A Director on the Festival Circuit: An Interview with Atom Egoyan

RICHARD PORTON

Atom Egoyan is an archetypal case of a filmmaker whose career has been shaped by his intimate association with a host of film festivals. Several festival venues have been constants as Egoyan progressed from being a scrappy director of ‘art films’ to an international figure. The Toronto International Film Festival (located in the city where Egoyan has resided since his university days) screened his first feature, Next of Kin, in 1984. TIFF has subsequently showcased virtually all of Egoyan’s major projects; Ararat opened TIFF in 2002 and his latest feature, Adoration, was screened at the 2008 festival.

Despite this home town recognition, however, Wim Wenders’ decision to turn over his prize money for Wings of Desire to Egoyan at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma in Montreal in 1987 became a legendary film festival moment. In addition, after Family Viewing, the film that inspired Wenders’ impromptu act of generosity, Egoyan became a fixture on the festival circuit. 1989’s Speaking Parts marked Egoyan’s first appearance at Cannes’ Directors’ Fortnight; he resurfaced at the same sidebar in 1991 with The Adjuster. From Exotica (1994) to the present, most of Egoyan’s high-profile fiction films (as opposed to occasional smaller projects such as the too-little known documentary, Citadel, 2006) have been showcased in competition at Cannes, although Ararat was shown out of competition, in the main selection, at the director’s
request. The trajectory from a slightly outré marginal figure to a mainstream international auteur perhaps culminated in the special Grand Jury Prize he received for *The Sweet Hereafter* in 1997. His one attempt to make an entirely mainstream film, *Where the Truth Lies* (shown in competition in 2005) met with a scathing critical reception that may have made him reflective but has not left any visible psychic wounds. In any case, Egoyan is no longer exclusively a filmmaker – and is as likely to surface as a video artist engaged in gallery installations, or a director of opera (his production of Richard Strauss’s *Salome* premiered in Toronto and went on to revivals in Vancouver and Houston) or theatre (his stage adaptation of Samuel Beckett’s television play, *Eh Joe*, won acclaim in Dublin, London and New York.)

In the following interview, Egoyan assesses his festival experiences – whether as youthful spectator, aspiring filmmaker or, as his career reached maturity, jury member – with an analytical, often humorous, eye.

Richard Porton: Although this volume is made up primarily of contributions by critics and filmmakers, I also think it’s important to have a film-
maker’s perspective. You seemed like the ideal person to interview since festivals – perhaps beginning with the screening of *Next of Kin* at the Toronto Film Festival – have provided you with many important career touchstones.

Atom Egoyan: Yes, I’ve been thinking about this lately. I was hugely invested in projecting the meaning of what these festivals meant – and that became a large part of how my journey through these events has marked me. The Toronto Film Festival was something I was keenly aware of as a student. I had seen filmmakers present their work there and I had covered the festival as a student journalist. I certainly fantasised about what it must have meant to be able to present a film at Toronto and have that kind of exposure. Likewise, many of the films I’d admired at that time were European movies that included the prizes they had garnered at various festivals in the presentation credits. You wouldn’t only see Cannes and Berlin; you might also see Locarno and these other moments in a film’s career that took on a special significance.

That was part of my make up at that time: to dream of what it would be like to be part of one of these hallowed events. It wasn’t an immediate process for me, though. *Next of Kin* made it to some festivals – but nothing remarkable outside of Toronto and Mannheim. *Family Viewing* was submitted to Cannes and wasn’t invited; it was also submitted to Locarno during the summer of ’87 and wasn’t invited. It then premiered in Toronto and was invited, with some hesitation, to the Forum in Berlin. And then it was invited to Locarno the following summer – at which point I discovered that it hadn’t even been properly submitted to Locarno the first time. The then-director of the festival hadn’t even seen it. So there’s a whole level of machination that goes on in terms of selection and one’s entry into the selection process that is very daunting and mysterious to a filmmaker at the beginning of his career. You’re at the mercy of people who can champion your work and put it through.

RP: The festival circuit is usually posited as the antidote to the mainstream. And Wim Wenders’s decision to honour *Family Viewing* by handing over his prize money to you during the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma in Montreal is often cited as a key turning point in your career.

AE: For me – at that point – the festival was the mainstream. I really didn’t
have a sense of what the mainstream meant outside of the festival circuit. It was a different moment, perhaps. But it was long before *sex, lies, and videotape* and long before making an indie film became a ticket to success.

The experience at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma was every young filmmaker’s fantasy, a remarkable moment where I was able to achieve a degree of visibility because of Wim’s generosity. In retrospect it seems almost choreographed. But it was in fact a great surprise, which focused attention on a film that might not otherwise have had any.

R.P: And it’s become a seminal event in almost every biographical sketch or piece of journalism devoted to your career.

A.E: For a while, the weight of it was almost oppressive. I actually did an open forum on that event and dissected it, eventually coming up with the conclusion that Wim hadn’t even seen the film at that point. The film had received an honourable mention and he made a gesture by giving me the cash prize. Then a screening was convened and he supported it although I always wonder what might have happened he had first seen the film and hated it. Nevertheless, it’s remarkable that festivals can create those moments and the public can share in the fantasy. This kind of passing on of the baton can only really resonate if the public is attuned to the experiences of these filmmakers – and what these films mean. There was a tone and a space at the festival which allowed this to happen and I’m not sure it could happen again. Wim was also the head of the jury at Cannes when Soderbergh won the Palme d’Or for *sex, lies, and videotape*. There was also a feeling that this was a special moment. But it’s not a given.

R.P: So you thought of yourself as more of an experimental filmmaker at that time?

A.E: Those films were made with arts council grants and there were no expectations that they would perform commercially.

R.P: There was no funding through Telefilm?

A.E: *Next of Kin* and *Family Viewing* were arts council projects. I had rejected Telefilm. They had approached me, but the use of video – shooting it as a live TV show and then transferring it – was something that fell outside of their realm of understanding. It was an experimental work – using narrative devices of course – and was not a Telefilm project.
RP: And, to a certain extent, you’ve continued to alternate between relatively mainstream projects and more experimental work.

AE: Now I find myself in a strange place where I can make a small film, like the project Citadel, which I made a few years ago. I can be incredibly selective. I really haven’t shown it at any festivals at all because it wasn’t meant to be a commercial project and was made with no budget whatsoever. There’s no expectation, or pressure, for it to perform commercially. So I prefer to see it as a purely artisanal project. I don’t necessarily view festivals in the same way as I once did. It may be the product of my age or the point I’ve reached in my career. But I tend to see them now more as marketplaces than forums.

RP: Since I saw you present Citadel at the Barbican in London, I know that you wanted to appear with the film to answer questions at selected screenings. I suppose it would be too arduous to do this at numerous festivals.

AE: Maybe if it was something I had made twenty years ago, I would have devoted time to traveling with the film. It’s funny – there was a retrospective of my work at the Pompidou last year – and it seemed to make sense in that context. If one wants to look at the film festival as a forum for discussion, it almost assumes that the filmmaker will be present. Citadel in particular is a work that can’t be shown without some kind of discussion.

RP: So, although Citadel is a film that you couldn’t imagine within the commercial realm, it hasn’t (with the exception of Hot Docs in Toronto) screened on the festival circuit.

AE: Yes, although we did screen it several years ago at this small digital venue that I set up in Toronto and it proved ideal for this project. In terms of having a discussion, I think the most successful festival experiences I’ve had have been at the Forum in Berlin and certainly at the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma in Montreal.

RP: Didn’t the Rotterdam Film Festival help to launch Calendar, a similarly ‘small film’?

AE: That’s a very interesting festival story. The Adjuster won the grand prize at the Moscow Film Festival in 1991. Part of that prize was a million rubles to make a film in the Soviet Union. The result of this was that I went right from Moscow to Armenia with the idea of organising a plan
to make a film. Within the next year, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the ruble was devalued to the point where it was practically worthless. It was quite shocking; on the strength of this prize I went to what was then still a Soviet republic only to find that all the funding had evaporated. I went to the CineMart in Rotterdam, where we were required to tell a story about our projects. Fortunately, almost miraculously, a producer, Doris Hepp at ZDF, offered $100,000 to resurrect this project. Since this film was born out of a festival prize that then eluded me and was then resurrected at another festival, I suppose it could be termed the quintessential festival film – born in one, revived in another, and then premiered at yet another festival the following year – the Forum in Berlin.

R.P.: Of course, by now you’ve also had a great deal of exposure at Cannes, a dizzying marketplace and thereby radically different from festivals such as Rotterdam and Locarno.

A.E.: There was a point in my career, after *Speaking Parts* got into the Directors’ Fortnight, when I began to feel that I was on a completely
different track. My alignment with Alliance eventually became married to the idea of presenting my films at Cannes as a springboard for sales. That became true with *The Adjuster*, which was also included in the Fortnight the following year. *Calendar* was a very interesting film from this perspective. That film was seen as a bit of a deviation since Alliance was not excited about the film’s prospects as a commercial property. And, although they ended up representing it, their concentration at that time was on *Exotica* – a film that was already in the works – which they thought could be a breakthrough.

RP: And *Exotica* was a competition film, wasn’t it?
AE: It was invited into the competition at the last minute. It was originally included in Un Certain Regard. We held back since it was previously invited for the Fortnight. It was then of course bumped up to the competition.

RP: I’ve attended Cannes since 2001 and, although most of the mainstream critics flock to the competition films, I find that much of the truly interesting work is included in Directors’ Fortnight.
AE: Well, after a while it’s a purely commercial decision. Here’s another interesting festival story. The last film, *Where the Truth Lies*, was not intended for Cannes at all. But the selection committee insisted on seeing it although we were very hesitant. Although I usually like to send a print, we sent a tape. They were very adamant about showing the film. It’s very difficult to decline an offer after you go through that system and I think we were also suddenly intrigued by what this might mean. And I think you might also lose your sense of how a film should be positioned. It’s exciting; there’s a momentum that happens with that particular festival. But it’s still an open question as to whether it was a smart idea to screen that film at Cannes. From a commercial point of view, and that of international sales, it was spectacularly successful. And the reviews that came out the first day, particularly the one in *The Hollywood Reporter*, were over the moon. So we thought we had certainly made the right choice. But then there was the flip side and we were sort of pummeled by other critics. But, by that point, the sales had already been made. That’s how quickly things move. It’s very strategic and has to be done carefully. And, of all the markets where the film screened, France was the only
country where it performed well. So perhaps the point is that, although we think of these festivals as international events, they’re also national events (and this is true of Cannes as well). Cannes serves as a national platform and that’s true of many other festivals; one thinks of Berlin and Venice, for example. A premiere at either of those festivals is purely of importance for European distribution; for a premiere of a North American film to matter over here it has to be aligned with a screening at the Toronto festival. At least at Cannes you do get international exposure.

R.P: Moving on to another topic, did it bother you that the press made much of the fact that David Cronenberg was head of the jury when Felicia’s Journey was screened at Cannes? Do you think they were trying to whip up a rivalry between two Canadian directors?

AE: David is my mentor and I have tremendous respect for him. Having headed a jury myself at Berlin, I know there are certain decisions that no one will understand outside the confines of a room. David and I happen to be two prominent directors from Canada. There was really quite unrealistic speculation, which probably wouldn’t have occurred if we were from any other countries. This certainly wouldn’t have happened if we were from the United States.

I was on the jury at Cannes the year Cronenberg’s Crash was shown and was a very vocal supporter of the film. It was a fractious – in fact publicly fractious – jury. I made a very public bid for that film – not to support David per se but to support what I thought was a very extraordinary piece of work, an exceptional film. You hope to put your personal allegiances aside and focus on the work. I can’t presume to know what anyone on that jury thought of Felicia’s Journey. I never really talked about it with David.

I say this with some perspective. I think it’s important to talk about the fact that, from a filmmaker’s point of view, it’s very deforming when you’re going through an event like Cannes. You’re in a very strange bubble for those ten days. You don’t see the other films and you’re talking endlessly about your own work. So you’re divorced from any reality of what the other competition films are like. Everyone is telling you that your film is the best they’ve seen – and they might be doing that either sincerely or maliciously. But, for whatever reason, because of your state
of mind, you might be prone to believe that. It becomes very exaggerated. So, when you reach the evening when the prizes are announced, it can be quite devastating.

RP: Well, Angelopoulos was quite visibly upset one year at Cannes when he didn’t win the Palme d’Or he thought he deserved.

AE: It gets a little ugly because people are in a very peculiar zone. For those ten days, that is the world. It takes some time away from it for the dust to settle and learn to look at the experience objectively. It’s a very particular community that congregates at a very strange town in the south of France to see some exceptional films as well as some films that probably don’t have a right to be there at all.

RP: That would coincide with my perception of Cannes – although I assume screening *The Sweet Hereafter* there was one of your happiest festival experiences.

AE: It was an exceptional experience because it felt, in some ways, to be the culmination of so many things. It was the last film – before *Adoration* – I had produced myself. And I was working with a group of people, who
had all quite beautifully made their way to Cannes to see various films, either in the Directors’ Fortnight or in competition. So it was a very sweet evening. It felt like the right moment. I’ll never forget when Exotica won the International Critics Award. I’ve always felt strange about it because that was the year that Kieslowski was there with Three Colours: Red, which walked away empty-handed.

RP: I suppose that example demonstrates the arbitrariness of many coveted prizes. What was your experience like as a member of the Cannes jury in 1996, the year Secrets & Lies won the Palme d’Or?

AE: And Breaking the Waves won the Jury Prize. It was an exceptional year. Of course, while there were exceptional films we acknowledged, there were also exceptional films that we weren’t able to acknowledge. For example, we weren’t able to acknowledge Aki Kaurismaki’s Drifting Clouds. Fargo was also screened. It just wasn’t possible to give awards to everyone.

I had an interesting experience because Coppola was head of the jury and he was certainly someone who I had mythologised. It was fascinating to see that cult of personality emerge and witness someone who had the most remarkable double hit at Cannes between Apocalypse Now and The Conversation, which both won the Palme d’Or. I think what was remarkable about his process was that he didn’t think we should discuss the films at first but should instead get to know each other. The idea was that we would all know where we were coming from when we finally came to discuss the films. The idea was good in theory. But what happened was that we spent ten days socialising and being congenial while eventually discovering on the last day that we all had wildly different tastes. In fact, we should have started that work long before.

RP: Since the process seems so opaque to the clueless observer, it’s interesting to hear these inside tidbits.

AE: Yes, every head of the jury has his own technique. Some presidents might want every film to be discussed while some might want to eliminate certain projects from discussion – if a film doesn’t have any support on the jury, the argument goes, why discuss it? I think that’s a dangerous approach because the discussions are what form the consensus.

RP: These decisions often seem based on personal whims or the ability of certain jury members to dominate the group. It’s all quite unpredictable.
AE: For me, the most troubling aspect of a festival is that your experience of a film is set against what you’ve seen before and certainly what you’re going to see next, not an isolated experience. One could argue that the ideal jury would be the one that had exactly the same experience of when those films are viewed: they should be watching them together at all times. And, since there might be the possibility of other projections that would alter that experience, they should watch only those films. The cumulative experience of a festival is alchemical. I’ve had incredible emotional responses to work that left me cold seeing them months later outside of that event. It’s a peculiar aberration of how we normally view films.

RP: And perhaps the reverse is also true – films that seemed undistinguished during a festival can take on new resonances subsequently. Seeing five or six films a day and having very little to eat can obviously have an impact on your responses.

AE: And there are also personalities. You might have a very strange run in with someone that leaves you in a very bad way. Or you might be pushed around trying to get into a certain screening and that might leave a bad taste. So all of these things are unpredictable and can alter your perception of a film.

RP: Festivals such as Cannes and Toronto have now become so media driven and besotted with celebrities that the glitz often threatens to interfere with the experience of the films themselves.

AE: They become victims of their own success and I’m not sure there’s any way to prevent that. One of the joys of the Toronto International Film Festival is that you can actually chart your way through the event and perhaps focus on some of the less-hyped films.

RP: Some people feel that Toronto has become too preoccupied with junkets and Hollywood premieres.

AE: But the wonderful thing about Toronto is that it presents so many varied festival events. You can make it a festival of Eastern European films or African cinema or experimental work. You can create your own festival. If you only focus on the studio releases, it could become unbearable. But I don’t know why anyone would do that.

RP: When I was in Istanbul for the festival several years ago, I met several
Turkish critics and academics who were very fond of *Ararat* and went against the grain of what one would have thought would be stereotypical Turkish responses to the film. Do you think screening the film in Turkey was a worthwhile idea?

AE: I’ve had as much negative reaction to *Ararat* from the Armenian community as I’ve had from the Turkish community. There are ambiguities in the work and it’s designed to provoke a response. There was a very alarmist reaction to *Ararat*, mainly from people who hadn’t seen the work. It was attacked as propaganda, which by its very nature has to be simple-minded and ham-fisted, and the film is anything but that. *Ararat* allows for a conversation to begin, and certainly the scene between the Turkish actor and the young boy observing the film production represents where I’m positioned. I was heartened by the Turkish intellectual response to the film. I’ve also had a similar response to a joint project I did with the Turkish video artist Kutlug Ataman that premiered in Toronto at the Luminato Festival and then was invited to the Istanbul Biennale. The problem is that there are nationalists who just have a knee-jerk reaction without giving much time to the work. That’s just a result of our unfortunate history.

My work was represented at the Istanbul Film Festival quite early on with *The Adjuster* and *Exotica*, both of which received commercial distribution in Turkey. I toyed with the idea of going, but I wanted some assurance from the festival committees that I could enter the country and speak with a certain degree of openness. I never received confirmation...
that I could, for example, use the word genocide (although I remember a very open discussion with a Turkish journalist in Locarno that I found quite liberating). Even recently, with this current installation, I was asked to refrain from using the word genocide. I’m torn. On the one hand, I applaud the programmers’ decision to show the work. On the other, I find it difficult to censor myself and feel constrained under those circumstances.

RP: To move from political constraints at festivals to more absurd confrontations – I recall a New York Film Festival Q & A for your film of *Krapp’s Last Tape* where the notoriously nasty John Simon asked a string of obnoxious questions. That must be disconcerting for a filmmaker.

AE: I was there one year with my composer, Mychael Danna and he made the most wilting comments. I think it was the year that Mychael had composed the music for *The Ice Storm* and John Simon asked about how he felt about substituting ‘exotic bells and whistles’ for a soundtrack (laughs). He said it with the utmost casualness. With *Krapp’s Last Tape*, as I recall, he asked why I made the most boring possible interpretation of that play. But it’s all a bit of a performance for the benefit of a room full of other journalists. You become a bit hardened after a while.

RP: In the final analysis, how would you sum up the pluses and minuses of the festival experience?

AE: Given that I now have a body of work, I’d say that the festival circuit has been essential to introducing the public to that work. I’d say that, for certain types of films, festivals have become perhaps the only form of distribution. They were once seen as launching pads for films that might be picked up by a network of smaller distributors interested in experimental or offbeat work. But because of the financial precariousness of theatrical distribution for many films that should be seen on a large screen, the festival might be in fact the only form of distribution. For this reason, festivals have perhaps become even more valuable. For filmmakers who, for example, employ long takes and a certain leisurely rhythm, they deserve the best projection possible. And a good festival can at least offer optimal projection – if not the guarantee of commercial distribution.