cannot be affirmed, but what is possible to say is that the mythical resonance of the hero's magic musical abilities and his passionate romantic engagement (an attitude that triggers both his success and his ruin) contributed to the quality of the film. Inasmuch

as the film verges on the indecipherable, its content was similarly subject to a double reading: together with its existentialist underpinnings, it was commercialized as erotic, and obtained a nomination for an Adult Video Award for best Alternative Video. In that sense, Virgil and Egoyan embrace the two extremes of Greek world, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, a reference to classical world that was acknowledged by the director himself when talked about his characters' emotional world, "They're able to articulate their pain at some point, and for that reason seem to be more classically identifiable" (Pevere 1995b, 43).

Definitely, this fact contributed to the successful reception of this personal film, whose origins relate to the author's cultural and biographical background. Culturally, the director admitted the importance of his experience as reader and spectator at the time of *Exotica*'s release: "The things that I've been drawing on for the past 10 years are basically the literature and theatre and film I saw in my late adolescence and early twenties" (Pevere 1995a, 67). When commenting on his sources of inspiration, he also made himself clear about his approach: "[M]y motivations are quite classical in terms of what I want to reveal about the characters, my desire to find a catharsis or some sense of resolution" (Gruben, 271); which should be added to other forms of cultural cross-fertilization like the literary tradition of the absurd, with Beckett's *œuvre* as a good example. Apart from it, there is always, according to the director, a visual stimulus that inspires each of his films and, in this case, it was the emotional impact caused by a picture of the body of a woman who had been arrested at the border when she was smuggling some eggs; what shocked him was mainly the contrasting effect of the maternal body incubating the eggs and a male body arresting her. Finally, as it will be shown further on, the film also draws from the director's autobiographical traumatic experience with the film's main topic, loss of love and subsequent healing.

2. Myth and Cinema

Being a well-known "compulsive movie-goer" (Pevere 2005a, 16), Egoyan filters his cinematic obsession in a very creative way. While he is probably not fully conscious about it, he takes, however, some inspiration from films he has watched. Among the best-known recreations of the classical myth of Orpheus, Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Marcel Camus' *Orfeu negro* (1959) or David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Exotica* is most influenced by the English-American director's approach—though it also shows some interest for Cocteau and Lynch. In relation to Hitchcock's influence, it needs to be noted firstly that Egoyan directed an episode of the American program "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" (1987) entitled "The Final Twist" when he was in his mid-twenties. Yet, the influence of this director goes beyond that show. *Exotica* can be defined as Hitchcockian both in its content and form.

Hitchcock's revisiting of the myth through his vague adaptation of the French novel *D'entre les morts* by Boileau-Narcejac (1954) will be here demonstrated to be the main cinematic reference for Egoyan's rewriting of the myth. Indeed, both filmmakers rework the classical story but create a much more psychologically complex version. This works to instill a cinematically powerful style, which enabled Hitchcock to do what he described as his main interest in this film; that is to say, to visualize "the hero's attempt to re-create the image of a dead woman through another one who's alive" (Truffaut 2017 [1967], 243). The common world that Hitchcock and Egoyan share is based on the

complexity of the hero's quest to save the woman he loves as a way to save himself, on the necrophiliac fascination for women and, most importantly, on the traumatic healing process ensuing loss. Both *auteurs* offer the visual perception of these aspects through the artificiality of film language, obviously, the best way to deal with the role of visuality in the Orphic myth.

Trapped and haunted by their pasts, the modern Orpheuses, Scottie and Francis, embody most of the fascination the Thracian poet arose. The nature of their self-accusatory action, looking back, and their desperate attempt at recreating the past are indicative of the existence of a guilty feeling. It is a crime (murder in Hitchcock's case and pedophilia in Egoyan's) that brings life back through a fictionalized experience (necrophilia), whose ultimate purpose is to relive the traumatic past in order to be able to survive. In this sense, both filmmakers emphasize the mental sickness from which their characters suffer as a representation of their respective time periods.

Moreover, Hitchcock and Egoyan both use a double female character to represent Eurydice's role. The Victorian *doppelgänger*, based on the physical quality of the folkloric double apparitions, serves as a modern reference to their schizophrenic psychologization. In Hitchcock's film, Madeleine/Judie pay tribute to the "erotic thriller" genre convention of the *femme fatale* and, in Egoyan's case, Lisa/Christina are victimized as objects men use to satisfy themselves. The fact that none of them is depicted as a real woman, or even as a fully developed character, makes it easier for us to understand the necrophiliac atmosphere in the two modern stories. On the basis of this rationale, the two directors present these women as ideal images and works of art to be admired by men rather than touched, which explains Egoyan's insistence on the "*noli me tangere*" topos.

Furthermore, such an approach relates to men's problems in dealing with reality and their need to create artificial substitutes in order to feel at ease. The classic account of the myth of Orpheus already contains men's obsession with gaining control over the Other, rather than over themselves. Interestingly, what in the case of the Greek hero has a positive connotation and includes the power to dominate nature and gods in his search for himself, turns out to have a negative implication in the films in terms of the main characters' social irresponsibility. The explanation for that difference between the classical and the modern texts can probably be explained by the critical moments that hegemonic masculinity in the 50s and at the end of the 20th century went through, as stated by Roger Horrocks, "The second half of the century has seen an increasing destitution and dereliction in the male image" (1995, 171). Individuals, under pressure to be real men, panicked in their approach to women's bodies, and, as a consequence, the more pain men felt, the less real they wanted women to be, an evident fact that explains partially irrational behavior, "Men's sexual violence and harassment of women are in part grounded in a psychically corrupt pain that enables men to see themselves as victimized by women's attractiveness" (Beneke, 173).

Hitchcock's and Egoyan's approaches share two more relevant elements. First, an erotic subtext aimed at showing our psychological world and its interaction with social life. In particular, this subtext reveals how sexuality is connected to death, which is seen as both attractive and frightening in its association with the Romantic delusion of sexuality close to necrophiliac infatuation. Closely connected, the second element involves the cinematic obsessive exploration of gazing due to its key role in the myth of Orpheus. The forbidden glance, with the disappearing image of Eurydice, is one of its most mysterious mythemes, to the extent that it has produced an industrial amount of

critical guessing as to the reason why Orpheus disobeys and turns back. Looking back against the gods' injunction could be seen from two different perspectives depending on the way the classical relationship between gods and humans is interpreted. First, in the case gods are trying to help Orpheus, the decision not to look back would be his salvation—both as a way of recovering his love and as a metaphorical way of recovering from his loss since dwelling in the past means missing what was lost and constantly remembering what no longer exists. The second perspective, which assumes Gods' will to set an example for humans and to keep them at a distance, seems more plausible. Humans' power to capture reality through visual skills is contrasted to its deadly implication in the mythical account when gods tease Orpheus with their warning. On the one hand, they know it is improbable that a human being will believe in what they cannot see, all the more so when it is the object of their love. On the other hand, the Gods want to test Orpheus' obedience and make clear their power. Their perverse plan works, and the hero's transgressive gesture proves his human imperfection as the result of human curiosity, accident, impatience or cowardice; or even as an example of *hybris* that leads to this foolish act of overconfidence and arrogance. Regardless of the chosen perspective, the fact is that Orpheus' responsibility and guilt cannot be avoided, and it is his gaze that causes Eurydice to die a second time.

From our contemporary perspective, the violence of his outrageous gaze can also be interpreted as part of the paradoxical male behavior of desiring and destroying women. Given that the cultural value of the gaze ranges from physical identification to philosophical and emotional meanings, it is not difficult to understand the perversion of the scopophilic instinct in films, a point highlighted by Laura Mulvey in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Her main objective was to demonstrate "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (6) and some of its contradictions through examples that include Hitchcock's masterpieces. After insisting on how central the gaze is to the message, she concludes as follows: "*Vertigo* focuses on the implications of the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference and the power of the male symbolic encapsulated in the hero" (17).

The power of scopophilia emerges when consideration is given to the connections between Hitchcock's work and *Exotica*. What is more, the dominance of the male gaze in cinema is probably the background for Egoyan's decision to name Francis' disappeared daughter Lisa, the same name as that of the main character in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954). On the basis of the common female name, it is possible to draw a parallel between the two male characters' behavior. Jeff, Lisa's boyfriend in Hitchcock's film, shifts from an unfriendly asexual relationship—closer to what could be described as familial when she is in his apartment—to the sexual interest he feels when observing her through his camera lens outside the apartment. In the Canadian film, Francis, Lisa's father, reacts similarly: after being traumatically separated from his daughter, he pays every night to see her unnatural replacement, a striptease dancer who happens to have been Lisa's babysitter; that is, he turns his mourning for his daughter into a fetishistic relationship, dangerously identifying both women. The Orphic gaze, based on the male fantasy of looking at a female image, supports the phallic discourse. Specifically, Orpheus' relationship to Eurydice illustrates what Gary R. Brooks calls "Centerfold Syndrome" (1995, 2) as a combination of voyeurism, objectification, the need for validation, trophysm, and the fear of true intimacy, which unfortunately still constitutes the saddest reality of most love stories in patriarchy.

3. Egoyan's Orpheus

In addition to using Hitchcock as a source of inspiration, Egoyan is able to adapt the motifs of the myth of Orpheus to his own cinematic world and to work from his own palette. The film, indeed, includes the elements he has admitted that attract him as a filmmaker: "Complexity. Conflicting agendas. Different people trying to present a version of reality. A hidden history. How people cope with trauma. The need to create and construct personas" (Riley, 2005). The film, thus, fits perfectly in his singular and experimental world, his "Un-American weirdness" whose thematic and formal consistency has given him his own space. Jonathan Romney goes as far as to say that Egoyan has "practically created his own genre" (1995, 8). Egoyanesque postmodern existentialism, as his cinematic space could be named, has its core in the search for identity, home and the process of healing, a cultural reality that Catherine Russell figured as "a complex structure of memory, family, and representation" (2002, 323).

Exotica, which is Egoyan's sixth feature film, is immersed in what Romney defined as "self-enclosed erotic microclimate" (2003, 110). More specifically, it is rooted in plays about male violence, including *After Grad with Dad* (1980) and *Convention* (1982), which Egoyan wrote and directed when he was in his early twenties. Thematically, the film revolves around the traumatic experience of incest and the scars as part of any human being's attempt to survive himself/herself. Attention should be drawn to the fact that the film belongs to the Family Romances—the Freudian phrase that describes the dynamics of obsessive memory and loss. Together with *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) and *Felicia's Journey* (1999), this trilogy examines a controversial topic: the corrupted relationship between adults' experience and children's innocence. Egoyan even suggests some incestuous reality and fantasy about parental attention crossing the boundary into child abuse and murder, helping us to identify the author's doubts about the first social institution: "I'm suspicious of [the family's] structure" (Pevere 1995a, 26). It needs to be noted here that incest was acknowledged as a personal concern. When promoting the last part of the trilogy, Egoyan admitted that in his late teens he had been involved with a girl who was suffering from an abusive betrayal by her father, though he only found out about it later. Learning about this episode made him feel a traumatic mixture of desire and frustration, as can be inferred from his own words:

> [S]omebody who is abused makes a parody of their own sexual identity as a means of trying to convince themselves that that part of themselves which has been destroyed is somehow not as vital as it is. Somehow they have to reduce it to something more grotesque than it can be, otherwise it becomes too painful to deal with. (Pevere 1995b, 48)

Leaving aside his feeling of guilt for not having done anything and thereby for having participated in an example of Sartrean denial, he gained insight into the world of sexuality and understood too late his loneliness in those days: "I came to understand how the sexual act is something quite separate from a means of sexual expression" (Pevere 1995b, 49).

Logically, works of art conceived at an early stage of an artist contain autobiographical undertones. Egoyan goes as far as to describe his characters as his alter-ego creations: "[F]ragments or aspects of my own personality. They were people looking for their own identity through rituals or gestures. But they were just shells" (Johnson, 2015). However, in this case, the sick need Francis feels to go to the Exotica club to – somehow – protect

Christina and thus reconnect with his happy past life is mainly Egoyan's cinematic way of denouncing the power difference in social status of men and women and the way female oppression is naturally explained, which can be related to Eurydice's unbalanced link to Orpheus. Francis' pathological desire embodies one of Egoyan's motifs: his skeptical opinion of institutionalized discourse. *Exotica* exemplifies the filmmaker's approach to family as social institution in the same way that *Calendar* (1993) questions national roots: "All that's meant to protect us is bound to fall apart. Bound to become contrived, useless and absurd. All that's meant to protect is bound to isolate. And all that's meant to isolate is bound to hurt" (Egoyan 1993).

Parents and husbands are supposed to protect "their" women. Contradictorily enough, in Orpheus' case, the hero fails to protect his wife, and so does Francis with Lisa and Christina. As argued, there is no clear reason why these two men do not help the women close to them, and by doing so also help themselves. Although the underworld they enter and inhabit for the rest of their lives cannot offer an explanation for the course of action they take, it emphasizes the mytheme of breaking the law and losing the woman they are in love with. Even if both stories have this narrative element in common, the way Egoyan tells it is contrary to the classical order and true to Paul Virilio's description of the Canadian's cinematic techniques, "You film in 'reverse gear'" (106). *Exotica* concludes with a coda where we see the very beginning of the story, which is not aimed at explaining what the spectator has seen but rather at making the audience ask the same question as in Orpheus myth, why does not the man help the woman and why does he let her disappear?

It is this five-minute flashback that contains the film's clearest Orphic allusion. It shows how after a moment of home happiness, Francis drives his daughter's babysitter, a very young Christina, back to her place. Outside her house, seeing her sad reaction when asked about the way her father talks about her, he reassures her in these terms: "Listen, Christina, if there is ever anything you want to talk about, about what might be going on at home, or whatever, you know that I'm here, okay?" (Egoyan 1994). With no further word spoken she gets out of the car and, while walking slowly the long pathway to her house, she turns back and looks at him. The meaning underlying this scene, added to the possible fantasy of an incestuous relationship between Francis and Lisa, dramatizes the complex relationship between adults and children, hinting at something that has been interpreted in a variety of ways in Christina's case. Romney reads it as an "unspecified damage" (1995, 7), whereas Wilson infers that "Christina is a character who has been abused within a family context" (2003, 32); and Masterson, for his part, sees clearly, "she is being sexually abused by her father" (2002, 887). Whatever Egoyan wants us to infer, what cannot be denied is the way this scene highlights the importance of gazing when Christina unsuccessfully seeks Francis' help. However, he does not react and she crosses the threshold of the postmodern representation of classical hell, her middleclass house, accompanied just by the gloomy music as she enters that labyrinth to disappear from our view.

The disturbing depth of this primal scene is depicted through the forbidding nature of the dream-like house in whose interior everything is hidden. Our contemporary hell, where we are condemned to live, is identified with our place and our family, reminding us about the central message of the film: "The things you want are the things that slip away" (Egoyan 1994). This idea takes us back to Orpheus' tragedy: in particular, to the loss of happiness, the search for some therapy, and the condemnation to live in a state between life and death.

Egoyan does not use brutality or any violent image. On the contrary, he portrays incest almost as hopeless *fatum*, where human intervention is reduced to nothing. The nightmarish atmosphere of the daylight delirium of the film's last five minutes redeems neither Francis nor Christina, in spite of reversing the gender roles from the classical story. Here starts their healing process to survive their past using erotic fantasies as a shield and soothing their pain with voyeuristic practices as a placebo. Francis asks Christina in Exotica, the club, "How could anybody want to hurt you?" (Egoyan 1994), playing out the protective father role he failed to be.

Unable to face reality, which he summarizes as "a jungle out there" (Egoyan 1994), and his mental pain, which he never verbalizes, Francis enacts his own fantasy, relegating the present to a state of inexistence by ritualistically meeting Christina every night at Exotica to mourn their shared loss. What Freud termed "faulty mourning" refers here to their personal project to come to terms with traumatic experiences without resorting to professional help. Indeed, the male protagonist seems to believe that healing will occur by repeating the same patterns of behaviour. Gazing at a semi-naked Christina for $5 and being able to talk to her in order to make her feel safe is the pseudo-therapeutic fetishistic cure Francis uses to avoid paralysis. Experiencing some connection with life without abandoning the dead territory implies the sort of imposture those who need a fully controlled getaway go for. However, this method can lead to an addiction where loss is exaggerated, and so we end up creating our own reality to substitute the real world, out of fear of facing who we really are. The postmodern sarcasm in Egoyan's film shows itself in the way in which Francis' scopic obsessive behaviour is not a cure for him since it ultimately increases his suffering but, paradoxically, it is closely connected to the cinematic nature since turning reality into a picture is actually what cinema does. Whereas the repetition of the healing action proves to be a short-lasting fantasy, recorded images turn out to be the only possibility of true memories, blurring the difference between reality and fantasy. The ghostly result is the best representation that Egoyan can create of our dysfunctional world and our fragility, the dark part of the message customers in the club can get when Eric, introducing the girl, says, "[She] can show you the mysteries of her world" (Egoyan 1994).

4. The Epistemological Gaze

The narrative puzzle concludes when the therapy is proven wrong. As a matter of fact, the hopeful scene in which Francis and Eric hug one another shows the human touch that breaks the club's rule of "*noli me tangere*." Egoyan emphasizes the importance of a transcendental method to deal with traumas; something which has commonalities with Orpheus' final stages and the transformation of his loss into a religious experience, the so-called Orphic mysteries. However, intertextuality is not limited to this scene, since what both the myth and the film share is mainly their metafictional value. It was the critic and novelist Maurice Blanchot, in his central theoretical essay "The Gaze of Orpheus" (1982 [1955]), who used the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to work on the paradoxical nature of literary art and analyzed the analogies between the gaze and artistic writing and story-telling processes: "Writing begins with Orpheus's gaze" (Blanchot, 175). Through his music, the mythical hero compensates his love's loss in its configuration of invisibility, but identifying himself with his art, "He is Orpheus only in the song" (171), as well as his power, "only in the song does Orpheus have power over Eurydice" (172); both characters lose themselves in the song.

Blanchot's interpretation of Orpheus' link between inspiration and desire and his insistence on gaze as the essential moment of freedom take us back to Egoyan, whose connection with Hitchcock becomes, from this theoretical stance, even more noticeable. According to the French theorist's interpretation of the myth, both filmmakers are to be considered Orphic authors because of the way they love the form of film itself, that which Hitchcock called "pure cinema" (Truffaut 2017 [1967], 283). His emphasis is on the construction of the story and on the way it is told, rather than on the story itself, which, in *Vertigo*'s case, he summarized in a sentence: "the man wants to go to bed with a woman who's dead; he's indulging in a form of necrophilia" (Truffaut 2017 [1967], 244). He knew that it is the form, what is specific to each artistic expression, that creates the content. In other words, the major element that Egoyan learned from Hitchcock's films is the development of the structure and the visual narrative to achieve emotions in a way that only cinema is able to do. In this case, it is the artistic choices that are able to make us enjoy the films—at least from the cinematic point of view—and are considered responsible for the place both films have among the best examples of their authors' respective *œuvres,* to the extent that, besides *Exotica*'s status, *Vertigo* is usually, together with *Citizen Kane*, rated as one of the best two films ever made.

In Hitchcock's filmography, visual formalism represents his cinematic project, "I also explained that the story was of less importance to me than the overall visual impact on the screen" (Truffaut 2017 [1967], 247-8); *Vertigo* is then one hundred percent Orphic because it contributes to making insanity evident, in its etymological sense. As regards *Exotica*, its author, together with his artistic teams and artists, including his cinematographer, Paul Sarossy, and his musician, Mychael Danna, proves that his narrative conventions go one step beyond Hitchcock's use of structure, dialogues and acting. In contrast to the cause-and-effect logic of Hollywood narration, Egoyan's purpose is to introduce the spectator to an insane chaotic atmosphere where different layers are juxtaposed. He presents the process the same way characters cope with what they have not yet come to terms with, letting the audience similarly go through it. This way, he breaks the chronological structure. By rejecting the predictability of a linear narrative, he represents the film's obsession, which Egoyan himself has summarized in these words: "In telling the story of *Exotica*, I wanted to structure the film like a striptease" (Beard 2007, 113). His words may refer not only to the gradual way in which the movie reveals itself but also to the honesty it shows to reach the darkest part of ourselves. Egoyan's deconstruction of the story insists on what one of the two contrasting protagonists, Eric, verbalizes: "I just need to find a structure" (Egoyan 1994). Experimenting with narrative devices, like making the audience go back to the initial stage at the very end of the film, denies the spectator any sort of comfortable position or superiority and provokes our shocked reaction. Withholding information—or giving it through flashbacks that sometimes are not even offered as the characters' past moments, using a mostly incoherent psychological point of view or refusing to use dialogues in any clear informative way, all underline the director's intention to cause the strong catharsis the tragedy asks for and to communicate the inexpressible message.

The outrageous nature of the myth is then emphasized through the combination of a classical approach towards dramatic characters, in terms of their identities and their goals, and the use of untraditional techniques, which, as pointed out by Egoyan himself, result in a film in which "the means by which […] things happen is unorthodox" (Gruben, 271). In an interview with Peter Harcourt, Egoyan expounded further on his cinematic interests, revealing the artistic creed by which he assessed film viewing:

> The most resonant moments for me as a viewer always come when I don't quite know what it is I'm watching. I'm lost in a wash of emotions and feelings that do not originate from something that I can identify immediately. They're the most exhilarating passages in cinema because they come so close to the dream state. (Cited in Wilson 2009, 13)

Given Egoyan's preference for unpredictable, multi-layered and misleading films, it seems reasonable to understand that clear or objective information is not his main objective. Therefore, the way his films should be watched is, in fact, similar to the quality he admires in Hitchcock's rereading of the myth of Orpheus, which he praised in these terms:

> [H]e seems able to use the instrument in a purely emotional way. He was so good at those technical tricks—but the thing that makes *Vertigo* so moving is that it transcends all that**.** It operates at the level of a fever dream. It really feels to be his most personal work. (Said, 2003)

That is to say, the Canadian director considers that the cinematic key element is the transcendental power of technicalities. It is Egoyan's strong opposition to logical thinking that enables us to define his films as lyrical, rather than narrative, texts. In his work, causality is thus substituted by the poetic approach to difficult questions; hence, it is safer to follow the classical *sententia*, "*Melius sentire quam scire*." In *Exotica*'s case what cannot be rationally comprehended moves us deeply. The relevance of such an emotional territory is that its irrational undertones coincide with the *topos* created by Orpheus's decision to go beyond death to search for Eurydice and to cause her definite death by disobeying. This way both the classical and the Canadian stories, as well as Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, get closer to their audiences, who may react to Eurydice's physical death with surprise and will certainly be shocked by her second eternal death.

Emotional logic is at the root of cathartic empathy and, in consequence, enables the understanding of feelings, which can mainly be justified subjectively. The psychological connection with the audience is triggered by the irrational quality of the myth, whose archetypal basis is the collective unconscious that connects this world and the underworld. The epistemological side of emotional discourse explains Orpheus' journey between life and death, thereby appealing to the sacred in our existence. Suffering associated with the process of understanding oneself moves the audience to empathize with the irrational yet human desire to go beyond our limits.

This way, the myth of Orpheus makes sense in any of its reappropriations; i.e. classical, modern or postmodern. Certainly, all three texts highlight the psychological undertones of the myth, helping us recognize our irrational side that Egoyan has emphasized, "[p]eople tend to discuss my films in terms of theory, but I'm not a theorist—my stories are told to communicate emotions" (Mckenna, 1995). The Canadian director, in fact, turns the myth's emotional truth into the universal language of cinema. Highlighted by the hidden meaning of title, *Exotica*'s visual metaphor explains our pathological state of alienation, which is considered by its creator the film's leitmotiv: "[W]hat really drives the film is the exoticism that we feel towards our own experience, that point at which our own memory, and our own relationship to the things that are closest to us become exotic" (Shambu, 2001).

In agreement with another postmodernist Canadian, Marshall McLuhan, whose book *The Medium Is the Message* (1964) theorizes on the medium as an extension of ourselves, Egoyan and Hitchcock found their place in the movies. Accordingly, their work is always

a metacinematic one. When Romney insists that Egoyan shows "the frames as well as the picture" (1999, 6), he is pointing at what the Canadian director has in common with Hitchcock: both filmmakers work on the best filmic possibilities to create a supreme form of expression. Egoyan admired Hitchcock's self-consciousness, and he himself admitted his own preference for artificiality: "I've always wanted to resist films which have the ability to make people think that what they are seeing is real" (Gruben, 271). From the very first scene, *Exotica* makes clear its scopic nature by focusing on the problems of gazing: "You have to convince yourself that this person has something hidden that you have to find" (Egoyan 1994). The rest of the film revolves around this theme, with images seeking to represent what we do not want to lose. For Egoyan cinema is always about loss; in his words, "I find cinema is a great medium to explore ideas of loss, because of the nature of how an image affects us and how we relate to our own memory and especially how memory has changed with the advent of motion pictures with their ability to record experience" (Porton 1997, 39-41).

As a consequence, visual recorded material has changed our stereotypical approach to the concept of surface. It no longer means superficial knowledge; quite the opposite, it is identified with the photographic frame and the value of video imagery representing our psychological territory; that is, "the concept of surface proves to be the most complex and intriguing aspect of any rendering of personality" (Egoyan 1993, 25). The complexity of the content together with the almost self-contained nature of the image, which displays sensory and mental realities, results in its distance from its creator, as Egoyan is happy to admit: "The films that really excite me are those in which it is unclear if the filmmaker is really aware of how disturbing or moving the image is" (1993, 52). In any case, the artificiality of cinematic language based on mechanical devices that have a psychological component is no different from human nature as discursive concept in postmodern theory where nature has become unnatural.

Hitchcock's and Egoyan's metacinematic obsession in *Vertig*o and *Exotica* relies on the metafictional content in the myth of Orpheus because, as Metka Zupancic states, in Orphism "language becomes the ultimate, in other words, the absolute" (2017, 54). In her analysis of the influence of this myth in the French *Nouveau Roman*, Zupancic uses Elizabeth Sewell's *The Orphic Voice* (1960) to emphasize what the story represents: "In the Orpheus story, myth is looking at itself. This is the reflection of myth in its own mirror" (Sewell 1960, 41). If consideration is given to the systematic way in which Orphism creates "a textual and intertextual web" (Zupancic, 62), it seems reasonable to connect the metapoetical element that Sewell emphasizes, "[f]or Orpheus is poetry thinking about itself" (47), with the metacinematic obsession that characterizes both Hitchcock's and Egoyan's work. As a matter of fact, their two thrillers explore the consequences of looking, loving and losing in a way clearly connected to Ihab Hassan's idea of Orpheus' guilt, "The crime of Orpheus corresponds to the form of his atonement. Whatever that sin may be, language and form, expressions of emergent consciousness, are complicit in it" (1982, 5).

5. Conclusion

As concluding remarks, film language offers unexplored possibilities for the analysis of the human nature component expressed in myths. Cinema, on the one hand, is marvelously able to express our thoughts and emotions in a visual way, showing the

way our subconsciousness works. In Egoyan, for example, images trigger a myriad of possibilities, sometimes even making visible the invisible: "[T]o me, the highest aim of any film is to enter so completely into the subconscious of the viewer that there are moments and scenes and gestures which can be generated by the spectator's imagination. That becomes part of the film they're playing in their mind" (Pevere 1995a, 50). On the other hand, his films work on the artistic principles of cinema as an expressive medium that include Griffith's grammar or Eisenstein's montage, as well as Welles' modernist revolution or Hitchcock's psychological *mise-en-scène*. In the Canadian's case, according to Emma Wilson, he has been able to create new ways to cause the audience's catharsis, "through his manipulation of video and other technologies within film, Egoyan finds modes of representation that bring the viewer up close to the emotions of his protagonists" (2006, 25-26).

The importance of *Exotica*'s emotional realism may be described as an instance of the perfect synthesis of cinematic devices and human feelings and conflicts. What is more, Egoyan's postmodernist approach rules out the possibility of distinguishing between reality and recorded images in his films, playing with "video-memories," as emotionally experienced recorded material in order to remind the character who he is, like in Francis' case. In fact, Egoyan is, in Romney's words, the "most alluringly postmodern" (2003, back cover). His intense self-consciousness and the complexity of his works make him deserve such distinction. For him there is no simple truth, probably because of his desire to turn the camera into a character, a missing person or a modern version of the voice of the gods in the Greek chorus, or even of the filmmaker.

His skepticism and epistemological questioning do not allow the spectator to take anything for granted or to relax comfortably feeling at home. Moreover, the process of self-examination scrutinizes most of what society considers normalcy: the world of alienation, major social institutions like the institution of family as well as many other social realities like home or even the realm of fantasy, including sexuality. Most of these aspects are analyzed from a postmodern point of view that does not attempt at separating cultural affairs from an economy- and technology-driven post-industrial society. It is the merging of discourses that causes every action in the film to have a price and be seen as part of the marketplace the world has been transformed into, to the point that *Exotica* was defined by bell hooks, as "the quintessential postmodern film" (2009 [1996], 36).

It should therefore come as little surprise that the new Orpheus is an accountant ready to pay $5 to enjoy the company of a sex worker and abuse survivor. This new Eurydice makes him feel the way he likes, while he has paid for (another) baby-sitter who, while playing the piano at his home, looks after the memory of a dead girl. The role played by music—the highest form of art in classical world—in the myth presents Orpheus as the epitome of his culture and his skill enabled him to lure his way in the underworld in order to be with Eurydice. All this power is substituted in Egoyan's film by economy, which offers Francis the same possibilities. Once the ancient role of music is reduced and pagan gods are no longer needed to remind us who we are, such a psychological and social function is carried out by technological devices in *Exotica*; more specifically, the already mentioned video-memories, which, as Jonathan Romney explains, have a "status as a prosthesis for human memory" (2003, 111). The parallelism between gods and video goes so far as they both present a world where our inner experiences are exoticized, to the point that they are as distant from us as gods were on the Olympus.

Leaving aside the modifications to the myth made by Egoyan as a result of the fact that the text is used in a different context, the most important commonality needs to be highlighted. His diasporic film, a nomadic text that bell hooks identified with "the world of border crossing" (28), explores a territory that cannot be limited by temporal or geographical templates. The existential issues such as identity, happiness, the traumatic links between desire and loss, or intimacy that the myth of Orpheus presented inspired Atom Egoyan, probably through Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. However, he was able to make the story of Orpheus his own text, coming up with "a film that is utterly Egoyan's" (Pevere 1995a, 34); that is to say, full of his own concerns and his own hyperreal cinematic style. It is his critical approach to the contemporary world in his art-house film that reinvents the myth's metaphysical questioning; more specifically, the epistemological chaos as a consequence of the connection between Eros and Thanatos.

The magic of cinema as the supreme art form allows the complexity of the visual material of the myth to be developed. Working on images to reflect the importance of absence implies considering films as fully equipped cultural texts to give new life to human questions. The immutable relevance of Orpheus' example insists on Cocteau's interpretation of the myth as watching death at work. In an age dominated by images, enlarging the limits of phenomenal visuality complicates some of the issues the myth displayed. Cinema—a logical inheritor of myths' social role—helps us face some of our darkest truths. Furthermore, it is an appropriate means to try to offer artistic possibilities to the fears and horrors of our liquid and hybrid era by blurring, in Egoyan's case, the fragile line between reality and cinema and using images to keep track of our memories as a truth that fosters remembering. Some filmmakers reflect as artists on human identity rather than insisting as businessmen on the principle expressed in the movie's most famous line: "We're here to entertain, not to heal" (Egoyan 1994).

Myths, cinema and art in general have this therapeutical search for a purifying catharsis to cope with the tragic vision of general state of woundedness that Leonard Cohen sings in "Everybody Knows" (1988), the background music for Christina's act. Myths will fertilize our reality as long as their malleable but always relevant content is used to visualize the symptoms of our unhealthy age. This way *Exotica*, merging the particular and the universal, reaffirms the value of the classical "*omnia vincit amor*," a literary topic that cannot belong only to the ancient world since it still represents a utopian dream.

Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

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