In this chapter, we move from a discussion of Montréal's identity to an exploration of cities with very different histories. Robert Lepage's *Le Confessionnal* (1995) and Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica* (1994)—set in Québec City and Toronto, respectively—expand on gender roles and sexual identities. As their representation of gay characters demonstrated, Canadian cinema was offering an expanded view of masculinity well before mainstream American cinema did with the release of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). One could argue that Canadian cinema's marginality in the Canadian box office worked to its advantage, encouraging innovation that allowed it to move ahead of the commercially oriented cinema of Hollywood. Gender roles and identities have indeed evolved significantly in the postmodern era. In particular, gay culture and its male and female identities have been culturally repositioned and normalized among
certain sectors of the population, especially the urban middle class. Montréal, Vancouver, and Toronto—Canada’s main centres of film production—are all home to large gay communities. Auteurs who choose to highlight gay characters in their films are drawn to narratives in which gay cultures both collide and co-exist with straight cultures. The result can be a complicated characterization that situates sexual orientation within a multifaceted discussion of class, generation, language, and religion, as well as nationality and ethnicity.

Some critics consider identifying a director’s non-normative sexual orientation to be stigmatizing or ghettoizing the directors and his or her work; they therefore challenge the discussion of the relationship of an auteur director’s sexual orientation to his or her films. They fear that discussing this topic leads to a labelling or categorization that somehow marginalizes or discounts the director or the work and wraps all the director’s art in a sexual identity label. They argue that discussion of sexual orientation may distract from a full appreciation of the work; sometimes they even claim that one’s sexual orientation is irrelevant to art and that any discussion of it suggests a homophobic tendency on the part of the critic.

This chapter argues against this interpretation, while acknowledging that there is a valid basis for this concern, considering some of the homophobic attitudes that persist in mainstream society. However, the fear of oversimplistic labelling (and therefore dismissal of the artist’s abilities) leads to ignoring what I consider to be a valid influence on a filmmaker’s art. Precluding discussion of the influence of an auteur’s sexuality on a film while approving discussion of the filmmaker’s gender or nationality or class background is highly selective and restrictive. As I have made clear from the beginning of this book, a filmmaker carries numerous identities at any one time and these identities interact with one another and influence each other in the production of the filmmaker’s art. No one influence is more important or valid than any other. When a filmmaker is formed by a certain national culture, a certain class background, a certain religious tradition, or a certain familial experience—as have the filmmakers like Arcand and Lauzon, discussed earlier—the influence of these backgrounds on a work should not be ignored. When expressing an authentic narrative as an auteur, a filmmaker is communicating what is within to the audience. Robert Lepage’s Le Confessionnal (1995) fits this framework very well. It deals with Québec’s emphasis on the traditional
family and the challenges that this presents to a gay son in the 1990s. Lepage’s style of film imagery is sophisticated, theatrical, and cinematically expressive. The powerful blend of dream and reality challenges traditional morality and its consequences. *Le Confessionnal* is also a nuanced film in that it deals with exploitation within gay relations, thereby normalizing gay life within the community rather than simply valorizing or idealizing the film’s characters. It also locates gender on a continuum of possibility: it has a male lead who is presented as being asexual or whose sexual identity is indeterminate and a gay prostitute who has fathered a son through a heterosexual relationship. In this way, the film reflects not only queer theory’s emphasis on sexual continuities for all human beings but also the importance of gay characterization in cinema as fundamental to the contemporary cultural process of making diverse sexual orientations normative.

In contrast, Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica* (1994) offers a symbolic and diffident treatment of its gay character, whose sexual orientation contributes to his being viewed as an “outsider,” an observer of and reluctant player in the traumas of heterosexual society. Egoyan uses the protagonist’s gay identity as a metaphor for the outsider nature of his own ethnicity. This conflation of sexual orientation and ethnicity makes reading the film more complicated. Superficially, Egoyan’s gay character is more hesitant and less straightforward, or “out,” than Lepage’s. Both films are about hiding and keeping secrets, but the revelatory process, the unmasking of the mystery, is clearer in *Le Confessionnal* because the metaphorical burden carried by the protagonist in *Exotica* adds a layer to the representation. The fictional persona in each film is different, yet the characters’ roles as “detectives” solving their respective mysteries position them as the lens through which the audience is forced to engage in the narrative. So the audience comes to identify with the gay characters rather than with the clearly straight ones, who are presented as highly flawed and problematic. In both films, the protagonists are clearly coded as individuals who are Other to the hetero-normative world. They play the role of the outsider who can reveal the secrets of the dominant heterosexual society and its self-valorizing myths such as the sanctity of the traditional family.

The gay characters in both films are rooted in the imagination of the auteur directors. Lepage, a gay auteur, has created a gay character, and Egoyan, a heterosexual auteur, has done the same. The attribution of similarities and
differences in their gay characterizations and whether these have anything to do with the sexual orientations of the auteurs is best dealt with through a full exegesis of each film. In the previous chapter, I argued that in three particular films that involved female leads, those created by two female auteurs were cinematically more successful as gender portrayals for contemporary audiences than the one created by the male auteur. This chapter continues the discussion of authorship.

A TALE OF TWO FILMS, TWO CITIES, TWO NATIONS, AND TWO MEN

Exotica and Le Confessionnal are both centred on the dramas and tragedies of heterosexual family history. Exotica is a film about internalized human suffering and heterosexual familial dysfunction. Its narrative flow requires some flashbacks, which are minimal and infrequent, so that the mystery can be sustained until the end. For Egoyan’s story to be told, the past must remain hidden in the same way that the characters have repressed it psychologically within themselves. Le Confessionnal, in contrast, is more playful and intertextual because of its self-referential source in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1952 film, I Confess, which, like Le Confessionnal, was largely filmed in Québec City. Lepage’s treatment of the past is seamless and constant so that the story is presented as a single, integrated narrative in which the visual present (1989) is regularly and necessarily informed by the visual past (1952). In this way, the film portrays a single consciousness informed by a lifetime of experience. Lepage melds time through a tracking shot that blends a location seamlessly from one period to another, producing an illusion that temporal difference has been eliminated. In her discussion of Le Confessionnal, Monique Tschofen also points out how certain locations and figures mirror each other: “Characters in both the present and the past tense of the film haunt the same restricted locations. . . . Spaces also echo and recall one another. The confessional with its narrow space and Cartesian grid-like grill is recalled in everything from the elevator doors to shutters to private dancing booths in strip clubs to sauna ceilings.”

The film’s temporal crossover has a historical context, as explained by Bill Marshall: “The relationship between ‘now’ and ‘then’ takes place across the caesura of the Quiet Revolution, with the priest-ridden, pious, but hypocritical
society of the 1950s replaced by the commercialism, hedonism, and moral fragmentation of the 1980s and 1990s.” Yet there remains in the film a profound sense of continuity, of a single society carrying its legacy on its shoulders. The concept of a culture leaving a legacy refers to the continuing relevance or adoption of the content of that legacy into contemporary forms of the culture. So even though Catholicism has a more limited social influence in the film’s present, 1989, than it did in 1952, it clearly remains a force, albeit in a different guise. In some cases, one could argue, a facet of culture has more power as a legacy than it did in its original incarnation. This may be one of the viewpoints that Lepage wanted the film to express.

*Le Confessionnal* was Lepage’s debut feature film. As writer and director, he was honoured for the film at the Genies with awards for Best Film, Best First Feature Film, Best Director, and Best Cinematography. The film has been described as expressing a “search for meaning/truth . . . in a world increasingly fragmented, complex, and overwhelming.” The search involves Pierre Lamontagne (Lothaire Bluteau, of *Jésus de Montréal*) returning for his father’s funeral in Québec City. He succeeds in finding his half-brother Marc (Patrick Goyette), who is alienated from the family and earns his livelihood as a sex worker. The story of Marc’s falsified parentage unravels from that of a supposedly orphaned, illegitimate son of an unknown father and Pierre’s mother’s sister, who committed suicide after he was born, to a realization that Pierre and Marc are half-brothers: their father had an affair with his wife’s sister and never acknowledged his paternity of Marc. Interwoven with this contemporary story is a fictionalized treatment of Alfred Hitchcock’s making of *I Confess* in Québec City in 1952, during which the father of the two men, Paul-Émile Lamontagne (François Papineau), works as a cabbie driving the director around and members of the family audition for parts in the film. Lepage’s film becomes a reflection of Hitchcock’s film in terms of both its title and its moral plot.

Although Egoyan also deals with *Exotica’s* characters in both the present and the past, he does so in a more linear way than Lepage. Yes, the present is bound by the past in *Exotica*, but in Lepage’s world the past is also constrained by the games of memory. In *Exotica*, the past is replayed in the present as its characters persist in the same ritualized patterns, while in *Le Confessionnal* there is progress toward a kind of religiously themed reconciliation. While
both films engage with family secrets and the trauma of death in contemporary urban life, they do so in different ways, reflecting distinctive authorship. The denial of true identity is at the core of both narratives, but that denial results in different conclusions. Every identity in these films is informed by a personal history that is painful, exploitive, and unnerving, but *Le Confessionnal* ends, like Arcand’s *Jésus de Montréal*, with a strong sense of hope and moral victory, while *Exotica* ends, like Lauzon’s *Léolo*, in hopelessness and defeat. Likewise, *Exotica*’s portrayal of Thomas (Don McKellar), the gay pet-store owner, differs dramatically from the persona of Marc (Patrick Goyette), the gay hustler in *Le Confessionnal*, who is tormented by his identity as a sex worker and his personal history as an adopted son. Reluctantly, he joins his brother Pierre (Lothaire Bluteau), whose sexual orientation is both indeterminate and unimportant, in unravelling the secret of his own paternity. The construction of Marc as the tormented Other is more overt in *Le Confessionnal* than is the construction of Thomas in *Exotica*. I believe these differences have their roots in the different lives and experiences of the directors.

Lepage’s film has been noted for its use of some specific autobiographical elements, such as his growing up with adopted siblings, which give it an underlying coherence and authenticity. While Egoyan’s film has been praised for its symbolic richness and innovative acting style that bespeaks general urban alienation, its autobiographical sources are more generalized and metaphoric. The difference in cultures of Lepage and Egoyan, informed by nationality and language (Québec/French and Canada/English) and ethnicity (Québécois and Armenian), is a preliminary factor in distinguishing the work of these two male auteurs, but there are others as well—specifically, class and religion. The ideological constructions of radically different urban centres—Québec City in *Le Confessionnal* and Toronto in *Exotica*—raises issues of how cultural environments and inherited identities influence the artistic self-expression of auteurs.

A city’s formative role in a filmmaker’s life varies with the filmmaker’s specific experiences and memories of a certain city—its sense of freedom or lack thereof, its range of possibilities or its restrictions. The autobiographical element openly acknowledged by Lauzon in *Léolo* is matched in *Le Confessionnal*. “Lepage grew up in a bilingual, blended household,” writes Peter Dickinson, “the biological French-speaking son of working class parents who had previously adopted two anglophone children. . . . Lepage’s bicultural
upbringing [has] been incorporated into the complicated family dynamics and sibling rivalries at the core of most of Lepage's films.\textsuperscript{5}

The theme of adoption and unacknowledgement, the mood of mystery and foreboding, and the sense of “blending” images, identities, time periods, historical fact, and personal memory are major threads in \textit{Le Confessionnal}. There is also a cultural project in Lepage's film that is centred on the role of Quévèc City in Quévècois identity, both previous and current. For Lepage, Quévèc City as the traditional signifier of a certain Eurocentric, francophone “purity” becomes a framework for all kinds of otherness—national, linguistic, and gendered. The city offers a significant space for the filmmaker to present an alternate viewpoint: he brings in a contrasting 1950s Anglo-American factor and uses Hollywood as the signifier of a rootless cosmopolitanism that feeds on other cultures. Scott MacKenzie calls the film “a meditation of the relationship between cinema, memory, and identity.”\textsuperscript{6} Lepage, having grown up in a nontraditional Quévèc family, embraces his past by using Hitchcock's \textit{I Confess} film project as a pretext and making his own version of that film. He makes it in French, using imaginary autobiographical links (for example, Lepage's real father did not drive cab for Hitchcock) and a deconstruction of the clerical persona central to Hitchcock's film. \textit{I Confess} was made under the strictures of the Catholic hierarchy of the province, which demanded that it approve the script before it would allow filming on church property. \textit{Le Confessionnal} was not. Lepage incorporates a re-creation of the making of the 1952 film into his film, set in 1989, and insists that the perspective of a native son on the same topic updates our understanding of Quévèc while still validating Hitchcock's depiction of Duplessis-era life. His perspective is completely postmodern in its articulation—each person has multiple, layered identities and nothing is as it seems on the proverbial surface—while Hitchcock's film is imbued with the clarity of modernism in which a priest was an idealized figure.

Lepage's film \textit{defamiliarizes} the past, rids it of stereotypes (other than to satirize them), and inscribes the present with a pastiche of characters with conflicting identities who pursue their journeys on divergent paths. The personal identity crises in Lepage's film become a commentary on the instability of imagined collective identities. Lepage shows how once secure and stable historical selves, created through ideology, can dissipate under the pressure of all kinds of otherness. He cleverly links the personal and the public in his film,
showing how the specific identity of Québec City in the 1950s was already a disturbed reality—completely enthralled by Hollywood and its power, which offered a counternarrative to the reactionary ideology imposed by the clerical state—and was embraced by the population. In fact, one could argue that Lepage portrays cinema as a Trojan horse that brings the outside world to fortress Québec. The excitement of having “Hollywood” come to town, as Lepage constructs it in the film, undermines the superficial piety of the characters of the 1950s, who are presented as already torn between their native religiosity and the appeal of Hollywood glamour, so often condemned by their clergy.

In contrast to Lepage, the native son, Egoyan is a double immigrant: an immigrant to Canada (Victoria) but also a migrant to Toronto, where he has forged an impressive film career. Like Lepage, whose film is a blended Anglo-French challenge to francophone singularity, Egoyan brings his own challenge to Canadian nationality. As an Armenian Canadian, he can reflect on the problem of the exotic Other as articulated by European culture. Le Confessionnal uses the theme of adoptive identities to challenge family myths and to pay homage to three internalized and interwoven elements: one’s home city, the art of cinema itself, and homosexuality. Exotica parallels this move by also using the theme of adoptive identities to express ethnic, racial, and sexual diversity in a way that configures these identities as a threat to the mythology of the heterosexual status quo. But Egoyan’s approach has a different focus. While Lepage’s protagonist is shown to be closely tied to his family identity as he purposefully unravels its secrets, Egoyan’s outsider is a figure who floats without a family and sees the traditional family as a false construct. It may be that as a Québec filmmaker, Lepage needs to engage the myth of the francophone, traditional, Catholic family as the wellspring of Québec’s identity and reveal its forgotten diversity (and perversity), while Egoyan does not have to face a similar Anglo-Protestant family myth in his Toronto story because he was not part of it originally. What he sees in his adoptive city of Toronto is diversity, which would not have been the case in Toronto in the 1950s but was real in the 1980s, when Egoyan arrived. While all of Exotica’s characters are connected sociologically, they are all disconnected psychologically. Egoyan’s Toronto is an urban space filled with strangers who cannot or will not communicate with each other. The revelatory aspect of Egoyan’s film does not change the behaviour of its characters. Fundamentally, Egoyan presents us with a world fixated
on a past identity that is now only a re-enacted dream: it is no longer real and so remains disconnected from the present. Lepage, in contrast, gives his audience an otherness that offers hope, responsible love, and justice. The familial in Egoyan’s film remains broken and in perpetual pain. The familial in Lepage’s film embarks on a new definition that is inclusive of diverse configurations and structures. Lepage writes as an insider exploring his own past, while Egoyan writes as an outsider, watching a society that is strange to him.

In spite of their differences, the two films both engage in powerful dialogues on the theme of masculinity. In the case of *Exotica*, both heterosexual and homosexual masculinities are shown to be problematic. Every significant male character in the film is wounded in one way or another. Each one suffers from the secrets that he carries. The female characters are equally wounded when they come under male influence. In *Le Confessionnal*, the power struggle between the brothers as they embark on solving the mystery of Marc’s paternity leads to Marc’s suicide, while the accusatory dialogue between Pierre and Marc’s sexual exploiter about Marc’s death defines masculinity as a moral battle. The women portrayed in *Le Confessionnal* also face suicide because of the destructive mores imposed by society. In both films, the theme of a troubled masculinity drives the narrative. Both filmmakers use profession, family roles, sexual orientation, and even happenstance to create male characters in conflict with themselves and the society around them. In Lepage’s case, the character is led to redemption; Egoyan’s character remains buried in obsessive behaviour.

**LE CONFESSIONNAL AND THE OTHERNESS OF THE PAST**

*Le Confessionnal*, a film about the vicissitudes of fatherhood, heterosexual and homosexual, begins with an opening streetscape much like Lauzon’s opening shot in *Léolo*, with a similar voice-over commentary about family locale. The voice-over presents the story autobiographically, as a first-person account. Lepage used the same shadowy, foreboding, black-and-white streetscapes and church interiors that Hitchcock used in *I Confess*, which thus serve as a visual and philosophical contrast to his own colour cinematography of the same locations using the same camera angles. The moodiness of black-and-white
cinematography that Hitchcock exploited in I Confess is measured against
the nuances of colour cinematography that Lepage used for the same period,
thereby suggesting that the scenes are the construction of a contemporary
memory.

Both I Confess and Le Confessionnal convey a sense of deep entrapment
in the past. For example, the ancestral home that Pierre returns to is vacant
after the death of his father and needs to be cleared of personal effects. Pierre
tries to cover up the past by painting the walls, but without total success: the
images that were once there return in a ghostly form. Pierre tries to give the
past a makeover while seeking out its hidden truths, but he is trapped inside
the family narrative and its characters, whom he cannot shake. Similarly,
Lepage is trying to repaint the Québec that Hitchcock created in his film, but
he cannot totally erase it, as shown by his inclusion of clips from the older film
within his film. Hitchcock’s film haunts Lepage’s film just as the past haunts
Lepage’s characters. The family home has to be replaced with a new structure
(in the film, it is a bridge) that leads to the future rather than the past. This was
reflected in Lepage’s own life when he developed a significant global practice as
a theatre artist, letting his film career lapse.

Pierre, the protagonist, is a penniless artist who arrives in Québec City
from a stint abroad and lands a job at the Château Frontenac, the castle-like
symbol of old Québec. He is a waiter in a bar, and it is through this job that he
finds Marc and Marc’s lover, a former priest who knows the story of Marc’s
paternity and is now a high government official. Trying to trace Marc leads
Pierre to Manon, a stripper who is the mother of Marc’s diabetic son. In his
menial job, Pierre moves through the innards of the Château, an architectural
symbol of Québec’s fortress-like identity, using narrow hallways, spiral stair-
cases reminiscent of psychological vertigo in film noir movies, and closed doors
to private rooms as he tries to uncover the secrets of this former world that is
hidden to him. The symbolic power of the Château is subverted by his going
inside and breaking into its secrets. Scott MacKenzie captures this mytho-
heroic quest when he refers to the film’s narrative as “labyrinthian.”

Most of the film is shot in interior spaces to reflect Pierre’s inner search;
the few external scenes are of the streets in the old city below the Château and
the suburban emptiness near a motel on the wrong side of the tracks, which
establish contrasting atmospheres expressive of class divisions and the tension
between public image and private lives. Lepage’s primary construction of urban space is one of rooms—rooms in the family house, rooms in the hotel, rooms in the motel—but the film also contains certain interior church scenes. Although these are locations we can relate to, they do not express the fullness of urban life. Instead, they are meant to capture the claustrophobic “confessional” universe of the narrative and the labyrinthian psychology underlying the narration of sins. Québec City serves as a metaphor for a whole society rather than as a unique urban space that needs to be defined and articulated. Kevin Pask, writing at the beginning of the new millennium, called Lepage a “high cultural emblem” of the new internationally oriented Québec; as a filmmaker, he was redefining Québec’s identity as supranational.9 Le Confessionnal can be read as one of those phases through which he stepped in order to relate his being Québécois with global high art.

In addition to the Château and the row house of his childhood, an important urban location in Le Confessionnal is the Sea Horse bath house, where Pierre goes in search of Marc in order to entice him to return to the family home. His search through the labyrinth of cubicles becomes a symbolic maze filled with old men, who represent the past that he is trying to expose. When he finally corrals Marc in the steam room, their discussion, like their blood relationship, is clouded by mist. The gay bath house is reflected in another problematic urban entity—the low-end motel, where Marc’s son is being cared for by his stripper mother. Symbolically placed on the “other side of the tracks,” the motel is another substitute “home,” like the Château is for the former priest Raymond Massicotte (Normand Daneau) and the former family home is for Pierre. Each of these structures has numerous rooms, where private lives are hidden and family secrets abound. The secrets of the Lamontagne family are convoluted and dysfunctional, just as the three main buildings in the film are confusing internally while maintaining a facade of normality and propriety from the street. Each place is home to unsanctioned relations, while preserving the pretense of functioning as a high-end hotel or a working-class home. Social acceptance and public functionality are the opaque walls that Pierre must see through.

Lepage’s narrative is a Cain and Abel parable. Although Pierre cares for Marc (Abel), his unrelenting search for the truth of Marc’s paternity culminates in Marc’s death, indicating that even the best intentions carry the biblical
mark of Cain. This religious allusion is enhanced by the parable of the Prodigal Son: Marc first seems to signify the prodigal while Pierre represents the dutiful son returning to fulfill his familial duties to his father. But the narrative indicates they are both alienated from the father because of the lies they have been forced to live. These mixed biblical allusions are indicative of the Christian culture in which Lepage grew up and which marks Québec society, even in its current secular phase.

The linkages among the father figure, the priest figure, and the two conflicted brothers are captured in the French words for each identity that seem to resonate with each other—père (father) and frère (brother), and even prêtre (priest), because a priest is normally addressed as “Father,” or “Père.” Father, brother, and priest are all masculine roles within Catholicism, but the gender identity of all the key males, other than the heterosexual father, is gay (Marc and Raymond) or possibly gay (Pierre). Added to this masculine lineup is the patriarchal figure of Alfred Hitchcock, who adds another layer of authorial masculinity to the narrative. When black-clad Hitchcock “acts” as a “confessor” to Pierre’s father in a cab ride in Lepage’s “Confession,” he becomes entwined with the priestly role of both films: his original and Lepage’s remake. The priest, like Hitchcock the filmmaker, is a figure of authority. The links among priesthood, maleness, and celibacy as a touchstone of the old Québec are skilfully deconstructed by Lepage when Raymond, who was initially suspected of having illicitly fathered Marc when he was a young priest, reappears in the film as an aging homosexual using his wealth and power to prey on Marc. Lepage’s deconstruction of traditional values associated with the Duplessis era in Québec, combined with his placing Hitchcock’s anti-Québec Hollywood universe in Québec, is a form of historical revisionism that undermines the complacent homogeneity of the past. That homogeneity is further challenged by Pierre’s previous life of art study in China and, finally, by Marc’s suicide in Japan. Asia becomes the site of difference and otherness, a global presence that Québec requires in order to expand its identity. These “other geographies” are the escape routes from the insular, claustrophobic Lamontagne family of the 1950s, whose working-class patriarch never left Québec City but whose sons have. It is their home, but they are now foreign to it because the foreign represents their search for freedom and a flight from heterosexual traditionalism.
Biblical allusions permeate this film in a more obvious manner than in *Lèolo* because of the priestly allusion, but less obviously than in *Jésus de Montréal*, whose Passion-play structure is transparently Christian. Lepage's selection of 1989 for the present in *Le Confessionnal*, the same year *Jésus* was released (and in which Lepage appeared in a minor role), cannot be considered a coincidence. Lepage is commenting on Québec's religious identity, on the power of its symbols, and on how a society that has been secularized continues to see itself through the iconography and symbolism of its previous self. The role of the transformed family in *Jésus* is echoed in the reborn family at the end of *Le Confessionnal*, which has resolved into Pierre and his late half-brother's son. The new family of the postmodern present is configured as a male universe of a man and a boy, which stands in contrast to the extended heterosexual family of the 1950s represented in the film. The symbolic bridge crossing at the end of the film suggests a new beginning, a fresh start, a trajectory unburdened of a deceitful past. As his artistic career attests, Lepage is much more a citizen of the world than were the filmmakers of Arcand's generation.10

While religion and gender identities are central to *Le Confessionnal*, class is another key identifier. It begins with the working-class reality of the Lamontagne family, whose father “moves up” to a position as a taxi driver, away from blue-collar factory work. Even though the family views a service job at the Château as a better alternative to taxi work, it is Pierre, a generation later, who actually “achieves” that position. And it is the character of Pierre who represents Lepage in the film. Pierre’s artistic self is equated with Lepage as a filmmaker and theatre director. In general, the artist is self-employed, as is a taxi driver who depends on fares, so Pierre is simply continuing his father’s role.

Working-class realities are reproduced when Pierre becomes a waiter at the Château and Marc earns his living as a sex worker. Manon, the mother of Marc's son, is also a sex worker. All live a marginal economic existence, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation. In fact, the economic stability of the working class is portrayed in the film as having decreased over time, while those who had authority in the modernist era (the clergy) are shown to have made economic progress. Lepage uses iconic buildings in the film to codify class. The Château represents wealth and power; the motel represents the poverty and instability of the underclass; and the Lamontagne home, now empty, represents the solid working class and suggests its evisceration. Only
the “artist” role assigned to Pierre suggests escape from the working class. His waiter job is only temporary. It is not a career.

Another structure that has class overtones is the signature bridge in Québec City from which Marc’s mother threw herself after his birth and over which Pierre and the boy walk at the end of the film, signalling overcoming. This immense steel structure, much like the foundry in Léolo, is an expression of blue-collar sweat, of foundry, of mining, of an older industrial era. It is a stable human construct that connects two immovable shores and spans flowing water that represents the passage of time. At the start of the film, the narrator says (during a shot of the bridge) that “the past carries the present like a child on its shoulders.” This is what Pierre does at the end of the film: he is the past that carries the present when he puts the boy on his shoulders. The class nature of the bridge is part of the cultural text that also signifies Québec City as a historical reality and whose ideological framing rusts with time. The bridge, like the ideology it represents, ages because time, represented by the water that passes continually underneath, is always in motion, while the bridge is static.

“Film has elements of theatre, architecture and literature,” Lepage has said, “that play a part in the storytelling, a part that may well have more impact on the viewer than the story but not on a conscious level.” The references to the Château Frontenac, the motel, the family home, and now the bridge are the signifiers of the role of urban classes and their relationships to each other. This sociological dimension of the film is overshadowed by the importance of post-modern culture in relationship to the modernist past: in particular, the Québec City of Hitchcock’s film—clerical, conservative, and introspective. Lepage provides a looser reading of society in the Duplessis era because he does not view it monolithically, the way an outsider might experience it. As an insider, he knows the society is flawed, its facades filled with cracks. He provides a postmodernist subversion of the society and its ideology, while Hitchcock’s modernist world, some forty years earlier, is one of either/or binaries and conventional melodramatic elements. Hitchcock had to have his film script vetted by the Catholic clergy prior to filming, while Lepage’s film reflects the loss of that earlier power.

Jim Leach points out that Lepage “has acknowledged Michel Tremblay’s ritualistic plays about working-class Montreal as a major influence.” Tremblay’s dysfunctional family dramas set in Montréal have their roots in
both his working-class upbringing and his gay identity, which was subjected to a traditionally homophobic environment.

While *Le Confessionnal* acknowledges a separation between past and present, it also confirms the continuities between them. For example, in the ultimate scene in the film, the uncle and the nephew, who up to this point are two separate bodies, coalesce into one figure when Pierre lifts the boy onto his shoulders. The symbolic unity of the two stands as a bridge between the death of the boy’s grandmother in 1952 and the death of his father in 1989. What is valuable about the bridge as a symbolic structure is that it is an open, transparent reality, a place of passage rather than of hiding. What is on the bridge can be seen. While the singularity of the bridge implies the aloneness of orphanhood, the two shores that it links imply the parental or sibling binary. What Lepage has done is link the masculine world of fathers, sons, and grandsons with a bridge that the males in the film must walk across. Whatever “displacement” their bodies have experienced is now bridged. The gay Other is integrated into the common selfhood of the Lamontagnes and of Québec.

A sense of orphanhood can also be applied to the film: Québec society and culture were seen as orphaned (removed) from the modern era via *I Confess*, when Hitchcock presented Québec as a backward and clerically oppressed society. Christopher Gittings rightly claims that through this 1952 Hollywood film, Québec City was imaged negatively for a global audience because of Hollywood’s extensive power of representation. Of course, this public persona for Québec and Québec City was not historically “real” for 1952 because the film was based on a fictional work that was published at the beginning of the twentieth century, almost a half-century before the film was produced. Yet Québec was the only francophone political entity that still maintained such a massive clerical power so late in the twentieth century. Lepage is not blind to this legacy. He uses the conceit of Hitchcock’s film to comment on that legacy and what he considers its true identity.

The interplay in Lepage’s film of various desires in the past (Pierre’s mother wanting a baby but suffering from miscarriages and his aunt wanting her daughter to be in the Hitchcock film) with desires in the present (Pierre wanting to unravel the mystery of Marc’s patrimony) highlights the power of both past and present to inflate or deflate future possibilities. Intentionality and agency mix in mysterious ways in *Le Confessionnal*. The basic element in
forging a future is blindness, both to the potential effects of our actions and to their original sources. Monique Tschofen considers the theme of blindness to be the structuring principle of the film.\textsuperscript{15} There is the purported “blindness” of the priest to whoever is confessing; the blindness caused by diabetes, which links the males in the family; the blindness to the past, represented by Pierre’s repainting his father’s house; the blindness created by closed doors and closed minds; and finally, blindness as punishment in Greek tragedy. All of these are referenced in the film, in which blindness revolves around family secrets and how past, present, and future are captive to those secrets.

This theme of blindness can be extended to the city, where exteriors hide interior acts and words. All the spaces in the film are constricting and narrowing, just like the cobblestone streets of old Québec City. The cobblestones signify ancientness, the remnants of Europe in the New World—an inherent geopolitical doubleness, as Lepage sees Québec. Some wish to remember what was in order to affirm the distinctness of Québec, but this results in the preservation and valorization of falsehood—a 1989 present that is proud of having rejected the province’s Catholic-laden past but still sees that past as its essence. In an interview after the release of the film, Lepage said that the film deals with “a small family unit in a small city in a small province with a small population.”\textsuperscript{16} This emphasis on smallness as a defining characteristic of the subject of his film is meant to contrast with the bigness associated with Hitchcock, Hollywood, and our media-saturated and now digitally globalized world. The mythological associations in the film, whether biblical or classical Greek, are Lepage’s attempt to give the film at least a patina of epic grandeur. Lepage wants his story to be writ large through its contrast with a film by a recognized cinematic master. Yet Lepage also views \textit{Le Confessionnal} as historically superior because his film makes the audience “see” the earlier blindness of which Hitchcock provided only glimpses.\textsuperscript{17}

The impact of Lepage’s \textit{Le Confessionnal} on his Québec is comparable to that of Hitchcock’s \textit{I Confess} on an earlier Québec, which makes Lepage an important and creative cinematic figure, at least for the 1990s, while he was still making films. A major English-language interpreter of Lepage’s work is Aleksandar Dunderović, whose monograph, \textit{The Cinema of Robert Lepage: The Poetics of Memory}, is published in the Directors’ Cuts series; the series includes books about Wim Wenders, Ken Loach, George Romero, David Lynch, and
Andrzej Wajda, putting Lepage in excellent directorial company on par with Hitchcock. Dunderović provides a valuable biographical sketch of Lepage's bicultural family life in the heart of monocultural Québec City. Both parents were fluent in English, and they adopted anglophone children prior to the birth of their own, thus creating a space for valuing difference. Dunderović claims that this familial bilingualism “meant that he was marginalised because of his family otherness.” It may also have led to Lepage’s view that the “smallness” of Québec created an incestuous atmosphere for an artist, who requires external influences to flourish. Dunderović makes a startling revelation about the autobiographical connections of the film: “Lepage’s sister and manager had to prevent him from making a film that would severely expose his own family,” so the script underwent “a number of changes since its first version.”

*Le Confessionnal* is a postmodern allegory on gender roles, class, and religion told with the confidence of a classical Greek tragedian. Its urbanity is bi-historical (the passage from the “Dark Ages” of Duplessis to the secularism of the new Québec), psychological (family traumas) and architectural (the iconic structures referencing the city itself), but it is also associated with the Catholicism of Québec City and with issues of gender, sexual orientation, and class. The spatiality and visuality that Lepage gives this “small city” tends toward the claustrophobic in physical and psychological ways, but his seamless interplay of the recreated shadowy world of black-and-white film noir represented by *I Confess* with the tantalizing colours of his period scenes and the contemporary period is such that we are seduced into a visually enchanting filmic universe of storytelling. The film works its magic by imitating our own thought processes as they compress, expand, and recreate time, space, speech, and personality.

The claustrophobic character that Lepage gives the city comes from the films extensive use of interior shots, reflective of the “hiding” that occurs within history and family narrative. From the outside, the Château Frontenac depicts a castle-like stability and properness, while inside its rooms all manner of activities occur hidden from prying eyes. This theme of the hidden is an equally powerful driver in Atom Egoyan’s portrayal of family life in *Exotica*, but Egoyan’s film lacks Lepage’s profound sense of the historical. Lepage has created a film that “explores the allure of otherness” in all its manifestations: the otherness of Hollywood to Québec and now the global world, of the past
to the present, of gay to straight, of classical cinema to contemporary cinema, and so forth. In Egoyan’s film, otherness is not as alluring. Why? Because it is tied to psychological trauma and personal obsession rather than to history and society. Egoyan’s world is burdened by an oppressive fantasy and immovable unreality, while Lepage’s world is one of history finding liberation.

**EXOTICA AND THE OTHERNESS OF MEMORY**

*Exotica* was completed at about the same time as *Le Confessionnal*, so it shares the same mid-1990s ethos. In both films, common discursive binaries (male-female, old-young, past-present) meld into each other, stereotypes fade away and then reappear in different forms, and a diversity of viewpoints is presented for the audience’s attention and reflection. To undermine the linearity of narrative, Egoyan creates an intertextual universe in which normative cultural meanings dissipate. *Exotica* concluded a youthful auteuristic period for Egoyan and brought him a certain degree of renown. Some fifteen years after the film’s initial release, the Canadian film scholar and critic William Beard described the film as being Egoyan’s “masterpiece to date,” even though he has produced a number of successful films since, including *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997; an adaptation of a Russell Banks novel of the same name), which won several Genie Awards and was nominated for two Academy Awards, Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay. Nevertheless, *Exotica* had better gross sales than *The Sweet Hereafter*. There is something about *Exotica* that leaves the audience with a haunting feeling. I suspect the difference between the American-inspired *The Sweet Hereafter*, with its victorious narrative closure, and *Exotica* is the latter’s sense of pervasive dysfunction and despair, more commonly associated with Canadian than American dramatic films.

Egoyan grew up an immigrant in the heavily anglophile city of Victoria, British Columbia. His Armenian heritage and Egyptian birthplace ensured an ethnic—that is, minority—cultural background for his films that was distinct from the cultural mainstream of francophone and anglophone Canada. Egoyan’s transnationality differs substantially from Lepage’s career-acquired sense of globalized artistic identity with strong links to Québec’s francophone majority culture. For an artist, the concept of transnationality suggests more
than just a possession of multiple national identities. It represents an active attempt by the artist to work across or over or through various national identities. Egoyan did make one film on the Armenian genocide of World War I, which reflected his Armenian roots. The remainder of his work is strongly tied to Canada, so he cannot be considered transnational in the way that a Canadian filmmaker like Deepa Mehta is transnational. Mehta has made her major films in and about India, which is her birthplace. Egoyan’s reputation has put him in the top echelons of Canadian filmmaking (along with David Cronenberg and Denys Arcand), which confirms the importance of the ethnic/national element in distinguishing his work. Transnational filmmakers, who work in the context of a national cinema, carry an active awareness of otherness to the national cinemas with which they are engaged. In an interview with Hamid Naficy while Exotica was being made, Egoyan spoke of the “cultural baggage” that separates him “from the dominant community.” An auteuristic expression of another culture challenges the dominant ideological constructs of Canadian society by substituting the lens of that culture and the experiences associated with it within Canada. Filmic discourses like Egoyan’s ensure that postmodern hybridity informs mainstream Canadian cinema and its construction of the urban sphere. These discourses affirm that otherness in a multitude of forms is part of any national identity that is polyphonic and multicultural. Lepage could deconstruct Québec’s ideological foundations, but he had to work within its cultural constructs. Egoyan was born an outsider and had to assimilate to different cultural norms, which located him for a time in a certain marginalized social space. It was his Armenian heritage that he found “exotic.” Referring to his Armenian and Anglo background, he told Naficy, “I’m really somewhere between those two.”

Egoyan situates the ethnocultural conflicts in the film in Toronto, which was at the time of the film’s making (and is even more so now) Canada’s most culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse city. Like Arcand migrating to Montréal as a youth, Egoyan migrated from insular Victoria to Toronto as a youth. Both went to “the big city” with the goal of getting an education. Exotica is immersed in a disturbing psychological moodiness generated by its signature “exotic” Middle Eastern musicality, its transgressive sexual symbolism, and its unrelentingly slow-moving, teasing pace, comparable to the gyrations of a provocative striptease. Naficy situates the film’s otherness in its “accented” nature.
In other words, Egoyan filmic language is not that of a native speaker. Naficy goes on to explain Egoyan’s accented style as coming from certain “looks, expression, postures, music” as well as “themes of and structures of absence and presence, loss and belonging, abandonment and displacement, obsession and seduction, veiling and unveiling.” Exotica is gritty and anguished, filled with characters with repressed and perverted inner selves whose psychological lives remain blocked and inaccessible throughout most of the story. While Lepage makes a sociological critique of elite wealth and power and portrays the economics of the working class with realism, Egoyan deals with money purely as a symbol that signifies a loss of human relationship. The ethnic Other experiences the monetary nexus as the predominant, neutral, communicative vehicle of the dominant culture. Every venue portrayed in the film is dominated by financial transactions, often involving rather petty amounts. These transactions signify a fundamental feature of Toronto’s urban relations, but they are not a commentary on class consciousness. The pet-store owner protagonist of the film comes from the same class as Egoyan’s immigrant family, that of the petit bourgeois storeowner.

Exotica is a film about two kinds of mirrors: those that reflect the personas offered to the world (how we try to look to others) and the one-way mirrors that allow unnoticed surveillance, supposedly capturing us in candid moments. The latter is meant to reflect the inherent voyeurism of the film-viewing experience. While Lepage uses stunning track shots to uproot time by flowing seamlessly from 1952 to 1989, Egoyan’s camera lingers on the pained and convoluted depths of the anguished human soul in a mood of unalterable eternity. This sense of stasis makes the audience feel uncomfortable, voyeuristic, and alienated from what is happening on the screen. While Lepage’s allegory of Québec history makes us marvel at his talent for connecting the personal story and public history, the Toronto that Egoyan constructs becomes a psychoanalytic couch, where he invites us to be both a patient and our own analyst. Lepage’s empathy becomes Egoyan’s alienation. Lepage’s narrative and technique offers the traditional illusion of hope for the audience, but Egoyan’s offers nothing of the sort. While Lepage builds associations in a dysfunctional family universe, Egoyan pushes us ever deeper into dysfunctionality and dissociation. In other words, Lepage’s urban narrative has an upward motion, while Egoyan’s holds us pinned to the ground, unable to move.
The plot of *Exotica* centres around a Revenue Canada auditor named Francis (Bruce Greenwood) who frequents the Exotica club to watch a young girl named Christina (Mia Kirshner), dressed in a school uniform, perform suggestive dances. Francis is doing an audit on a pet-store owner named Thomas (Don McKellar), who ends up being blackmailed by Francis into participating in his obsession at the strip club. The film features three other significant characters: Zoe (Arsinée Khanjian), who owns the club; the club's emcee, Eric (Elias Koteas), a former lover of Christina's and the father of Zoe's soon-to-be-born child; and finally, Tracey (Sarah Polley), who pretends to “babysit” Francis's deceased daughter while he is at the club. The intertwining of these strangers and employees in a web of sexual and psychological abuse is the core of the film.

*Exotica* is a highly urbanized film in its locales: a strip club, a pet store, an opera house, and an airport, all of which are integral to metropolitan areas. The only “at home” shots are flashbacks. For Egoyan, the urban person in primarily depicted in public space, where interacting with others means that private selves are protected from view, while, for Lepage, it is always private space that is important: urban life consists of individuals who pursue personal meanings and attachments, oblivious to the surrounding throng. In *Exotica*, the alienation produced by keeping up a pretense adds to the anonymity of the city, while in *Le Confessionnal* the city is overwhelmed by interconnected personal narratives, shared images, and troubling relationships. A good example of this from *Le Confessionnal* is the bartender at the Château Laurier, who, rather than being an impersonal figure who simply responds to customers’ requests (the bartender familiar from American films), is actually one of Pierre’s relatives, who gets Pierre a job at the hotel. The familial pervades *Le Confessionnal* in a conscious and overt manner—even in the most anonymous of urban locales, there is “the family”—whereas, in *Exotica*, the familial is broken and repressed. Lepage opens up family secrets to some sort of resolution; Egoyan leaves them mired in irresolution. The absence of genuine human connection is evident in the way that Egoyan associates ethnicity with strangeness and establishes the spirit of alienation as the basic oral and visual texture of *Exotica*. The protagonist’s pet store, the antagonist’s family home, and the nightclub where the two confront each other offer a public face, a false front, behind which dark and dirty secrets lie. Wherever the character of Thomas is present, he is constructed as an outsider, a stranger who does not feel...
comfortable where he is. He is an outsider at the airport when he arrives and is scrutinized by distrustful Canada Customs officials. As a gay man, he is an outsider in the strip club for heterosexual audiences. He is even a stranger to his own business venue, which he uses as a cover for smuggling activities. This retail store never has any customers. Obviously, it is his “wholesale” business of illegal breeding of species that is its essence. And at the opera, the strangeness continues: Thomas goes to the opera not for the performance but to pick up a sexual partner. Everything in which he is outwardly engaged is a false front, a mask that hides his real purpose and identity. Thomas is the perfect metaphor for the ethnic conundrum of maintaining dual or even triple identities, of not being oneself by projecting only what the society wants—or what the outsider thinks it wants—to see. Of course, when one is “audited” by the dominant society, as represented by Revenue Canada, the masks we live by are torn away and we, like Thomas, become vulnerable to blackmail.

The fictional lives of all the characters who inhabit Exotica have been described as “landscapes of devastation.” The main conflict is between Thomas, representing the Other, and Francis, representing the dominant society of Toronto. While the audience is immediately shown Thomas’s false front, Francis’s falseness is only revealed gradually. Egoyan is suggesting that the outsider is not as successful at hiding as is the insider. The faux lush interior of the Exotica strip club and the architectural elegance of the opera house simply mask the traumas and unorthodox uses they are put to by those who frequent them. Behind the walls of these buildings are hidden inner selves crying out for redemption from within an emotionally anguished universe.

By the time Exotica was made, Toronto had become the most multicultural, multietnic, and multiracial city in Canada. This is its postmodern face. That Francis is shown to have had a mixed-race marriage is an aspect of that demographic reality. Another is the range of nonwhite sexual partners that Thomas meets at the opera, including blacks and Aboriginals. While the main characters are white, they vary in terms of their “whiteness”: characters like Thomas and Zoe are presented as “off-centre” culturally, either through appearance or accent. They are “ethnicized” in contrast with the WASP personas of Francis and Christina, who have a common history in white middle-class Anglo society. In fact, the schoolgirl uniform that Christina wears for her striptease signifies elite private schooling associated with Anglo
dominance. Thomas and Zoe’s otherness puts them outside the circles of real power, whether private or state. Ethnicity keeps them at the level of small-business owners, immigrant entrepreneurs comparable to the Egoyan family in Victoria. However, the tensions, issues, and conflicts that are prominent in the film are centred not on the racialized minorities of Toronto but on the ethnicized ones. For example, in the opening airport scene, when the arriving Thomas is being watched through a one-way mirror, the white supervisor from Canada Customs is lecturing an African Canadian subordinate on how to spot smugglers. The ethnic smuggler—in this case, Thomas—goes undetected, which serves as a commentary on the false sense of knowledge that the supposed powers have and the dominant culture’s distrust of immigration and the entrance of “foreigners.” This foreign element evolves into an ethnic identity encoded with distrust and insecurity.

Sight is the dominant metaphor in the film. The film’s “scopic regime,” as Emma Wilson calls it, is linked to the role of mirrors through which the patrons of both the airport and the club are monitored and scrutinized. On the one hand, mirrors serve as a commentary on the voyeuristic nature of cinematic storytelling; on the other hand, they also suggest how the outsider feels in relationship to the wider society—under surveillance. Am I dressed correctly? Am I saying the right thing? How do I fit in? How do I stand out? A whole series of self-questioning attitudes come with being “accented.” The sense of being constantly on view and dealing with one’s desires to fit in are part of ethnic identity in Canada. The construction of the visualized social self is always problematic. But the visual is not the only signifier of foreignness.

Even before this opening scene, the soundtrack accompanying the opening credits signifies the Other as “exotic.” The score immediately establishes difference and distance by evoking the sounds of what was once called “the Near East” or “the Levant.” The music then blends with the exotic interiors of the club and even with the strange pet store containing empty fish tanks. The facades that are the “fronts” of the store and the club (the back rooms of both establishments is where the real power lies) represent the public faces of private lives. Egoyan, whose family owned a small business in Victoria, makes the owner of the Exotica a woman with an accent (Egoyan’s wife, also of Armenian descent, plays the role). The power of surveillance that the dominant society has is reciprocated by the ethnic in the small-business venue of the club, where the
patrons are being watched. While the term transnational offers the suggestion of equality by moving identity out of the national context, the term ethnic suggests the subordination that the immigrant has traditionally experienced within the Canadian social hierarchy. I would argue that Egoyan expresses more of an ethnic sensibility in this film than the transnational sensibility of someone like Deepa Mehta. Thomas, the owner of a pet store filled with exotic species, represents the attractively foreign, something unusual, desired, and expensive.

When Francis, after being kicked out of the strip club, forces Thomas to become a player in his revenge plot, one gets a sense of how the ethnic views himself. Thomas is pulled into the machinations of the dominant society against his will. He knows that he does not belong and that this involvement will not go well for him. This message makes Exotica “a really postmodern” film, as critic William Beard observes, because it insists on “multiple and divergent views . . . de-verifying identity and memory, and dissolution of the ground of any possible stable ‘truth.’” Ethnic truth, in this case, is the truth of the outsider, who has adopted a diasporic identity. Doing so means surrendering an original identity and assuming another, an act that turns the former identity into a recessive gene, a memory. In Egoyan’s case, his upbringing was so totally Canadian that only occasionally was he reminded of his roots. The family even changed their name from Yehogyan to Egoyan for ease of pronunciation in the new society. The ethnic impulse is to delete what would be interpreted as exotic.

In an interview with film scholar Cynthia Fuchs, Atom Egoyan described the exotic as “something outside our immediate experience . . . the exoticism of race, the exoticism of music . . . the exoticism of sexual icons.” Ultimately, the exoticism he finds associated with himself in Canada simply adds to his own sense of otherness and of not fully belonging. Exoticization can turn into self-alienation if the ethnic mentality adopts the dominant cultural mores with their colonizing or racist history. In contrast, the alienation that Lepage explores in Le Confessionnal is not a form of self-alienation. Pierre, who is the counterpart to Egoyan’s Thomas and represents the author, is a coherent, centred individual who has the psychological strength to explore an unhealthy family secret and work his way through the issue without being destroyed. Egoyan’s fictional universe is one of perverse psychological entrapment from which there seems to be no escape because of the inability of the characters to
confront their neuroses and game playing. While Pierre offers a hopeful resolution in the narrative closure of *Le Confessionnal*, the truth having made him free, Francis’s sick universe continues. Egoyan makes it clear that the “hiding” that Thomas engages in as a smuggler of “exotic” eggs is petty compared to the hiding engaged in by Francis, which is profoundly imprisoning.

*Exotica* is filled with interiority that is in one way or another a place of fantasy, suggesting that the places we inhabit are indeed more fantasy than reality. Thomas’s pet store is filled with walls of fish tanks bathed in a greenish-purple light: they appear to be covered with a dirty film. It is unlike any real pet store because it is only a metaphor for the exotic—the nontransparency of otherness, which is constructed to obscure rather than reveal. Members of the dominant society view ethnicity as the realm of the opaque, the invisible, and the incomprehensible on which they can project their repressed, primarily sexual, fantasies. Egoyan’s characters are all involved with falseness that obscures, suggesting strongly that everyone in a society is nontransparent and infected with secret lives that are concealed only through hard work. Francis—the father who failed to protect his daughter from kidnapping, rape, and death—claims that he is protective of the dancer Christina, who is eventually revealed to have been his daughter’s babysitter before her abduction, but he is actually exploitive of her and her profession. He is living an obsessive fantasy in which Christina the dancer performs in a school uniform, which is what his daughter was wearing when she was discovered; this suggests an incestuous attitude. A younger version of Christina is the character of Tracey, the deceased daughter’s current “babysitter,” who performs a faux babysitting role when Francis goes to the strip club where Christina performs. The Exotica club represents indulgence in fantasy, and everyone is caught up in it. Christina deludes herself by claiming that she is providing the distraught and confused Francis with “therapy,” when in fact she is colluding in his psychological state. Everyone, ethnic and nonethnic, is corrupted in this story, and everyone plays false roles and mixed-up identities with alibis for their actions.

Eric, the emcee whose job it is to provide the fantasy voice-over commentary on the dancers for patrons of the club, sets up Francis for a fall because of the club’s “no touch” rule. The rule serves as a metaphor for film itself: touch the skin of the film, which is the theatre screen or the television screen, and the illusion that is being created disappears. The people projected onto it become
instantly unreal because tactility overcomes visuality and the suspension of disbelief. The audience’s normal engagement with the film is challenged by Egoyan’s directorial insistence that the artificiality of acting be highlighted, that the performances by the characters be presented as suspect, as not representing a real person or one’s true self. The acting style he created for the actors is intended to make the audience aware of their own acting and their own immersion in and creation of illusion.

Every site in *Exotica*—pet store, opera house, and strip club—comes with a socially constructed meaning that Egoyan deconstructs because these sites are social masks that ethnic individuals experience as alien social constructs. In Egoyan’s hands, opera, the home of high art and civility, becomes a site of sexual transgression. The pet store, the site of childhood desires for animal companionship, becomes a place of intrigue, illegality, and blackmail. The strip club, constructed as a socially negative environment associated with exploitation, becomes a place of truth seeking, revelation, and therapeutic reconciliation. Every stereotype is turned upside down. Insight, Egoyan tells us, comes by uncovering the fantasies we have about places, either constructed by those sites themselves or imposed on them by social discourse. The public dialogue about them is radically different from their private meanings and uses. These two worlds, the public and the private, do not blend but live beside each other like two solitudes. They are strangers to each other. When Francis is thrown out on the street after touching Christina (the breaking of illusion), he is like Adam thrown out of the Garden of Eden or the citizen of an ancient Greek city-state who is exiled and so forfeits his identity. Eric, the biblical snake who misled him to do this misdeed, becomes the target of Francis’s hatred and desire for revenge. But there is no killing of Eric. The evil that resides within him has to be embraced and forgiven. Eric is just another side of Francis, whose life has been changed by the rape and murder of his daughter, because Eric, together with Christina, found the body. Now they work in the realm of pure illusion, projected by the patrons of the club.

One of the fascinating parallels between *Le Confessionnal* and *Exotica* is how sexuality is desexualized in both films. In *Le Confessionnal*, the prodigal son is a sex worker who is presented as being exploited by wealth, power, and age. The relationship he has with the former priest is troubling and demoralizing for him because it does not empower him. It contributes to his eventual...
suicide. The sexuality surrounding Marc’s son’s mother is also presented as demoralizing and degrading. There is nothing titillating about sexuality in the film. Likewise, the sexuality in *Exotica* is not highlighted in any sensual or romantic way. The gay sex in *Exotica* is presented as simple pleasure without any emotional entanglement. In contrast, heterosexual eroticism is shown to be troubled, confused, even malicious and psychotic. *Le Confessionnal* suggests that personal wounds can be healed once the “sin” is revealed, but in *Exotica*, the wounds continue to fester because the religious component is lacking. The lack of salvation suggests an entrapment that is inescapable. While the relations between the gay and straight worlds of *Le Confessionnal* are strong, in *Exotica*, they are highly charged, opaque, and tormented. Lepage’s representation of gay men as living within a professional continuum (celibate priest to gay government official) and as residing within the heterosexual family (as sons and as fathers of sons) makes the two sexualities complementary and integrative. They are a familial whole. But Egoyan’s gay character is a permanent outsider who is pulled into the morass of heterosexual relations and its familial dysfunctions under duress. This is why Thomas’s otherness is more illuminating of Egoyan’s own concerns about ethnic identity than it is about gay identity.

This major difference flows from the historicity that informs Lepage’s sensibility and the ahistoricity of Egoyan’s film. For Lepage, Québec City is a multigenerational and extended family for which time is of the essence, while for Egoyan, Toronto is a nuclear family traumatized by specific recent events that are timeless in their impact. Egoyan’s history in Toronto, in which he had lived for about fifteen years since coming to study at the University of Toronto, was wrapped up in becoming a recognized filmmaker. (This was his fourth auteur feature.) When he made *Exotica*, he was in his early thirties, a precocious young man far from his familial roots for whom the present overshadowed his past. While Lepage’s film creates an intertextual reference point with Hitchcock’s *I Confess* and so connects with an earlier era in Québec history and filmmaking, Egoyan stands outside Toronto’s historic identity, both as a stranger and a critic. He views the city as a conglomerate of personal presents, nothing more. All of these personal moments are presented as false ways of being in the world in the same way that cinema is “false.” What we experience in watching a film is not the reality of how it was made and its meaning to those who took part in making it, but the narrative mask that it is—its image.
The importance of role playing in *Exotica*, which is the essence of film acting itself, is discussed extensively by Catherine Russell in her gender-related article “Role Playing and the White Male Imaginary in Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica*.” Both Lepage and Egoyan fit into the “white male imaginary” category but in different ways, and they expand that category in terms of the cultural formations associated with sexuality, language, and nationality/ethnicity. The “emotional landscape of the city” is well portrayed by Egoyan, Russell concludes, because in his film, “ethnicity and race . . . become familiar features of urban Canadian life.” But although this is valid for Toronto, it is not characteristic of Québec City. In *Exotica*, the darkness and interiority that pervades the film is suddenly lifted in a flashback to a beautiful, sunlit, green field that is obviously rural or park-like and where Francis’s daughter’s body is discovered. As a visual and oral (speechless) site, it is the opposite of everything so far in the film; it is symbolic of an earlier, happier, more idyllic life for most of the characters, who are now trapped in the consequences of what was discovered that day. It was on that day that they (Eric, Christina, and Francis) were driven from their Edenic paradise.

A parallel scene in *Le Confessionnal* is the concluding scene, in which Pierre and his nephew, whom he has liberated from his addict mother, walk across the bridge with trees and nature in the background. They are walking to a new life, to a world beyond their past. They have a future together. In *Exotica*, the rural, idyllic scene is meant to represent a pivotal moment in time, now perverted by memory through Francis’s eroticized parody of his daughter brought to life through the costumed body of Christina, her former babysitter. There is no new life here, as is suggested at the end of *Le Confessional*, but only the reference to a constant replaying of the past, which is why the sun-drenched rural scene is so ironic. It signifies the new reality as being one of death and the past. Because the sunlit scene from the past leads us right back into the hopelessness of Francis’s mind, Peter Harcourt concludes that this “natural” scene subverts the meaning of the word *natural*: nature becomes unnatural in comparison to the psychological naturalness of urban life. The equation of psychological squalor with urban life is very powerful.

One can argue that the male-female relations in *Exotica* follow the pattern of heterosexual patriarchy: the film portrays the exploitive nature of sexually charged entertainment practices and alludes to incest, sexual abuse,
and infidelity within the heterosexual family. The performance scenes in the biker tavern in *Le Confessionnal* are not romanticized or exoticized the way the dancing is in *Exotica* (the perfect bodies, the lush decor, the sense of being an expensive place); rather, they are made crude, vulgar, and destructive. The Exotica club is not so much a site of degrading employment, as the tavern is, but a falsely constructed fantasy where no-touch rules are a fig leaf covering the eroticism and class-based fantasy that the place encourages. While men in suits inhabit the Exotica, it is bikers who frequent the tavern, and they have no illusions about what they see.

William Beard claims, with some justification, that *Exotica*’s “negotiation of its seductive maze of themes, tropes and situations” is a “virtuosic performance.”[^39] That performance is intricately tied to Egoyan’s own exploitation of the symbolic and the iconic. In *Le Confessionnal*, male-female relations are portrayed in the context of family history, without much character development compared to *Exotica*. Lepage portrays the social construction of roles in 1952 as quite different from the roles of 1989, but they are not ideal in either era. Likewise, 1952 has no overt gay aspects because everything is “closeted,” while gay characters are played as normal in the contemporary period. The film thus recognizes the historical evolution of gay liberation in the latter half of the twentieth century in North America in general. Toronto has the largest gay community in Canada, and having a gay character fits this specific Canadian urban scene. However, Egoyan’s use of the gay character as a metaphor for ethnic otherness is very different from Lepage’s use of gayness.

When we compare *Exotica* with *Le Confessionnal*, we can see that the categories of memory and the past intersect in the two films by having different kinds of otherness central to their narrative. The otherness of *Le Confessionnal* concerns a search for inclusiveness and reconciliation within the dynamics of family, while the otherness of *Exotica* is an exploration of an unbridgeable difference within the family structure. The characters’ power to integrate in *Exotica* is very limited: their urban sensibility is dark and wounded. It is a film about being in the closet rather than about coming out. The prime currency in *Le Confessionnal* is emotion, caring, and concern, while the prime currency in *Exotica* is either money or fantasy, both of which are expressions of alienation. Both filmmakers use their films to question dominant identities, but Egoyan goes further by suggesting that the way that identities are created, recreated,
and masked is fundamental to human beings. Identity is a construct that is always in play, constantly being modified within both individual consciousness and public perception.

For Canadian audiences viewing Exotica, there is a strong sense that Toronto is the urban centre in the film, but for non-Canadian audiences, it could be any major North American city. In this way, Egoyan can simultaneously reveal and hide his adopted city. One cannot say the same about Québec City, whose specificity is crucial to the unfolding of Le Confessionnal: the story makes the most sense in relationship to that city and its history, while Egoyan’s story could have been set in any major North American city.

EMBODYING OTHERNESS IN THE CITY

The embodiment of otherness in certain characters in each film creates radically different urban worlds. In Egoyan’s case, his exploration of “ethnicity, exile, and diaspora” results in an embodiment of “substitution,” “displacement,” and “translation or transference” in a recurring ritual of addiction that cannot be overcome—a cycle of eternal return filled with alienation and distress.40 Lepage’s film involves a fundamental reaching out to others that integrates both the characters and the audience into a common vision of the human community. While Francis fails to fill his inner void with the performed parody danced by Christina, Pierre wants to embrace his brother and heal the family sins, which he does. Thomas seems to meander through his life with small acts of self-interest and a sense of others’ needs, but he is always pulled by stronger forces emanating from the dominant norms of his adopted world. Compared to Pierre, he is not self-determining because he does not come from the dominant demographic. But this lack of self-determination and progress suffuses all of Egoyan’s ethnic characters in the film. Their fundamental lack of self-understanding leads to negative results. Nellie Hogikyan’s study of the “post-exilic imaginary” in Egoyan’s work emphasizes how his creation of “detachment” is a way of transcending “the paradigm of exile.”41 The filmmaker is “detached” from the narrative he has created, as well as from the film itself. Although he puts himself into the story, he also remains aloof from it. Hogikyan considers this the basic stance of a “post-national, post-nostalgic,
and post-ethnic positionality.” Hogikyan sees in Egoyan’s art a strategy for dealing with outsider status. Distancing oneself from a particular situation suggests that the otherness that anyone feels is embodied in a self-image or self-constructed identity (a fantasy) that results from the self’s constant and fundamental reading of itself only in relationship to others who have more power. When Egoyan reads strangeness as a fantasy created by the dominant elements in society, he is able to deconstruct its power. The Other is always a fantasy. This postmodernist strategy is also present in Le Confessionnal when Lepage highlights and normalizes the gay presence as integral to Québec society. The gay identity of each character is not exoticized in any way. They are all part of the Québec family as equal members. The only event exoticized in Le Confessionnal is Hitchcock’s filmmaking: that is, the otherness of Hollywood and its “outsider” status in Québec.

In his essay “Sur la représentation de la communauté gaie dans la publicité du magazine Têtut,” Luc Dupont writes:

Sous l’apparence d’une structure anatomique quasi identique, le corps humaine est le véhicule et l’illustration privilégiés de la dynamique culturelle de la communauté gaie, de ses désirs et de ses rêves. En conséquence, le corps est signe et trouve chargé de significations multiples.

[Under the guise of a more or less identical anatomical structure, the human body is the vehicle for, and the privileged illustration of, the cultural dynamic of the gay community, of its desires and dreams. As a result, the body is a symbol charged with multiple meanings.]

The embodiment of gay otherness in filmic representation involves body types, modes of speech, clothing, and gestures, among other signifiers. Marc is represented as a stud, a man of virile masculinity, while Thomas is quieter and more effeminate. Egoyan has embodied ethnicity in a more stereotypically gay body, while Lepage has not, although one could argue that Pierre’s body type is androgynous. There are also a variety of embodiments that relate to otherness: for instance, the Other and the body politic, the Other as an exoticized Other, and the sense of the Other’s body as a threat. This latter point appears in the customs agent’s comments about Thomas and in Thomas’s bringing the illegal
matter into the country strapped to his body. The body is viewed and judged superficially by outsiders, while those whose body it is experience it totally. In an essay about one of his earlier films (*Speaking Parts*), Egoyan writes that “the concept of surface proves to be the most complex and intriguing aspect of any rendering of personality.”44 The embodiment of identity as one’s surface renders it skin deep. It is the persona of role playing and acting. Egoyan’s characters move slowly and inexorably, while being bound up in dialogues where miscommunication is the norm. Lepage’s embodiments are less radical and less troubling. They have a naturalism to them, which he gladly plays off the theatrical and technical special effects that he uses to remind us of the artificiality of the cinematic mode. The unnaturalism of Egoyan’s characters is used to remind us of the artificiality of our social roles. If the recognition of otherness is a key element of postmodernist cinema and its re-creation of marginalized figures is central to its narratives, then the embodiments of that otherness in these two films indicate how broad a range of representation is possible. The contrast between Lepage’s naturalism and Egoyan’s unnaturalistic style illustrates how postmodern otherness can be played in diverse ways.

The issue of distinct bodies and how they appear to and impact the views of others has an autobiographical connection to Lepage. Peter Dickinson writes: “Lepage’s feelings of difference and doubleness were compounded by a growing awareness of his homosexuality and by the psychological alienation from his own body that accompanied his physical diagnosis with alopecia, a skin condition that can result in a complete loss of body hair.”45 Lepage’s body removed him from physical norms, creating a sense of being a double. This means that one knows oneself as similar to others but also knows that others identify one as non-normative. One feels there are two of me: one that I know, and one that others identify. Reconciling the two is not easy. In *Le Confessionnal*, this is captured in the use of the “doubled screen” of two time periods and two films, which connect the characters in the film. Lepage uses a television screening of *I Confess* in 1989 as a reference to this seamless duality. Of course, Egoyan is famous for his use of video screens as signifiers of representation and surface in his films. We are our own body doubles, acting out (performing) not what we are but what we are attracted to and determined by.

The cultural factors that play vital roles in these two films are mirrors of each other, with Egoyan’s ethnicity mirroring Lepage’s nationality, accented
English mirroring Québec French, and Egoyan’s generational issues paralleling the exploitation associated with powerful class structures. As for gender, the focus on the failures of the traditional heterosexual family and the prominence of gay characters in both films gives masculinity a broader construction and social diversity. While Lepage’s construction of gayness is more open and inclusive, Egoyan’s construction is symbolic and a metaphor for all forms of otherness. Egoyan adds a further dimension to his narrative by including a racialized community that reflects Toronto’s 1990s demographics, while Québec City between 1952 and 1989 remains Eurocentric and white, certainly a valid sociological representation. Lepage plays with colour in his film, making the spectator aware of various meanings associated with different colours, but Egoyan tends toward darkness; even where there is light, it is not transparent or illuminating.

Spatiality (the cultural and psychological construction of space) is presented differently in each city. While the rooms of Le Confessionnal are realistically constructed to be faithful to the historic period portrayed (other than the maze in the bath house), those of Exotica are phantasmagorical constructs tending toward the claustrophobic. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur claims that “the dialectic of lived space, geometrical space and inhabited space” has its equivalencies in “lived time, cosmic time and historical time.”\(^{46}\) Le Confessionnal gravitates toward lived space and time and inhabited space and historical time. History and memory are its playing fields. Egoyan reaches out for a space that reflects cosmic time because it is inhabited by the deepest recesses of the psyche, where time is a minor player.

The oralities in each film also differ, with Lepage focusing on the English-French linguistic divide being more prominent in 1952 and less so in 1989. The historical continuum of this city’s life betrays its evolution. The orality of Toronto in Exotica fits with the ethnic and racial class divisions in the film but is generally subsumed by the flat and monotonal presentations that Egoyan insisted that his actors give. Toronto is presented as a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial site of diasporic identities and transnationality, a city of outsiders who are strangers, while Québec City is constructed as a city of insiders who are strangers to each other.

As male auteurs who foreground male characters, Lepage and Egoyan follow a similar pattern to that of the female auteurs in the previous chapter,
who foreground female characters. While Pool’s and Rozema’s protagonists fit ideologically into feminist characterizations of the female persona, the gay characterization created by a straight director like Egoyan is more akin to Villeneuve’s fictional female, Bibiane. Lepage creates a film whose view of sexuality as a continuum rather than binary opposites is close to queer cinema, which seeks to downplay sexual differences. What is most telling, however, is that in the end, Lepage’s narrative closure suggests a departure from the city, a sense of a new life emerging, as was occurring for Lepage in his professional life at the time of the film’s creation. Only by going to the world of “the Other”—that is, the broader world represented by Hitchcock—can there be a new beginning and a new statement. In contrast, Egoyan’s sense of human entrapment may very well be linked to Toronto as a metropolitan reality with millions of inhabitants. It is a big, demographically diverse city, while Québec City is a small, mostly monolingual city and the capital of an aspiring but unrealized nationality. Québec City, for artists of Lepage’s global ambitions, is a city of centrifugal power, which has spun him away into an international career and sensibility. It is not a diasporic city like Toronto. The power of diasporic, transnational identities in a city like Toronto is more evident in Clement Virgo’s Rude (1995) and Deepa Mehta’s Bollywood/Hollywood (2001), discussed in the next chapter. Whereas Egoyan grew up in Victoria, Virgo’s childhood was spent in Jamaica, and Mehta was in her early twenties when she arrived in Canada. In these two directors we thus find a more enhanced sense of diaspora and transnationality than we do in Egoyan.